

The merchant of venice is a racist play



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Since the very early ages, discrimination against people of different races has always existed in society. People with different coloured skin, people from different religions and people from different countries are often stereotypes, and some people are prejudice about these people and act on the prejudice. This is known as racism.

Shakespeare's play "The Merchant of Venice" is full of ambiguity about racism. The two main points of racism to be pointed out are firstly, the use of racial stereotyping mainly by what the characters say, and the other is one of the main characters, Shylock, who is a Jew. The intention of the play is still undecided to this day, no-one is sure if Shakespeare was intending to be anti-Semitic or if he was wanted completely the opposite.

However, several quotes in the play are undoubtedly racist, for example, 'If he have the condition of a saint, and the complexion of a devil, I had rather he should shrive me than wive me', which comes from Portia about the Prince of Morocco. Quotes such as these are undoubtedly racist since saying that she wouldn't marry the perfect man if he was black is a very emotive thing to say. The condemning of Judaism however, is used much more. The word 'Jew' is often replaced for 'Dog', and the religion is often linked to the Devil, for example Launcelot says 'The Jew is the very devil incarnation'.

Looking at the title of the play, 'The Merchant of Venice', it focuses on Antonio, rather than Shylock. This is a surprise since the play is a comedy, and the character that the audience would laugh at, was in fact Shylock. A title such as 'The Jew of Venice' would have been more appropriate in this situation, as he is the main subject of the comedy.

The main argument against the play being racist is the fact that unlike most Jews in theatre, Shylock is an extremely complex character with moral issues in the story and has feelings like every human does. Included is one of the most famous Shakespeare speeches about the equality of men despite their beliefs – “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.... 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?”

At the time Shakespeare wrote the play, there were no Jews in England, apart from ones which had converted to Christianity in order to be able to stay in their homes. They had been banned from the country in 1290, and to the Elizabethan audience, they were something of a myth – the closest thing to a Jew they had seen were interpretations of one in theatre.

They were considered the villain in many around the time, and were always the stereotypical old man who was mean, selfish and money-obsessed. Before being expelled from the country, the Jews were already banned from numerous professions. Many were money-lenders, since they could legally charge interest in lending money whereas the Christians couldn't. Since they would always be chasing up debt, they were disliked. This feeling of resentment lasted long after they had been expelled, as well as for the original reason for the hatred; the Jews were the reason for Jesus Christ's crucifixion.

Shylock is hardly ever referred to with his name, simply ' Jew', which is very degrading and obviously discriminating since he is separated from society, otherwise people wouldn't know who they were talking about if someone referred to him as ' Jew'. There are plenty of moments where Shylock complains of people calling him " misbeliever, cut-throat dog," and them " spitting upon his Jewish gabardine". He is obviously mistreated and the only reason is because he's Jewish. Judaism is frequently condemned and most of the times are linked to the devil. At one point, Solanio says " unless the devil himself turns Jew", which is implying that the only way the devil could be worse is to turn Jewish – this is simply stating that the devil is better than a Jew.

Jews were portrayed as unkind and the play also has the same view – " The Hebrew will turn Christian, he grows kind" states that to grow kind means they must be turning Christian. A clever play on words when referring to Jessica is also used when she is called a " gentle Jew" – ' gentile', in the Bible means ' non-Jew' and ' gentilis' is also Latin for ' belonging to the same clan'. Therefore calling her a " gentle Jew" implies that she was too nice to be Jewish.

The first mention of racism between Shylock and Antonio is in fact from Shylock, when he says " I hate him for he is a Christian". Although we find out later that in fact it is more the hatred from Antonio that matters, since it is the first mentioned racist slur, we are encouraged to form a negative impression of Shylock.

Shylock is also depicted as evil and bloodthirsty when he makes his agreement that he may have a pound of Antonio's flesh. The fact that he turns down triple the amount of money and is so insistent to have his bond ("If every ducat in six thousand ducats were in six parts, and every part a ducat, I would not draw them, I would have my bond"), could also be implying he is bloodthirsty. A rumour among Christians was that Jews actually did eat human flesh, and since there were no Jews in the country, no-one was there to deny this rumour and it was generally believed. He is also portrayed as an extremely uncaring person; when his daughter Jessica runs away, he seems to value his money more than his daughter, or at least values them equally.

All these insults towards Shylock's character imply the play was indeed racist, but another view is that it is just the characters who are racist, and not necessarily Shakespeare's views. The reason Shylock wanted the pound of flesh was revenge – "So can I give no reason, nor I will not, more than a lodged hate and a certain loathing I bear Antonio". Antonio admits to spitting on and calling Shylock names and even tells Shylock after he is lent the money, that he is "as like to call thee so again, to spit on thee again, to spurn thee too". Shylock finally has the chance legally to get his revenge on Antonio. Shylock even says, in his speech, "if you wrong us shall we not revenge?", and he is simply doing what any other person, Christian or Jewish, would do.

Throughout the play, a modern audience might feel sympathy for Shylock. He is abused throughout the play and especially at the end of the story, where he is made to give away a large amount of his wealth and convert to

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Christianity. He has an emotional exit after he is told his sentence, which I don't think would be included if Shakespeare didn't want people to feel sympathy for him – in any other story with heroes and villains, the villain would never have obvious feelings and would never be sympathised with.

This is an important factor in the play – Shakespeare has written the play in a way so that Shylock has emotions. Although the other characters, such as Solanio, mock him – “ My daughter! O my ducats! .. O my Christian ducats!” (This mocks Shylock being confused), we are encouraged to feel sympathy for him since his daughter has left him and so has his money; they are the two most important things to him. After the court case, the only thing he has left, his house, is also taken, which he obviously is hurt by – “ That doth sustain my house; you take my life when you do take the means whereby I live”.

Shylock's “ Hath not a Jew eyes” speech is also pivotal – it is a strong argument, and Shakespeare would not have put the speech in a play which is only there to proclaim Jewish people as villains. It must have been put in to give a message about prejudice, and if so, the play isn't racist to be hurtful, it could just be in context – possibly it shows the racism and discrimination against Jews, which is unjustified. “ For sufferance is the badge of all our tribe”, Shylock tells us it is his race that are abused, not just him.

However, as previously stated the audience at the time were not tolerant towards Jews. One could argue that the ending of the play where Shylock has to convert and give away his wealth, is just to keep the audience happy, as it would be like a happy ending where the villain is made to suffer.

Shakespeare knew what the audience wanted, and to include his message of anti-prejudice, he'd need to do it subtly whilst still keeping the audience happy so more people would come and see it performed. He therefore included examples of Shylock being abused, Shylock's speech reinforces his message and evokes sympathy for Shylock, yet the storyline is still biased towards the heroes: the Christians.

Aside from Shylock, other racial slurs are prevalent throughout the play. In Act 1 scene 2, Portia and Nerissa discuss the men who come to try and achieve Portia's hand in marriage. Here there is the debate whether the people mentioned are characters or racial stereotypes. The lines uttered by Portia about the various nobles could all easily be the stereotypes, and I think this is the intention. It would have been greatly enjoyed by the audience, since this is a great factor of comedy even to this day.

The Prince of Morocco, at his first mention, is insulted for his race. ' If he have the condition of a saint, and the complexion of a devil, I had rather he should shrive me than wive me' Portia says, and even on his entry, he says ' mistake me not for my complexion'. There were no black people in England at the time, and if there were, they would have been strongly discriminated against. This racial slur would be the norm at the time, however as a mixed race society today would recognise this as very racist.

My personal response to the play is that it is indeed racist; however only to the extent that it explores the racial prejudice endemic in society at that time and man's cruelty and hypocrisy. I think Shakespeare wanted to show that people who weren't white and Christian, had feelings and emotions too;

how we are all human beings. However, to get this point across, he has to weave a story that included romantic love and comedy in order for it to be accepted by society at the time. The strong emotional speeches given to Shylock would make people think about how Jews were mistreated, and the issues of equality may have resonated with the audience long after the performance was over.