
Shylock's Character and Anti-Semitism of Elizabethan Era

Perhaps no other play in Shakespeare's repertoire has provoked greater controversy regarding its fundamental moral and religious attitudes than *The Merchant of Venice*. To understand Shakespeare's treatment of the Jews in this play, we need to understand Judaism as seen in the Elizabethan era. The Jews, expelled from England in 1290, did not return until 1656. As a literary and social convention, the Jew was a numinous figure more like a monster than a social stereotype such as a "hillbilly" or a "nerd." Many Christians came to believe Jews had cloven feet and a tail, and that they suffered from an innate bad smell and from diseases of the blood, for which they sought remedies in vampirism. With these ideas in mind, many scholars, directors, and students have examined the bard's intention, attempting to deduce whether the playwright needed a villain his audience would immediately hate or a villain who, despite his faults, is understandable.

There are at least two positions commonly adopted regarding anti-Semitism in *The Merchant of Venice*. The first perspective confirms that the play has strong anti-Semitic themes and suggests that chastising the Jew for his inherent evilness was an act of great importance in constructing Shylock's character. Some readings that suggest this even go so far as to maintain that Shakespeare laid the groundwork for the racial anti-Semitism of a later era in the character of Shylock. Convinced of the inherent anti-Semitism embodied in this play, Efraim Sicher believes that it is only because of the events of the Holocaust that recent scholars have endeavored to "attempt a corrective" with the character of Shylock and that without the post-Holocaust sensibilities regarding the idea of anti-Semitism, Shylock would have remained an unchallenged villain (57).

In an effort to save Shakespeare and the Christian character from the charge of intolerance and anti-Semitism, commentators have also sought to transform the play into an allegory. Sir Israel Gollancz, for example, views the play as Shakespeare's largely unconscious development of certain myths implicit in the original sources in which Antonio represents Christ, Shylock represents Evil, and Portia represents both mercy and grace (13). While these suggestions certainly infuse the trial scene with meaning they do not, upon further examination, add much to the rest of the play. It is impossible to construct one definitive allegory that encompasses the entire work on all of its levels. In her "Biblical Allusion and Allegory in *The Merchant of Venice*" Barbra Lewalski demonstrates that the closest one can come to an allegorical meaning in *The Merchant of Venice* is in the mostly biblical trace allusions that perforate the text. For example, Lewalski cites Antonio's love of Bassanio and his wanting to help Bassanio to be reflective of Paul's characterization of Christian love in terms of humility and self forgiveness in 1 Corinthians 8:4-5. She states, "The moral contrast of Shylock and Antonio is more complex with reference

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to that most difficult injunction of the sermon on the mount--forgiveness of injuries and love of enemies" (330).

While it is clear that *The Merchant of Venice* involves significant symbolic elements, it is also clear that this play is not only an allegory. Although it has certainly had an impact on European culture, the play cannot--among reasonable persons--be linked to the rise of anti-Semitism. Such provocation for anti-Semitism has been indigenous to the cultures in question all along, and the principal effect of *The Merchant of Venice* was to disrupt any ideological complacency deriving from the apparent Jewish stereotype presented by Shylock. This disruption does not entail Shylock's romantic transfiguration into a tragic hero. His stubborn villainy generates the uneasy tension that runs through the drama. Shylock is certainly a more malicious individual than Antonio, Bassanio, or Portia, yet it is obvious that the Jew suffers at the hands of the Christians. Just because we find the Christian characters more pleasant or engaging does not imply that they are inherently better or good. Good does not always equal fair, and justice is not always served by just any action taken against a malefactor. It is precisely because Shylock is so cruel and repellent that his appeal to our common humanity is so poignant.

From this standpoint, one can argue that although certain characters in *The Merchant of Venice* might portray anti-Semitism, these characters and their attitudes are disparaged to the point of clear disapproval throughout the play. Part of the way in which Shakespeare accomplishes this critique is by emphasizing Shylock's character as a man rather than his identity as a Jew. While Shakespeare almost certainly utilized anti-Semitic characterization in the genesis of Shylock, there are many elements of humanity in the character, most notably in his legendary "Hath not a Jew eyes" soliloquy in which Shylock pleads his right to dignity and his right to avenge himself on the Christians who wrong him. The inclusion of this soliloquy indicates that Shakespeare sought to do more than just mock the Jew. Shylock berates the Christians for failing to acknowledge his equally human status even as he is bent upon shedding it: "Hath not a Jew eyes?" he cries. "Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions . . . ?" Shylock is like the Christians in his faculties, he maintains, and the moral corollary follows inevitably: "And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?" A man ought not to be required to appeal to others on an exalted spiritual plane in order to have his fundamental humanity acknowledged. Shakespeare presents Shylock harshly but also allows him to speak eloquently on his own behalf, perhaps the first time a European playwright afforded a Jewish character such a podium.

Part of what the play reveals is the iniquities present in some Christians as well as in some Jews. The importance of *The Merchant of Venice*, then, is that it allows the reader to see behind the patina of religious identity that defines Shylock the Jew. Shakespeare allows us to glimpse Shylock the man--a character that hates and bleeds as does any Christian. Villainous Jews are typical in medieval literature. However, Jews who compel our attention as suffering human

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beings are virtually unheard of before Shakespeare. Shakespeare's depiction of Shylock, the Jewish moneylender, causes the audience to both hate and pity the man. To be sure, Shakespeare had in Christopher Marlowe a formidable competitor in the dramatization of a villainous Jew. In Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, Barabas is a caricature out of medieval mystery and miracle plays who gives an account of himself in close accord with the superstitious folk image of the Jew as ritual murderer, prisoner, and ruthless enemy of humanity--but especially of Christians. Furthermore, Marlowe's Jew is a schemer and a Machiavellian who acts as an Elizabethan archetype of villainy. Along his way, Barabas poisons an entire nunnery, including his own daughter who has taken refuge there after he kills both her suitors. In his article on "The Elizabethan Stage Jew and Christian Example," Alan C Dessen deftly sums up the differences between Shakespeare and Marlowe's Jewish characters. "Marlowe has used his stage Jew to indict a society which is truly Christian in name but not in deed. The Merchant of Venice in contrast, is a romantic comedy, not a sardonic tragedy, so Shakespeare's presentation of his stage Jew is somewhat different in tone and overall effect" (239). Shylock's daughter Jessica, unhappy at home, elopes with a prodigal Christian, Lorenzo, and steals money and jewels from her father. Shylock is enraged at the loss of his ducats, but he is also heartbroken over his daughter's heartless betrayal of him. He cries out in his rage and frustration, "I would my daughter were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear! Would she were hears'd at my foot, and the ducats in her coffin!" The discrepancy between Barabas' atrocity and Shylock's malevolent but perfectly understandable human exclamation could hardly be more pronounced. One wishes his daughter dead in a moment of passion and the other makes her so; Barabas, then, is a monster and Shylock is a man.

Whether Shylock is the evil Jew that the surrounding Christians portray him as, or the misrepresented man suffering under the weight of righteous indignation largely depends on creation of the character on stage. For many generations, the part of Shylock was a caricature of the Jewish stereotype: acquisitive, hawk-nosed, hunch-shouldered and a wily schemer, wringing his hands in sly obsequiousness to strike a bargain, reveling with ruthless satisfaction when he has the upper hand, indulging in unscrupulous practices, and gloating over his mounting hoard of gold. Only recently have directors abandoned the red wig and bottle in favor of presenting a truer character who is an admirable figure striking back at his oppressors, exposing them as the hypocrites that they are. In this light we see Shylock is not only seeking to repay his accusers for the injuries he has sustained, but also for the ancient injustices endured by his people at the hand of Christians. Even when Shylock is vilified to his fullest, there is a constant, unavoidable challenge made concerning the sincerity of Christian Venice, making his complete villainy impossible to achieve. Perhaps a shallow comfort, "but some readers may find some reassurance in the knowledge that Shakespeare, although perhaps building upon Elizabethan prejudices, was still using the stage Jew as a potent dramatic weapon against Christian hypocrisy and complacency" (Dessen 245). Thus, the Jew is a means to a larger end, whether that end be moralistic, ironic, or comedic that condemns a community's failure to live up

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to its own stated ideals.

Part of what makes total evil villainy impossible to pull off with Shylock is from the outset; Shakespeare sets about providing him with powerful motivation for his hatred of Antonio that extends beyond the fact that he is a Christian and a hypocritical one at that. When Antonio offers Shylock surety for a loan of 3,000 ducats to the improvident Bassanio, the aggrieved moneylender reminds the merchant that he has called the Jew a "misbeliever, cut-throat dog" along with a host of other insults. "Hath a dog money?" Shylock asks, "Is it possible / A cur can lend three thousand ducats?" Antonio is unmoved by Shylock's indignant response to such humiliations and tells him to lend the money "to thine enemy, / Who if he break, thou mayst with better face / Exact the penalty." Antonio is, in modern parlance, asking for it, and the long-suffering Jew conceives his hatred here, when his genuine longing for reconciliation is rebuffed one time too many.

It is comprehensible that when the surrounding Christian characters of *The Merchant of Venice* portray Shylock as a murderous, evil Jew, they are acting well within the acceptable stereotypes of the age. However, the idea that Shakespeare actually intended ill will towards the Jews remains contentious. As a man who was surely reared a Catholic and who may have died a Catholic in the ferociously anti-Catholic England of Elizabeth and James, Shakespeare may well have sympathized with anyone under the pressure of religious conformity. This fact may well explain the poignancy of Shylock's forced conversion, troubling the penultimate act of this comedy. Shylock remains thwarted, but we cannot forget him and the recognition he earns as a man, not a monster.

There will be no final solution to the Shylock problem. Learned journals will continue to publish articles invoking Elizabethan attitudes towards Jews and will ask how the man often deemed the greatest playwright of all time could create such an inhumane Jewish villain. Meanwhile, no amount of contextual information or even evidence from the text will prevent or encourage actors to present *The Merchant of Venice* as the *Tragedy of the Jew*. Teachers, students, and general readers and viewers often torn between their instinctive responses and what they are told to believe will continue to be disturbed by Shakespeare's apparent lapse in tolerance. Regardless of Shakespeare's intention, the fact that the merchant of Venice reminds us of our fallibility as humans underscores its continued relevance.

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