

# “Antonio, il mercante della nostra storia”: Adapting *The Merchant of Venice* for Italian Children

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**Abstract** This essay discusses the challenges of adapting Shakespeare's play in narrative form for young readers. It cites the history of such adaptation, thinking about the 'set of instructions' authors have provided child readers to respond to the problematic elements of the play (usury, religious and personal prejudice, mercenary marriages, homosexual attraction, cuckoldry). It tracks Tosi's experience of translating/adapting the play and examines the narrative and ideological choices she made in her illustrated version (2015). The power of this story for children, Tosi argues, lies in its potential to ask questions relevant to their lives today.

**Keywords** The Merchant of Venice. Adaptation. Narrativization. Children's literature. Charles and Mary Lamb. Shylock. Portia. Lewis Carroll. Translation. Venice.

**Summary** 1 Narrativising Shakespeare for Children. – 2 Adapting *The Merchant of Venice* for Italian Children. – 2.1 Language, *Incipit* and Structure. – 2.2 Shylock, Usury and a Pound of Flesh. – 2.3 Rings, Misunderstandings and Antonio's Loneliness: The Ending.

## 1 Narrativising Shakespeare for Children

Lewis Carroll was, among other things, an enthusiastic theatregoer. He regularly took his child friends to see plays in London, including Shakespeare's. Writing to the actress Ellen Terry in 1880, whose performance as Portia opposite Henry Irving's Shylock he had seen at the Lyceum Theatre some nights

earlier, he asked her to do something to try to fix some lines in *The Merchant of Venice* which he found quite unbearable:

you gave me a treat on Saturday such as I have seldom had in my life. You must be weary by this time of hearing your own praises, so I will only say that Portia was all I could have imagined, and more. And Shylock is superb – especially in the trial scene. Now I am going to be very bold, and make a suggestion, which I do hope you will think well enough of to lay it before Mr. Irving. I want to see that clause omitted –

That, for this favour,

He presently become a Christian.

It is a sentiment that is entirely horrible and revolting to the feelings of all who believe in the Gospel of Love. Why should our ears be shocked by such words merely because they are Shakespeare's? [...] We have despised Shylock for his avarice, and we rejoice to see him lose his wealth: we have abhorred him for his bloodthirsty cruelty, and we rejoice to see him baffled. And now, in the very fullness of our joy at the triumph of right over wrong, we are suddenly called on to see in him the victim of a cruelty a thousand times worse than his own, and to honour him as a martyr. (Carroll 1982, 94-5)

This was at a time when Lewis Carroll was himself considering the possibility of preparing an edition of Shakespeare for girls. In a letter he wrote:

I have begun on *Tempest*, but done very little as yet [...] the method I propose to myself is to erase ruthlessly every word in the play that is in any degree profane, or coarse, or in any sense unsuited for a girl of from 10 to 15; and then make the best I can of what is left. (Ziegler 2003, 107)

Unfortunately, Carroll never completed this project, but the worry of providing suitable material to the young, the wish to protect, instruct and entertain them by erasing, rearranging, simplifying, and clarifying the playwright's words and plots has always been a major concern of all those who have rewritten Shakespeare for child readers.<sup>1</sup>

In the first part of my essay I lay out the problems and challenges of adapting Shakespeare in narrative form for child readers, then in the second section I concentrate on *The Merchant of Venice* as presenting specific challenges for adaptors, and I think about the way writers, with different degrees of success, have addressed the complex and

<sup>1</sup> For relevant critical work on adaptations for children see, among others, Stephens, McCallum 1998; Miller 2003; Hateley 2009; Müller 2013; Rokison 2013; and Tosi 2014.

very 'adult' issues that the play raises in the attempt to offer a pedagogically valuable reading experience to the child reader. In particular, in the second part of the essay, and taking into account the context of the history of narrative adaptations of this play (I am using Linda Hutcheon's broad definition of 'adaptation' as "both a product and the process of creation and reception", 2006, 14), I turn to my own experience of adapting the play and examine my own narrative (and ideological) choices.

The history of adaptations of Shakespeare's plays for young audiences, which traditionally starts with Charles and Mary Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare* (1807), is very much a story of drama turned into narrative, which, it turns out, has proven a highly durable sub-genre: narrative versions of Shakespeare's plays, often illustrated, are still being written and published in the English-speaking world, despite the other media in which Shakespeare's plays are made available to child readers. Of course, the remediation from drama to narrative has an enormous impact on plot, time/place coordinates, character/setting presentation, and perspective (since, in remediation, an extra-fictional narrator is introduced). Remediation entails making a number of critical decisions about compression and expansion and frequently spelling out what, in the Shakespearean text, is (intentionally) left ambiguous or obscure. Providing motivation for the characters' actions, words and decisions is possibly the most subtly creative of all the strategies devised by authors who wish to make sense of Shakespeare's plays for their readers.

One of the main issues that, from the Lambs onwards, authors have had to address is the relationship between dramatic language and prose narrative, and specifically the degree of linguistic simplification to which the plays should be subjected. What kind of language should the authors choose? Translation into a modern idiom? Paraphrasis? Most Victorian and Edwardian authors used prose narrative, interspersed with Shakespeare's lines. Another issue is relevance: all adapters in one way or another attempt to make Shakespeare meaningful and convincing to child readers across time, cultures and languages.

As far as 'format' is concerned, the Lambs relied on the structure of the short story collection, popular in Victorian and Edwardian times and still producing fine texts to this day, one brilliant example being Leon Garfield's *Shakespeare's Stories* (1985). Other adaptations are characterised by more freedom: they expand Shakespeare's plots by providing extra information, are highly creative and rework the original plays by adding prequels, sequels, and new characters. A Victorian forerunner of this typology, much favoured by contemporary Young Adult novelists, was Cowden Clarke's *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines*, published in 1850-1852.

## 2 Adapting *The Merchant of Venice* for Italian Children

Despite their different styles and formats, however, all adaptations of Shakespeare share a belief that his plays must be part of a child's culture. Whether Shakespeare is there in a mediated or sanitised version, he is there at least in part to launch the child's accumulation of cultural capital, and the adaptation works not just as an entry point in this acquisitive economy but as a 'bridge' to the original plays. This cultural scenario is, of course, connected to Shakespeare's central place in the English canon via the English school system - which assures his central place in an English-speaking child's experience. In Italy, where Shakespeare is not typically taught in the school curriculum, only recently has there been an interest in thinking about the presence (or rather, the absence) of adapted and retold Shakespeare for Italian children. In 2015 I undertook the daunting task of retelling *The Merchant of Venice* for Italian child readers, in a cultural context in which, despite the play's 'Italian-ness' - its Italian source and Italian setting - the only Italian adaptations available for children were translations of the Lambs' *Tales*, mostly out of print. Even in England, *The Merchant of Venice* is not a popular play in the children's Shakespeare canon, being obviously more complicated to retell than *The Tempest* or *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the usual favourites for children's adaptations. If that is the case in England, in Italy, the play is virtually non-existent in the children's canon.

In this second part of my essay I recount my experience of translating and adapting the play, addressing very similar linguistic and cultural challenges to those posed to previous adaptors, from the Lambs onwards. For example, I chose contemporary standard Italian for my retelling - which is a common choice for contemporary adaptations in English, as we see at the beginning of Marchette Chute's adaptation which opens, "*The Merchant of Venice* is a romantic comedy, but of a most unusual kind. For the theme is money, and the climax tells of an attempted murder" (1976, 48). Moreover, I was very interested in what kind of instructions, if any, authors through the centuries have provided their child readers so that they could - can - respond appropriately to the problematic elements of the play (a play that speaks of usury, discrimination, mercenary marriages, inter-religious marriages, forced conversion, possibly homosexual attraction, and cuckoldry). In Mary Lamb's version, for example, the omniscient narrator controls the interpretation of the story. We have hardly any access to Shylock's side of things: the "Hath not a Jew eyes?" (3.1.53) speech was omitted, Antonio's cruelty towards the Jew was underplayed, and Shylock was given a negative label almost every time he was introduced, a strategy of disparaging the Jew that ran parallel to the 'glorification' of the merchant, Antonio. By contrast, the recent BBC 4 *Shakespeare Retold* series has created an alternative

authorial voice in *The Merchant* via an extra-textual, invented character who is also the story's narrator. A slave boy in Antonio's household, Tomas, witnesses everything that happens and offers the reader/listener his thoughts:

I am Tomas, a slave. People don't notice me - no more than a dog, or a goat. I may be just a slave boy, but I'm human: I see, hear, speak, touch, smell. And when I get together with other household slaves, I listen to their gossip.

Shylock mentions slaves during the trial to denounce the Venetians' hypocrisy, and these words of Tomas's echo the "Hath not a Jew eyes?" (3.1.53) speech. But Tomas, like an omniscient narrator, also comments on what he sees as the dangerous choices the adults make in the play. The ending raises some very interesting questions:

Later, I wondered... will Jew and Christian ever be friends? And would I - and slaves like me - ever be free?

The author, Jamila Gavin, has obviously taken liberties with the text but she has made the story speak directly to today's young reader/listener by placing a shrewd young man at the centre of the conflicted world of the story who is even more discriminated against than Shylock and who asks questions relevant to her readers' young lives.

Embarking on *Il Mercante di Venezia*, I found myself engaging in a dialogue with past adaptors and their linguistic and ethical choices while entering into a continuous negotiation between present and past notions of personal freedom, parental control, discrimination and religious conversion.

## 2.1 Language, *Incipit* and Structure

The most obvious linguistic challenge was to rewrite the story in fluent Italian. I worked directly with the English text, consulting no Italian translations, and used mainly indirect speech and summary. Afterwards, I handed the text to the illustrator. Only when the book was in production did I realise that there was a moment in the adaptation when the words and the illustrations parted company: the night of Jessica's flight. I had decided to set that scene during Carnival, which seemed to make sense of the playtext's reference to masks. In my text, costumes and masks were described as colourful:



Figure 1 *Il Mercante di Venezia* book cover. Illustration by Desideria Guicciardini

approfittando del fatto che era carnevale e i giovani veneziani, indossando maschere e costumi colorati, ballavano e cantavano rincorrendosi nelle calli della città.<sup>2</sup>

But in the illustration, they were dark and rather menacing - absolutely appropriately, for the night of Jessica's flight is dangerous: people use the cover of darkness to lie, cheat and steal. Making this such a nightmarish scene, the illustrator, Desideria Guicciardini, who is highly experienced, imagined something different for this moment in the story. Elsewhere, her Venice was a vibrant place rendered in bright pinks and oranges. The discrepancy between my words and Guicciardini's illustration was something I corrected in the English

<sup>2</sup> “taking advantage of the fact that it was Carnival time and the young Venetians were wearing masks and costumes, dancing and singing merrily around the city” (unpublished translation - used for Storytelling 2016 season at the Globe).

translation that was used in London in the dramatic reading staged during the Children's Storytelling season at the Globe in 2016 and again in 2017. Now, my young Venetians ("taking advantage of the fact that it was Carnival time and the young Venetians were wearing masks and costumes") just wore masks and fancy-dress.

As is well known, *The Merchant* starts with Antonio's melancholic words to Salarino and Salanio: "In sooth I know not why I am so sad" (1.1.1). Now, opening a story for children with a group of men discussing the origin of another man's melancholia is not likely to be very entertaining for the average child (although it has been done, most notably by Ada Stidolph and Leon Garfield). So along the centuries, adaptors, who have a long history of taking liberties with Shakespeare's texts every time the story is adapted, rearranging scenes and abridging, distilling or expanding plot elements (Marchitello 2003), have also devised different ways to introduce young readers to the story. *Incipits* in narrative are nearly as crucial as in drama. In the nineteenth century there was a tendency to introduce the Venice setting as a magical place: Constance and Mary Maud (1913), for example, emphasised the "beautiful marble palaces", revealed the reason that gondolas are black, and compared the splendour of the Venetian vessels with those of the Invincible Armada (267) while Janey Lang explained that there, "the streets are waterways" and told the reader directly, "one day, when you go there [...] you will think you are in Fairyland" (1905, 33). Spenser Hoffmann in 1911 presented Renaissance Venice as "the mistress of the seas", "her trade", "world-wide" (78) (historically not true in the 1590s, though Shakespeare thought it was).

Such opening descriptions of Venice work very effectively as a background to the action – after a description of the "watery city" (Garfield 1985, 75) many retellings emphasise the mercantile vocation of Venice. Other adaptations choose to focus on one character in particular: Charles and Mary Lamb and Mary Seymour opened with a description of Shylock while Lois Hufford started with Antonio. Others open the story in Belmont: Elizabeth Macauley started with the casket scene, Abby Sage Richardson and Ian Serrailier, with Portia. (In the former, Portia's father is "the last of a long line of Venetian merchants who ruled the commerce of the world", 1881, 41.) In these versions the Venice bond plot appears almost as an offshoot of the Belmont casket plot – although, strictly speaking, to start at Belmont is to observe the chronological order of the plot since Bassanio and Portia have met in the pre-history of the story long before Antonio's encounter with Salarino and Salanio.

The problem of the *incipit* is connected to the question of the double setting: the play, most noticeably in Act 1, alternates between two locations, Venice and Belmont. In the first draft of my adaptation I did exactly the same, thinking it would give my narrative some 'movement'. After all, prose narrative allows great freedom, and nar-

rators can leave their characters in one place and find them again a few pages later (as Marchette Chute did in her version, making extensive use of expressions such as "[t]hen the scene shifts to Belmont [...] Back in Venice [...] Meanwhile, back in Belmont", 1976, 48-50). But this alteration interfered with the picture book format of the series I was writing for, a format that puts illustrations across two-page spreads. This in turn meant that the plot had to be divided into longer sequences, making abrupt scene changes quite impossible. My solution was to abandon the original plan of scenic alteration to think instead of a theme, a setting, and a character to be explored in the space of two pages. This allowed me to start with Antonio, as in Shakespeare's play, and his worries, and to rearrange the play as a list of mini-chapters entitled "Shylock", "The Contract", "Bassanio and the Three Caskets", "Jessica's Flight", "Shylock's Revenge", "Sailing from Belmont", "Antonio", "Balthazar", "The Ring", and "Antonio" again to finish. This also allowed me to insert some cliff hangers at the end of each section, to arouse the reader's curiosity. So, after a few introductory words on Venice and Renaissance trade, I had my narrator appropriate Salarino and Salanio's attempts to find a reason for the merchant's melancholia, and I interpolated the metaphors from the play into the mini-chapter on Antonio:

Anche Antonio, il mercante della nostra storia, non poteva fare a meno di pensare alle sue navi, qualsiasi cosa stesse facendo: quando guardava una clessidra gli venivano in mente i banchi di sabbia su cui le navi si potevano arenare, quando soffiava sul brodo troppo caldo della cena immaginava l'effetto del vento e delle tempeste sulle loro vele, quando toccava del marmo o della pietra si ricordava degli scogli su cui potevano incagliarsi, perdendo nel mare i loro preziosi carichi di stoffe, spezie, gioielli.<sup>3</sup>

Having read a number of adaptations that had very patronising narrators, I wanted to avoid this trap. But I could not help producing an external narrator who often asked questions and described actions and motives, and sometimes passed judgements on characters. Even if I tried to resist the force that inevitably pulls toward simplification and polarisation in characterisation (which is typical of the Lambs, and many others), sometimes I could not. I had Bassanio, for exam-

**3** "Antonio, the merchant of our story, couldn't help being reminded of his ships wherever he went and whatever he did. When he saw an hour-glass, he would picture the sand banks and shallows on which his ships could be wrecked; when he felt the summer breeze cooling his broth, he would imagine the harm that great winds and storms may do at sea; when he sat on a stone bench to catch his breath, huge dangerous rocks would come to mind, breaking his vessels' planks and causing them to capsize, scattering their caskets of jewels, colourful silks and fragrant spices into the ocean".



ple, enter the story as a *spendaccione*, a spendthrift. (So much for subtlety!) In terms of characters, there has been a tendency, from the Lambs onwards, to cut some of them. This is inevitable in a picture book which has a limited word length, but all adaptations of *The Merchant*, even in the format of the short story, focus on the central characters. This means that Launcelot Gobbo is usually eliminated (although he is kept by Surtees Townesend and A.B. Stidolph), Portia rarely has the chance to discuss the foibles of her foreign suitors, and Bassanio is often the only suitor put to the test. In my *Mercante* Nerissa is simply a *dama di compagnia* (lady-in-waiting). She does not take part in the trial and there is no Gratiano to marry her at the end. The reason for this was that I worried that a child reader – the book is advertised for 5 to 7-year-olds – might get confused with the multiple weddings and the complicated song and dance over the rings.

## 2.2 Shylock, Usury and a Pound of Flesh

The other problem was whether to expand on the concept of usury and the conditions of the Jews, and whether to introduce the Ghetto – which is not in Shakespeare's play. But, given the fact that the Ghetto, whether mentioned explicitly or not, provides the historical backdrop to the story as the place that gave the world the word for a Jewish enclave, it seemed important, and also even historically plausible, that Antonio should visit Shylock in his 'office' there. Most adaptations have Antonio and Shylock meet at Rialto, as in Serrailier's version, or, like Hoffmann's, they describe a general distance between Jews and Christians: "Jews kept themselves quite apart from the Christians" (Hoffmann 1911, 79). I decided to write a sequence to accompany Guicciardini's illustration that showed Antonio and Bassanio crossing a bridge and heading towards the Ghetto while, on the facing page, the illustration looked through a partially closed gate onto a busy campo, crowded with people dressed very differently from the Venetians the reader had seen so far. I wanted to explain what it meant to be a usurer in Venice and to describe the architectural peculiarity of the place, the tall buildings, that the child reader could see on the page. Lending money was one of the only jobs the Jews were allowed by the Republic of Venice, and their confinement to 'una zona' that segregated them and restricted their living space to a single small island meant that there was no space to build more houses, so houses had to rise taller to accommodate as many people as possible. The description of the houses and of the curfew imposed on the Jews and its implications builds the illusion of time passing: as this explanatory passage comes to an end, Bassanio and Antonio have 'arrived' and are ready to meet Shylock.



Figure 2 Busy life in the Venice Ghetto. Illustration by Desideria Guicciardini

Not insignificantly, the way the relationship between these two friends has been described throughout the centuries is very telling of how adaptors have tried to avoid any hint of ‘impropriety’: Antonio is invariably depicted as a lonely man who has no wife or children and is therefore very fond of Bassanio as a sort of substitute son (Hoffmann even inserted a pathetic parting scene when Bassanio leaves Venice for Belmont). I decided I could not emphasise this great fondness without hinting that Antonio may be a little in love with Bassanio, so instead of going in that direction, I censored my twenty-first century liberal attitudes and downplayed their relationship. In my version Antonio and Bassanio are ‘just’ good friends, spend a lot of time together, and are ready to help each other should necessity arise.

Many retellings have staged the polarisation between Shylock and Antonio from the very beginning. In the *Lambs’ Tales*, Antonio is “the kindest man that lived” while Shylock is “hard-hearted”, a “covetous Jew” in the tale’s opening paragraph (2007, 82); “the merciless Jew” whom Portia confronts when she enters the courtroom; the “unfeeling” and “cruel Shylock” of the trial (see Tosi 2013, 61). In the tradition of the *Lambs*, in Victorian and Edwardian times Shylock was generally portrayed negatively. Mary Seymour’s *Shakespeare Stories Simply Told* (1889), for example, opened with Shylock and his cruelty:

In the beautiful Italian city of Venice, there dwelt in former times a Jew, by name Shylock, who had grown rich by lending money at high interest to Christian merchants. No-one liked Shylock, he was so hard and so cruel in his dealings. (73)

Spenser Hoffmann in *The Children's Shakespeare* (1911) offered another bad Shylock:

the Jews' wealth was built out of the misery and ruin of their fellow-men, and you may be sure that such a means of getting their living made its mark upon their characters, crushing out of them all love, and pity, and mercy. (79)

On the opposite end of the spectrum, contemporary authors have tried to redress the balance and be over-sympathetic towards Shylock. Even allowing for the fact that it is very difficult not to bring our contemporary attitudes into the play, Anna Claybourne went a very long way trying to justify Shylock, to the extent that she actually changed the plot: in her version Shylock is prepared "to make this an interest-free loan" (2004, 117) and gladly accepts the invitation to dine at Antonio's to cement their friendship. It is only after Antonio has insisted on being hostile that he becomes angry and suggests the pound of flesh as a penalty. But even in the late nineteenth century, more sympathetic portrayals could be found: Thomas Carter's (1910) and Surtees Townesend's (1899) versions did not omit Antonio's or the Venetians' ill treatment of the Jews so Shylock's cruelty was motivated if not justified. Sage Richardson built a noble persona for Shylock, "a man of dear, subtle intellect, born to have been a statesman if the state had not refused him" (1871, 49), a description that puts one in mind of Disraeli, who at the time Richardson published her tales, had just completed a brief term as Great Britain's Prime Minister, a position he was going to hold for a much longer period from 1874 onwards. More recently, Garfield has offered an unusual ambivalence in portraying Shylock, perceptively underscoring the reciprocity of hate between Antonio and Shylock but, at one point in the story, describing the Jew in the attitude of a stage villain, rubbing his hands with gleeful anticipation at having the Christian at his mercy.

I had a number of interesting conversations with my editor about what to do with Shylock - I wanted to keep some ambiguity while she kept inviting me to 'make up my mind' about his responsibility in the play. I decided to retain the two speeches that establish that Shylock is discriminated against in Venice - the "many a time and oft | In the Rialto you have rated me" (1.3.102-103) speech which shows Antonio's most unpleasant side, and the "Hath not a Jew eyes?" (3.1.53) speech that has Shylock claiming, as a Jew, the same human qualities as the

Christians - including their 'natural' instinct for revenge. There are some retellings that assume that Shylock asks Antonio to sign the contract because he is hoping to kill him (as Lancelyn Green's did), thus making him evil from the beginning. I could not make that assumption - what we know about Shylock's motives is what he tells us in the play, but, like many adaptors before me, I could not resist making a direct connection between the way he was treated and his consequent embitterment and cruelty. So, after the "Hath not a Jew eyes?" (3.1.53) the narrator explains:

Ormai Shylock, incattivito da tutto quello che gli era successo, era pronto a diventare l'uomo rapace che Antonio disprezzava tanto.<sup>4</sup>

A pound of flesh (*una libbra di carne*) was a problem in itself. In Italy the metric system is used, and it is very unlikely that young readers would understand how much flesh would make 'una libbra'. However, footnotes were not an option (they are very rarely used in children's books) so I had to rely on the foreignness of the word to convey the unnaturalness of the bond. After all, it is not unusual for children's writers to introduce in their writing difficult words whose meanings children have to learn, maybe to use those words afterwards. (A.S. Byatt in a *Guardian* newspaper article once confessed that, for her, one of the glories of reading Beatrix Potter was the discovery of unexpected words, such as 'soporific' - to describe the effect of lettuce on rabbits - and that this inspired her with the love of words that made her want to become a writer.)

The forced conversion was another educationally challenging event. Some adaptors in the past simply avoided it, ending the trial with Shylock 'utterly broken by this change in his fortunes' (Harrison 1938, 55). Others, like the Mauds, justified Antonio:

This last clause [stipulating the conversion] was perhaps not so unkind as it sounds, for the Christians of that day thought no unbaptised person could ever possibly enter heaven; so Antonio may have imagined he was forcing the Jew to that action for his own good. (1913, 296-7)

I did not feel it was necessary for the narrator to pass judgement or justify the conditional clause Antonio added to Shylock's sentence, as I thought that reminding the reader of the mere facts would be sufficient to convey the impression of a broken and defeated Shylock:

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<sup>4</sup> 'Now Shylock, turned nasty from all the sad things that had happened to him, was ready to become the ferocious man that Antonio had always thought he was'.

Il Doge gli risparmiò la vita ma, dietro richiesta di Antonio, lo obbligò a lasciare parte del suo patrimonio in eredità alla figlia Jessica e a convertirsi al cristianesimo. Shylock, senza più denaro, senza il sostegno della sua religione, senza la sua unica figlia, era stato sconfitto.<sup>5</sup>

The relationship between Shylock and Jessica is another crux. Victorian and Edwardian retellings tended to see Jessica as Portia's negative foil: while the heiress of Belmont defers to the eccentric marriage plans of a dead father, Jessica rebels against her living one, steals from him and marries a Christian. How should a child reader be encouraged to read this event? Carter described Jessica as "treacherous and unworthy" (1910, 24), Hudson (1907) denounced her "heartless desertion" (78) and Sage Richardson commented on her "breaking her poor father's heart [...] and filial trust" (559). In my version I made explicit that Shylock would never have consented to the match with a Christian. This justifies in part her decision to elope.

### 2.3 Rings, Misunderstandings and Antonio's Loneliness: The Ending

The sexual puns about the rings of the last act pose a serious challenge to any adaptor for children. As should be expected, from the Lambs onwards, the tendency has been to ignore the detail that Portia may have been given the ring in exchange for lying with Balthazar, to focus only on Bassanio's remorse and Portia's disguise. I did not want to be an exception to the rule, so after my Portia pretends to be very upset about Bassanio's disloyalty in giving away her ring, without further ado she shows him the ring and reveals that she has impersonated the lawyer to save Antonio's life - at which announcement everyone is suitably impressed, surprised and grateful. After these farcical misunderstandings are clarified, endings invariably focus on the happiness of love and of wealth recovered, often with Bassanio and Portia including Antonio in their happiness, as in Townesend's ending:

Bassanio and Portia lived happily together at Belmont for many long years, loved and honoured by all who knew them. They were lucky in having a host of friends, but among them all, not one was more valued and welcomed than the man who had gladly pledged his life to help his friend, Antonio, the Merchant of Venice. (1899, 162)

<sup>5</sup> "The Doge spared his life, but on Antonio's request, forced Shylock to leave most of his property to Jessica and become a Christian. Shylock, now a poor man, without the support of his religion and without his only daughter, had been defeated".



Figure 3 Antonio Leaves Belmont. Illustration by Desideria Guicciardini

As we know, Bassanio and Portia’s fairy-tale happy ending is not matched by Antonio’s. While they enjoy wealth and love, Antonio must be content with the restoration of his wealth – in terms of anything gained, he is not improving his situation but just *recovering* the status and the financial comfort that he enjoyed at the beginning of the play. Because of this, he is excluded from the fairy-tale atmosphere of Belmont, where giving and ‘hazarding all’ wins love as well as social enhancement. So I decided to emphasise Antonio’s loneliness rather than the couples’ celebrations. After all, Antonio is the title role – the play starts with his unexplained sadness, and – I felt – it should end with the recovery of his argosies and his reputation, but also, and inevitably, with his loneliness. And this was the only place in my adaptation at which I actually surmised how the character would feel if he were a person in real life. Bassanio and Portia, as the lady of Belmont announces, will spend the rest of the night going over the events of the previous day. We may add that Portia and Bassanio have not really had time to consummate their marriage because Portia sent Bassanio rushing to Venice after they had heard the news about Antonio – giving her time to devise the rescue plan and put on her disguise. So, what is Antonio doing in Belmont? It is the early hours

and he is alone, like the solitary heron in the lagoon that appears in the last illustration. It is time to go home.

Era ormai l'alba.

Uno stuolo di gabbiani volava sulla laguna azzurrina nella luce del mattino.

Antonio guardò Bassanio e Porzia, abbracciati, che parlavano fitto: le spiegazioni di tutte queste felici conclusioni li avrebbero occupati per ore.

Per un attimo Antonio si sentì completamente solo.

Ma grazie a Bassanio e Porzia era salvo, e salvo due volte: Porzia gli aveva mostrato infatti un'altra lettera, in cui si informava il mercante che tre delle sue navi avevano raggiunto felicemente il porto di Venezia.

Antonio era di nuovo un uomo ricco! Poteva tornare a casa con la sua reputazione e il suo patrimonio intatti.

Volsse lo sguardo verso il mare e pensò alle sue navi, finalmente di ritorno a Venezia da terre lontane, cariche di gemme e tessuti preziosi.

Era il momento di lasciare Belmonte e tornare a casa ad accoglierle.<sup>6</sup>

The real challenge of retelling *The Merchant* for children, now and for Italian young readers, was still, I felt, to make Shakespeare *the child's contemporary*. Even if the story takes us back and forth between the enchanted atmosphere of Belmont and the mercantile world of Renaissance Venice (a different Venice from today's tourist destination where foreigners can still be fleeced), the world of the play is a place where a respectable member of the community can spit on somebody of a different religion, in a public place, without losing any of his respectability. This is a play that refuses the easy polarisations of fairy tale. No one is unambiguously good or bad, and adaptations that choose to transform the ambiguity into a simple allocation of

6 "It was almost dawn.

A flock of seagulls was flying over the lagoon in the blue morning light.

Antonio looked at Bassanio and Portia, who were hugging and talking incessantly: the explanations of all these events would take hours.

For a moment Antonio felt completely alone.

But thanks to Bassanio and Portia he was safe. More than safe: Portia had showed him another letter from Venice saying that three of his ships had just reached Venice harbour.

Antonio was a rich man again!

His reputation and his capital were intact.

He turned towards the sea, and thought of his ships, safely back in Venice from far-away lands, laden with gems and precious fabrics.

It was time to leave Belmont and go home to meet them".

criminal responsibility to Shylock do both the reader and the playwright a disservice – as do those adaptations that change the text to shift all the burden of responsibility *from* Shylock.

As Edith Nesbit remarked in her Preface to her own retellings of Shakespeare, "the stories are the least part of Shakespeare" (1912, 10). But they are what children enjoy; and the power of this story for children, from the romantic casket plot to the pound of flesh (an indefinite albeit still terrifying quantity for Italian children) could lie in the potential for asking questions such as: what makes one person different from another? What kind of behaviour qualifies a person as an enemy? Where do we draw the line between justice and mercy? Who has the power to decide where that line is drawn? Why is money so important, and what are people willing to do in order to obtain it? These are all questions that the play raises, as relevant to our own society as to the society of the play, questions which I think an adaptation should make explicit to the child, questions, however, that – like Shylock in Shakespeare's play – no adaptation is bound to answer.

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