



Shakespeare's Shylock, the Everlasting Character of all Times

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Abstract. How do we feel today about this controversial, complex character? Do we hate him for his uncompromising quest for revenge, for his inability to show mercy, for his intention to extract the pound of flesh himself? Or we feel sympathy for him as a tortured object of such irrational, abusive prejudice? Do we feel compassion for him as a father cruelly betrayed by a daughter? Do we pity him for his devastating public humiliation, for his lose of human right, of dignity? Shylock's strength of character, his patriotism, his convictions, his religious pride, his magnificent rationalism and his pride and self esteem, far outweigh the bad traits of his character. The punishment that is meted out to him at the end of the trial scene is as barbaric as his feeling for revenge. Throughout the play, his persecution is massive, and heart rendering. After the third scene he is deprived of all his wealth and what is worse is ordered to convert to Christianity, if he is to save his life. He is left friendless and without relatives, for his sole daughter, Jessica, betrays him for Lorenzo. We cannot but feel sympathy for the man at the end of the play. For someone so viril and larger than life. Shakespeare lets him disappear from the play without a whimper, making us believe he is more sinned against than sinning.

Keywords: anti-Semitism, inhumanity, injustice, victim of prejudice

1. INTRODUCTION

With the coming of the Renaissance this strictly biblical, if somewhat biased, portrayal of Jews gave way to an overly melodramatic perception. Jews became the evil villains of Elizabethan drama. Frequently portrayed as Machiavellian or greedy or both, they were not complex characters. In fact, many of Shakespeare's contemporaries simply told a story, rather than added any psychological layers to characters and their motives. Even Christopher Marlowe, Shakespeare's greatest rival, fell into the one-dimensional trap in his play *The Jew of Malta*, written in 1589 -- nearly a decade before *The Merchant of Venice*. Both Barabas in *The Jew of Malta* and Shylock are money-lenders and they both have daughters who leave home with their father's money, but there the similarity ends.

Barabas is an over-the-top villain who steals, cheats, and indulges in murder until he finally meets a gruesome end -- boiling in oil. Shakespeare's characterization of Shylock broke with theatrical tradition. Shylock is a complex man, whose every action can be understood and who, finally, elicits understanding from his audience. (Rogers) Shylock began the play much as an Elizabethan audience would expect: He exhibited every sign of being the piece's villain. As the money-hungry Jewish usurer that had become a stock character in Elizabethan drama, Shylock made himself thoroughly unpleasant, with asides to the audience stating that he hated Antonio because Antonio was a Christian -- "but more" he continued, because he lent money without interest, thus competing with Shylock's business and threatening Shylock's sole means of supporting himself and his family. (Rogers) In Shylock's final scene, Shakespeare had him act out another stereotype: a ritual murder.

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Of course, there is no mention in the play that Shylock would use Antonio's blood in any religious ritual. But the audience would have immediately associated the stage action with the myth. Shakespeare seemed to be giving his audience exactly what they expect from a stage Jew. In Portia, the audience got the means to stop the ritual murder because she would not let the Jew shed one drop of Christian blood. The text specifically says "Christian," reinforcing the "blood libel" legends. (Rogers) While he perpetuated received notions of Jews, Shakespeare also did an extraordinary thing for an Elizabethan playwright: He created a Jewish character who was flawed, and human, *and* oppressed by the Christians surrounding him. The audience was told time and again of Shylock's encounters with Christians and how they spat upon him, called him nasty epithets, and spurned him. Shylock was the very picture of a man who suffered much at the hands of his fellow men and who had finally reached his breaking point.

Growing scholarship points to the possibility that Shakespeare's family were themselves recusant Catholics, oppressed in Stratford and fallen from their high place in local society while Shakespeare was still a boy. If this is true, then perhaps Shylock's oppression was a metaphor for England's religious oppression during Shakespeare's lifetime. His forced conversion also fits with this notion, as it was not only Jews being forced to become Christians, but also Catholics forced to become Protestants and vice versa, depending on who was in control of the throne at the time. They had to convert or lose their lives. This theory is pure speculation, but it would hardly be the first time -- or the last -- that theatre was used to make a covert political statement. (Rogers)

2. SHAKESPEAR'S ENGLAND

It is impossible to definitively know what Shakespeare's intent was in creating the character of Shylock. Was Shakespeare drawing on the anti-Semitism of the time and using Shylock as an archetype to get laughs and evoke revulsion? Or, was Shakespeare turning this stereotype on its head to force his audiences to look at and question their own prejudices and fears? While it is likely that Shakespeare never visited Venice, it is also quite possible that he never met a Jew. Nevertheless fears and myths about Jews were ever-present. Even though there were no Jews left in England, the stereotypes and fears remained in Shakespeare's England. Jews were immensely wealthy even when they looked like Paupers and covertly pulled strings of an enormous intellectual network of capital and goods. Jews poisoned wells and were responsible for spreading the bubonic plague. Jews secretly plotted an apocalyptic war against the Christians (Greenblatt, pp. 258-259). Shakespeare may have also been responding to the current events of his time the famous trial of a supposed Jewish traitor. In 1594, London was consumed with the high-profile trial of Roderigo Lopez, the queen's physician. Lopez was accused of trying to poison the queen as a part of a plot hatched by the monarchs of Spain. Lopez, a practicing Protestant, was a converted Jew. The citizens of London feared that he was in fact, still a Jew, capable of the worst cunning and treachery possible. His alleged Jewishness matched his supposed deceitfulness and greed. Lopez was ultimately convicted and hanged in front of a laughing and mocking crowd of Londoners. Many scholars agree that this important trial of a prominent Jew, with the accusations of disloyalty, treachery and murder, influenced Shakespeare's work. Some speculate that Shakespeare himself may have been present at the hanging of Dr. Lopez.

Another English play from Shakespeare's England is worth examining. Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* (1592) surely influenced Shakespeare and his creation of Shylock, the Jewish usurer.

Marlowe was both a contemporary and a professional rival of Shakespeare. The Jew of the title, Barabas, is the height of anti-Semitic caricature. Among his many deeds are killing the sick, poisoning the wells, and poisoning an entire nunnery. Barabas, while embodying many

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anti-Jewish stereotypes, is only one of many despicable characters in the play, leading some to believe that Marlowe may have been critiquing the morality of the Christians of his day as well. Marlowe was an extremely controversial figure and this work examined the social and political issues of his day, including religious diversity, the rise of a commercial economy, and international tensions. The Jew of Malta became the biggest theatrical hit of its time, and certainly fed the anti-Jewish hysteria that prompted the mob to laugh so heartily at Roderigo Lopez on the gallows. Shakespeare would have been familiar with the play and Shylock may have been written as a response to Marlowe's infamous creation, Barabas.

Elizabethan theatergoers would have recognized Shylock as a Jew immediately. His red wig, bulbous nose and huge cape immediately label him as the other and as an outsider. Even though Jews were not living in England (at least not openly), they represented a stereotype evil, cunning, greed and at the very core, heartlessness. Throughout the play, Shylock is despised and insulted by the other characters. Shylock is spat upon by Antonio, reviled even by his servants, abandoned by his daughter, Jessica, and ultimately undone by Portia. The characters continually mock him and it is hard to imagine that the theatergoers in Shakespeare's time would not have shared the feelings of disdain conveyed by the players in *The Merchant of Venice*.

Money lending was a key political issue in Shakespeare's time, as the economy shifted from an agricultural to a market economy. A troubled relationship was forged between money-lenders and borrowers. Stephen Greenblatt writes, though officially the English declared by statute that usury was illegal under the law of God and had driven out only the people who were exempt, by reason of being Jews, from this prohibition, the realm's mercantile economy could not function without the possibility of money lending Christian usurers, even though they were not directly called that by name, occupied a position roughly comparable to the one held by the Jews: officially, they were despised, harassed, condemned from the pulpit and the stage, but they also played a key role. A role that could not be conveniently eliminated (Greenblatt, pp. 271-272).

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare exposes the increasing reliance on credit and money-lending in European society. Shylock, the money-lender, while reviled by the Venetians in the play, is a necessary evil as he makes it possible for his Christian customers to conduct both their business and romantic pursuits. The play explores the relationship and tension between love and commerce. Without Shylock's services, Bassanio could not win the lady richly left, Portia, and the Venetian businessmen could not finance their ventures. The conceit of usury as money breeding is a critical one for the play, and is based on Aristotelian teachings. Throughout the play there are puns confusing sexual and romantic references to money as Shakespeare asks his audience to consider both Shylock's and the Christian's passion and lust for money. While Shakespeare may be highlighting Christian hypocrisy about greed and money lending, it is also important to remember that money-lenders were despised in Shakespeare's time and that his audiences would have surely laughed at Shylock's ultimate ruin at the end of the play.

3. SHYLOCK: A CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Art and theatre are dynamic, and subject to interpretation from actors, directors, audiences and readers. Many critics have argued that *The Merchant of Venice* is a lesson about reading and interpretation. Throughout the play, characters interpret (and misinterpret) things: Shylock's interpretation of the "pound of flesh" is literal whereas Antonio initially reads Shylock's behavior as benign; Portia (disguised as the doctor) interprets the law and the quality of mercy; Gratiano and Bassanio misinterpret the doctor and his clerk, and are tricked into believing that their betrothed are men; and Portia's suitors are cast aside because they misread the caskets. In

many ways our reading of Shylock is influenced through our contemporary lenses. Similarly, we can see how the portrayal of Shylock and the problem of anti-Semitism have also changed over the years.

Even before the play begins, the *dramatis personae* presents Shylock as an archetype, Shylock, the Jew. Throughout the play, the other characters consistently refer to him as simply, the Jew. This characterization dehumanizes and de-personalizes Shylock and reduces him from a person to a category. During Shakespeare's time, Shylock, and Jews in general, were portrayed on the stage as comical, yet villainous figures. The costume included an orange wig, a bulbous nose, and a large and sinister cape. Jews were types, not people.

Despite being described as a romantic comedy in the First Folio of William Shakespeare's plays, *The Merchant of Venice* presents certain problems with this categorisation. The fact that the most memorable aspects of the play are the dramatic scenes of the court room and the powerful character of the Jewish moneylender Shylock question the simple distinction of comedy for this play. In writing Shylock, Shakespeare created one of the most famous and enduring portrayals of a Jew in English literature. He is both antagonist and victim, which mean any reading of the play must necessarily confront this ambiguity. He is by far the most intense character displaying a plethora of emotion as he seeks justice to right the perceived wrong done to him. The question arises, is the emphasis on Shylock's character so strong as to warrant the description of tragedy. Could the play equally be called the Tragedy of Shylock? The playwright Arthur Miller described tragedy by saying:

"I think the tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing, his sense of personal dignity. From Orestes to Hamlet, Medea to Macbeth, the underlying struggle is that of the individual attempting to gain his "rightful" position in his society". (See Miller) This description could also be applied to Shylock whose obsession with obtaining the repayment of his 'bond' result in his complete ruin. For Aristotle tragedy is "action not narrative. Through pity and terror it effects a purgation of these emotions". Shylock's price and vengeance are indeed terrible which means any pity we may feel for him must be formed with this in mind. Unlike Orestes, Hamlet, Medea and Macbeth whose downfall is to a significant part instigated by the machinations and manipulation of others Shylock is chiefly the instigator of his own fall with regard to the bond. This is not to suggest he is at any point beyond the power of others.

Throughout the play, Shylock's attitude toward money and human relationships undergoes some scrutiny. When we hear about Shylock's response to Jessica's elopement, it seems like he's more worried about the gold Jessica stole than the fact that his daughter is gone. Solanio tells us that Shylock screamed "My daughter! O my ducats!

O my daughter! / Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats!" (2.8.2). Hmm. Sure sounds like Shylock is more concerned about his money than his daughter, right?

But, later, when we actually see Shylock talking to Tubal about Jessica's elopement, it seems like Shylock isn't as materialistic as Solanio makes him out to be. Check out Shylock's response to the news that Jessica traded an important family heirloom:

Out upon her! Thou torturest me, Tubal: it was my

turquoise; I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor:

I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys. (3.1.14)

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The turquoise ring Jessica discarded is important to Shylock because it was a gift from his dead wife, not because it's worth a lot of money. So here, we can see that Shylock isn't exactly the money-grubbing villain he's been made out to be.

Shylock's pained response to Jessica's actions reveal that he is deeply human, a point that he makes at a pivotal moment in the play, when Salerio and Solanio taunt him with Jessica's elopement:

*Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs,
dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with
the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject
to the same diseases, healed by the same means,
warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as
a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed?
if you tickle us, do we not laugh? if you poison
us, do we not die? and if you wrong us, shall we not
revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will
resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian,
what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian
wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by
Christian example? Why, revenge. The villany you
teach me, I will execute, and it shall go hard but I
will better the instruction. (3.1.6)*

Here Shylock insists on the fact that Jews and Christians share a common humanity. He also exposes the hypocrisy of the Christian characters who are always talking about love and mercy but then go out of their way to alienate Shylock because he is Jewish and different.

Yet as powerful as this speech is, elsewhere in the play Shylock tends to emphasize the *differences* between Jews and Christians. When Bassanio invites him to dinner, Shylock mutters "I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you, and so following, but I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you" (1.3.8). Is Shylock just being hateful, or is his disdain justifiable? We know Shylock has been abused in the past (he's been trash-talked, spit upon, called a dog, and worse). Shylock is a monster of cruelty, miser, greedy, suspicious,

cunning, bloodthirsty, revengeful, mean, a bad father and a bad master. But it is the circumstances that made him like this.

Shylock is a tragic figure, trapped by prejudice and driven to revenge by the treatment he receives. He is not cruel by nature. He is human in inner-self as the Christians are. He is therefore the most injured man, insulted, abused and disgraced by the Christians and even by his own daughter. His cruelty is made by centuries of insult and outrage which the Christians inflicted upon the Jews race. Shylock became hard and savage by long and cruel oppression.

He suffers immensely. Shylock's humiliation and sufferings can only be measured by someone who has experienced the alienation of a gross minority.

Shylock is an outsider, both literally (living apart from Christian society in the Jewish ghetto) and figuratively (being forced into the margins). He is continually insulted, degraded by the other characters and described in bestial terms as a dog and a wolf. At other points in the play, Shylock (and by extension all Jews) is equated with the devil and with evil. He is spat upon by Antonio and reviled even by his servants. Shylock's daughter, Jessica, abandons him by running away and marrying, and by symbolically leaving the Jewish faith and converting to Christianity. In the end, Shylock's greed leads to his ruin. He is left without a livelihood, and in many ways, without a life. Shakespeare's creation of Shylock mirrored the sentiments, fears and myths about Jews that were commonly held in his day.

With these lines Shylock defends his humanity. This speech about human dignity stands in contrast, however, to the last few lines, a cry for vengeance. While Shylock claims that he is flesh and blood, he demands just this from Antonio a pound of flesh. These lines continue to be interpreted in a range of ways. Some have argued that these lines prove that Shakespeare somehow transcended the anti-Semitism of his time and argues that a Jewish person's humanity must be recognized and respected.

Others read the speech as a cynical and sarcastic one, showing once again that Shylock will use trickery to outwit and cheat his Christian customers.

The pound of flesh that Shylock seeks from Antonio is another extremely troubling aspect of the play.

His inhumane (and unmerciful) cry for murderous vengeance adds to the despicable nature of his character, particularly in light of Portia's words about the quality of mercy. Shylock's greed and lust for money are paralleled by his cruelty. One can read this scene as a contrast between the vengeful Jew and the merciful Christian, and by extension a clash between Old Testament and New Testament readings and values. Strikingly, though, the mercy that Portia so eloquently describes is not ever extended to the Jews of the play.

The mystery of Shakespeare's intentions and the meanings of the play, in particular the intent behind Shylock, have allowed for numerous interpretations over the years. Since Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock has been played and seen as a comic buffoon, a cruel villain, and as a tragic and sympathetic outsider. In Shakespeare's time Shylock was played as a comic figure. In the mid-1700s an English actor, Charles Macklin, created a monstrous and despicable villain. Later, in the early 19th century, the actor, Edmund Kean, challenged the conventional thinking and created a wholly sympathetic character. Starting in the Victorian period, and continuing through our contemporary times, most actors play Shylock as a tragic and human figure.

While one can debate the nature of Shylock's character, there is no doubt that Shylock has been used to fossilize and perpetuate the stereotypes of the evil Jew as powerful, cunning, money-hungry, and inhuman. As with the Passion Plays, stereotypical depictions of Jews may

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have had dangerous repercussions and fanned the fires of anti-Semitism.

Oscar-winner **Al Pacino** — always a daring actor — steps into the shoes of **Shakespeare's** notorious moneylender in the latest big-screen version of the Bard's classic, "**The Merchant of Venice**" Directed by **Michael Radford** and co-starring **Jeremy Irons** as Antonio, Sony Classics is handling "Merchant's" distribution with extreme care. Aware that the film could be used to stir hatred in today's global climate of mounting anti-Semitism, Sony is sensitive to interpretations of the most famous anti Semitic stereotype in literature.

Ivor Davis in an interview brings Pacino's insight to Shlock:

Q: How do you view Shylock?

Al Pacino: I see him as more sinned against than sinning. When I chart the history of this character, when I go into his life and his conditions, that's what I come away with.

Q: Because of the history of this play and the rise of anti-Semitism around the world today, can 'Merchant' not be seen as some kind of a provocation?

AP: I never had a desire to do 'Merchant of Venice' for a lot of reasons, but certainly I just couldn't quite see the character. I saw some great performances done, but I myself had no relationship to it. But then I read Michael Radford's text and I thought I understood somehow where Shylock was coming from. I thought that he made a case for Shylock and in doing that I was able to see the other elements of the character, those human elements. I started to understand his motivation and that was the point for me. I thought, 'I can play this.' Before that I didn't know how I would approach it, but I saw a character that I could understand and identify with.

Q: Is his tragedy that he lived during his time?

AP: I would say that, and his tragedy is also how he dealt with these conditions. As Michael Radford says, it's a kind of road rage really because of what he's come to in his life. It's sort of being violated by the conditions of his life. I remember going into it very much with Michael and Jeremy Irons and talking about that scene with the pound of flesh ... and knowing that what Shylock is really doing there is taking a risk. He doesn't know Antonio's ships are going to sink. It's a way of standing up to the oppressors, his way of posturing to them.

Q: Talk about approaching the 'hath not a Jew eyes' monologue. Is it about racism and is it indicating that Shakespeare wasn't anti-Semitic?

AP: This is a real case against prejudice. It's one of the great speeches against it. What I liked about it, what I felt about the way Michael set it up, and what I finally related to, was the fact that it was something that was happening on the street. It wasn't a speech anymore. It was an incident that was taking place. Of course it's wonderful. You get a speech like that and you really want to give it the old gun.

4. CONCLUSION

It is widely accepted that Shakespeare's supreme gift is his universality. He was not of an age but for all times, because his characters are true to the eternal aspects of human life and not limited to any contemporary society.

Shakespeare has never produced a character psychologically as complex as Shylock.

There is also no character with his vitality. When he whets his knife in the court room to cut the pound of flesh from Antonio's body, we are horrified. Yet, despite the horror, his vitality never leaves our consciousness. The vitality is even more remarkable, when we view it from the point of view of the massive prosecution that Shylock had to undergo because he is a Jew, and also because he lends money on interest. Hated by many, his love for money has not been analysed in a right perspective. He is not a looter, and he doesn't rob others of their wealth. He lends money on interest and from every single evidence in the play, it is abundantly clear, that he fulfils his contractual obligations. In an inhospitable, hostile environment, he has to protect his "well earned thrift" with extreme care. How he uses his money, is no one's business but his own. Evidence shows that he was kind to his wife Leah and to his daughter Jessica, since he provides the latter with a house and a servant.

William Shakespeare, being a man of the theatre, would have been heavily influenced not only by history, but also by the theatre that had preceded him. He was also an exceptionally good businessman with a keen sense of what his audience wanted. Portrayals of Jews in drama were a long-standing tradition by the time Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice*. The Jew seems to have been the guy audiences loved to hate in medieval and Renaissance drama. (See Rogers.)

Although Cohen will argue that "The Merchant of Venice seems to [him] a profoundly and crudely Anti-Semitic play" (Cohen 53), some critics agree more with the sentiments of Barton and Suchet. When analyzing *The Merchant of Venice*, "One must forget modern anti-Semitism and concentrate on the play as writ" (Smith 151). When regarding the character Shylock, "we're not here to talk about anti-Semitism but about character" (Barton 170). Human nature is what is essentially examined through all of Shakespeare's characters, regardless of race or religion. "Shakespeare always makes nature predominate over accident; and if he preserves the essential character, is not very careful of distinctions super induced and adventitious. His story requires Romans or kings, but he thinks only on men" (Johnson 204).

Philip Edwards remarks that Shylock is different. He knows why he hates. He comes on the stage in the third scene with assurance, dignity- and passion. During the course of the play hatred masters him; but Shakespeare keeps this absurd and vindictive member of a persecuted race so vividly alive as a person that is impossible for us to share the delight of the Christian characters in finally crushing him, destroying his wealth, his religion, his family. There is no point in saying that the values of Shakespeare's age were not ours, and that and in our interpretation of Shylock we attribute to him a sensibility not then existing. The Merchant of Venice is 'an improbable fiction' indeed, and it needed a stage villain to be hissed off the stage at the end. In making that villain a Jew whose malice is qualified by a perception of the history of his race, Shakespeare brilliantly demonstrates how his comedies, which are trifles light as air, can be as thoughtfully as the tragedies.

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