

Many theatrical producers are uncomfortable about staging "the merchant of venice..."



Many theatrical producers are uncomfortable about staging “ The Merchant of Venice” Essay Sample

“ The Merchant of Venice” has caused a great deal of controversy over whether or not it should be staged. People are worried about the play because they are afraid that it portrays Jews unfairly and can be seen as extremely offensive. Because of this, producers have to deal with the play in a sensitive way, especially since World War 2 when millions of Jews were treated in a devastating manner during the Holocaust. Over 6 million people died in gas chambers and other such methods of torture.

This would be a very sensitive issue for all Jews and for all of us who have been shamed by such persecution being possible because it is most likely that all Jews today knew at least someone who had to go through those awful experiences. For this reason, any prejudice shown towards Jews in this play has to be dealt with extreme care. The reason there is so much prejudice shown towards Jews in this play, is because of the views of people who were living in England at the time Shakespeare wrote it.

Jews were thought of as inferior, and if a Jew wanted to live in England they had to convert from being Jewish and become a Christian, because Christianity was thought of as the “ correct” religion. To see if this play is totally anti-Semitic, we need to look at Shakespeare and see if he went along with the views of his time, or if he challenged them. Shakespeare showed evidence of going along with the views of his time, firstly; by the way he portrayed Shylock. In the play Shylock is Jewish and he therefore represents the whole Jewish religion and how it was seen by people of that time.

Shakespeare stereotypes him by making him seem obsessed with money. This was because his job was money lending. But it was illegal for Jews to live in England, so he could not be employed and this was the only way in which he could make a living. Shakespeare also portrays him as “ keeping himself to himself”, as if he was self-centred and did not care about anyone else but himself. These descriptions, which Shakespeare makes of Shylock, portray him in a very bad light and this is just how Jews were thought of at the time. An example of the way Shylock is portrayed as selfish and greedy is when he is making the bond with Antonio.

We can sense the rivalry between the two characters, and can tell that neither likes the other. Shylock seems to enjoy the fact that he has power over Antonio in the way that he has come to borrow money from him and he takes his time in deciding whether or not he should agree to the bond. “ Three thousand ducats, well. ” “ For three months, – well. ” “ Antonio shall become bound, well. ” “ Three thousand ducats for three months and Antonio bound. ” He makes Bassanio wait for his answer and at the same time gains power, because Bassanio tries to persuade him to agree to lend Antonio the money.

This makes Shylock look like he enjoys taking pleasure in other people’s pain. When Antonio arrives, Shylock says, “ I hate him for he is a Christian. ” This suggests that the only reason that Shylock does not like him is because of his religion. Shylock is shown as deceitful when he pretends to like Antonio just to seal the bond of a pound of his flesh if he cannot pay him back the money he has lent him. The fact that the bond is a pound of flesh and not

money shows how Shylock wants revenge for the ways in which he has been treated, and wants Antonio to die, for that revenge.

Another way in which Shakespeare shows anti-Semitism towards Shylock is in the way he gives him exaggerated Jewish speech patterns when he is speaking English. This sets him aside as different from others in the play and mocks his speech. " I'll lend you thus much moneys? " Here he says " moneys" instead of " money". Shylock is portrayed as unpleasant to work for when Lancelot Gobbo leaves his service and goes to work for Bassanio, who is a Christian. Bassanio - " One speak for both. " Lancelot - " Serve you sir.

This suggests that Lancelot would much prefer to work for Bassanio.

Shakespeare shows Shylock's obsession with money when he is preparing to go to the meal to seal the bond with Antonio. He tells his daughter, Jessica, to lock the doors behind her to make sure all his money is safe. " Fast bind, fast find; A proverb never stale in thrifty mine. " He also says " For I did dream of money-bags to-night. " This shows his obsession with money.

Shakespeare portrays Shylock as selfish and greedy when he finds Jessica has run off with Lorenzo and taken all his money.

Shakespeare shows Shylock as if he cares more about his money than he does about his daughter, and he shows Salerio and Salerio mocking Shylock. " My daughter! - O my ducats! - O my daughter! " " Find the girl! She hath the stones upon her and the ducats". Shakespeare shows here that he is happy to mock Shylock in this way, and the way he does it will encourage the audience to laugh along and have these anti-Semitic views reinforced.

Salerio refers to Shylock as the “ Villain Jew” which suggests that he is not even worthy of a name, and does not have any feelings.

There is more evidence for Shylock being greedy and selfish, when he says “ I would my daughter were dead at my foot and the jewels in her ear”. Here he is saying that he wouldn’t care if his daughter were dead as long as he could have his money back, which she stole from him. When Shylock and Antonio are in court and Shylock is waiting for the pound of flesh, Shylock shows his determination to take his revenge on Antonio for the way Christians have treated him. “ I’ll have my bond; Speak not against my bond”. This shows him refusing any amount of money; he just wants Antonio to die so that he can have his revenge.

His determination to have the bond portrays Shylock as someone who has no mercy, and he almost seems to gloat over his moment of power, which seems sickening in that he is prepared to go to great lengths to get his bond. The fact that Shylock sits and sharpens his knife on his shoe and wants no surgeon present when he cuts the pound of flesh from Antonio is Shakespeare showing Shylock in a very negative way. At the end of the play when Shylock has all he owns taken from him because he has lost the bond, shows a great deal of anti-Semitism.

The Christians triumph over the Jew and the audiences of Shakespeare’s time were supposed to find this amusing. Perhaps the biggest piece of evidence to show anti-Semitism, is the fact that even though Shylock lost his daughter and money, he was also made to give up his religion and become a Christian, like all people were supposed to be at the time. “ Nay, take my life

and all; pardon not that: you take my house, when you do take the prop that doth sustain my house; you take my life when you do take the means whereby I live”.

However, it could be argued that, Shakespeare has not only shown that he goes along with the views of his time, he also shows evidence to challenge these views. This is shown in the fact that Shylock wants revenge from Antonio for him calling him names “ Mark you this, Bassanio, The devil can cite scripture for his purpose. ” Antonio refers to Shylock as the devil, as if this is a perfectly acceptable thing for him to do. Shylock shows us evidence of the way Antonio has treated him in the past.

Fair sir, you spit on me on Wednesday last; you spun’d me such a day; another time you call’d me dog; and for these courtesies I’ll lend you thus much moneys? ” This shows that Antonio uses every opportunity to have a go at Shylock. The fact that Shakespeare told us of what Antonio had done towards Shylock, is because he wants his audience to see Shylock’s point of view about the insults and ill-treatment he has to put up with and it helps to see him more sympathetically. We also feel sympathetic towards Shylock when Lancelot Gobbo leaves his service and when Jessica runs off with Lorenzo, without a second thought about her father.

His wife, we know, is dead and so he is portrayed as a lonely, isolated figure, who is on his own in life. When Salerio and Solanio are mocking Shylock and calling him names, it is obvious to see that it has gone too far. It is unnecessary and unfair that people can call him names and get away with it. This is what Shakespeare wanted us to see, because the audience can feel a

sense of anger, that Shylock has been treated in this way. When Shylock explains why he wants a pound of Antonio's flesh, he says, " If it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge.

Here, Shakespeare makes us feel that Antonio must have hurt Shylock badly for him to feel this strongly about wanting revenge, and makes the audience realise that it is wrong to mock someone, especially just because they have a different religion. One quotation shows Shakespeare strongly going against all the views of his time. " I am a Jew. 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? "

Here Shakespeare is telling us that everyone should have the same rights no matter what their religion, because we are all the same. The quotation also tells us that Shylock has every right to want revenge on Antonio, especially as he has been made to feel less than human, with the fact that he called him a dog. This speech therefore tells us that anti-Semitic views are wrong and should be challenged. When Shylock said that he wouldn't care if his daughter were dead as long as he could have his money back, which she stole from him.

It was obviously an awful thing to say, but looking more closely at other events that had happened we can try to find out why he may have said it.

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Firstly, Jessica had run off with Lorenzo, who is a Christian, and so hated Shylock, so the fact that she did this would have hurt him a lot because she was the only person he had left and she ran off with all his money and left him on his own. Secondly, we later find out, after he has said that he wouldn't care if she were dead, that Jessica has thoughtlessly taken the ring that was given to Shylock by his dead wife, and she has sold it for a monkey.

We see an unusual side to Shylock here, as he gets upset. The ring had obviously meant a great deal to him and he says, " I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys". Shakespeare makes his audience feel very sympathetic towards Shylock at this point and it is easier to see why Shylock feels anger towards his daughter. Shylock's last scene in the play, is perhaps the part in which we see him portrayed as most helpless and where the audience can easily feel sympathy towards him.

Shylock is the only Jew in the courtroom, when he wants to take the pound of flesh from Antonio and the Christians act as one big force against him. At the end, they take his religion, which was all he had left, and he becomes an isolated figure with no one to stand up for him. He has lost everything, Lancelot Gobbo, Jessica, his revenge on Antonio, his money, and now his religion. Shakespeare makes this happen to make his audience feel that this treatment towards Jews is totally unfair. At the end of this scene Shylock is asked to sign the bond, which will sign away everything he has, and we can sense that he is a broken man.

All the other characters in the courtroom act triumphantly and are so relieved that they have saved Antonio from giving Shylock a pound of his

flesh, that Shylock says, “ I pray you, give me leave to go from hence. I am not well. Send the deed after me, and I will sign it. He shows here that he has been too hurt and cannot bear to stay in the court any longer, and this last quotation from him, makes the audience feel very sympathetic towards his lonely, isolated figure as he leaves the courtroom.

Although Shakespeare’s audience may have felt Shylock got his ‘ just deserts’ it is hard for a modern audience not to sympathise with his plight here. Although, there is a lot of evidence to support the views of the play being anti-Semitic, and that Shakespeare goes along with the accepted views of Jews at the time, there is also evidence to suggest that the play is not completely anti-Semitic and it shows Shakespeare challenging the prejudiced views of Jews. He tries to show the unfairness of the way Jewish people are treated, just for having a different religion.