

How far is shylock a character for whom we can feel sympathy? how would a contemp...

[Literature](#), [William Shakespeare](#)



Throughout William Shakespeare's play, *The Merchant of Venice*, there is a strong theme of prejudice. Portia has to deal with prejudice against her sex, the Prince of Morocco has to deal with prejudice against his race but the character that is most discriminated against is Shylock. He is hated for being a Jew and a money-lender, but Shakespeare has not made Shylock a character easy to sympathise with. He appears to be mean and cruel and it seems as though he loves money above all things. However during the play there are moments when Shakespeare gives Shylock speeches which show his humanity. In these moments, although at the time it was written there was little tolerance of Jews, the audience is made to feel sorry for him. Shakespeare has created a character that the audience's feelings will change for by the minute. When the play was written the audience would have immediately disliked Shylock on the basis of his religion and occupation, however nowadays when religious prejudice is not nearly as strong we still find him an unpleasant character. One of the main things which makes him seem unpleasant is his greed and love of money. His first words are actually "Three thousand ducats; well", perhaps a method of Shakespeare's to show the audience immediately what is most important to Shylock. Later on in the first scene, when Antonio enters to talk to him about lending Bassanio money Shylock says to himself; "I hate him for he is a Christian; But more for that in low simplicity He lends out money gratis, and brings down The rate of usance here with us in Venice" This shows that Shylock puts his money before his religion. He says he hates Antonio because he is a Christian (and so an immediate enemy of the devout Jew) but more than that

he hates him because he lends out money for no fee and so takes business away from Shylock. He also puts his money before his daughter, Jessica. When she runs away with Lorenzo she takes some of her father's money and we hear from Solanio and Salerio that Shylock runs out into the street shouting; " My daughter! O my ducats!" He repeats the two phrases until they become confused, and it is clear that the money is more important to him than Jessica. Shakespeare emphasises the confusion in Shylock's mind between his ' daughter' and his ' ducats' by using alliteration. The only time when money seems less important to Shylock is in the court scene when he repeatedly refuses money so that he can carry out his bond, which is to cut a pound of flesh from Antonio's body for not repaying the three thousand ducats he was lent. This is the other characteristic that Shakespeare gives Shylock which makes him so unlikeable; his need for revenge. When his daughter runs away he is more interested in making her pay for her disobedience than getting her home safely, he says to Tubal; " I would my daughter were dead at my foot ... would she were hearsed at my foot, and the ducats in her coffin!" It is made clear early on why Jessica feels the need to run away. When she talks to Launcelot she says " Our house is hell" and then later; " To be asham'd to be my father's child! But though I am daughter to his blood, I am not to his manners." She is obviously ashamed to be associated with Shylock and tries to show Launcelot that she is not like him, and when she says " Farewell; and if my fortune be not cross'd I have a father, you a daughter, lost." Her language shows how much she longs to leave the house and escape from her father. Although there are times in the

play when it is obvious that Shylock loves her, it is easy for the audience to understand why living with him would be unbearable. His hatred for Antonio is also obvious and it is so strong that he refuses all offers of money so that he can cut off a pound of his flesh. In Act 3 Scene 1 Shylock makes his famous "Hath not a Jew eyes?" speech, and it is probably at this point that the audience feel most sympathetic towards him, however he ends the dialogue with; "If a Christian wrong a Jew what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge! The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall be hard but I will better the instruction." The beginning of this speech shows how Shylock longs for common humanity; Shakespeare wants the audience to see that Shylock is no different from anyone else. However the end shows that Shylock does not only want to be equal to the Christians but he wants to be better than them. He says he will "better the instruction" meaning he wants to be superior to the Christians in inflicting pain. His obsession with revenge is clear in this speech and the language he uses in the court scene makes him sound bitter and intent on making Antonio suffer. Throughout most of the court scene (Act 4 Scene 1) the audience will probably lose all sympathy for Shylock. He is menacing and gruesomely triumphant when Portia tells him he has the right to the pound of flesh. He gloats and repeats the words of the bond to Antonio with obvious relish, he says; "Ay 'his breast': So says the bond - doth it not, noble judge? 'Nearest his heart' - those are the very words." Bassanio also says "Why dost thou whet thy knife so earnestly" showing that Shakespeare intended the actor playing Shylock to be sharpening his knife while the scene was taking place.

This would make Shylock seem more threatening and eager to kill Antonio. He also rarely mentions Antonio's name but often refers to the pound of flesh. His language makes him seem very possessive and just in the way that he feels people see him and think only 'Jew', he looks at Antonio and sees only a pound of Christian flesh. Portia asks him whether there can be a doctor present to stop Antonio from bleeding to death and Shylock asks if it says that in the bond, and she replies "It is not so express'd: but what of that? 'Twere good you do so much for charity" She is asking him to show some mercy towards Antonio but Shylock only replies "I cannot find it: 'tis not in the bond." It is clear that he feels no sympathy for Antonio and will be glad to see him die. However the end of Act 4 Scene 1 leaves the audience sympathising with Shylock. Despite the fact that his bond was so brutal, the way he is crushed by Portia and mocked by Gratiano makes the audience uncomfortable. Shylock demanded that Antonio stuck strictly to the bond he made, he says "I stand here for the law" and it is this demand for justice which is Shylock's downfall. Portia tells him he may take his pound of flesh but cannot spill a drop of Antonio's blood in the process, she says "If thou dost shed One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods Are, by the laws of Venice, confiscate" Shylock realises it is hopeless to attempt this so he says he will take the money instead but he is told he cannot because he already refused it once before, Portia says "He hath refus'd it in the open court: He shall have merely justice, and his bond" She is making fun of him and reminding everyone that Shylock refused the money before and wanted only the bond to be carried out. Gratiano mimics Shylock and mockingly

repeats his words; " O upright judge! Mark, Jew: O learned judge" however most of the other characters remain silent and do not join in with Gratiano's taunting. In this scene the audience is not allowed to forget Shylock's religion. He is called ' Jew' more often than by his name and Portia refers to him as an ' alien' meaning he did not belong. They are all very hostile towards him so he seems more like an outsider. Even the Duke, who is supposed to be neutral obviously dislikes and degrades Shylock, he calls him an " Inhuman wretch, Uncapable of pity, void and empty From any dram of mercy." This builds up the audience's sympathy, simply because none of the other characters in the scene feel any. Antonio says that as punishment for attempting to take his life Shylock must give half his money to the state of Venice and half on loan to keep in trust for Lorenzo. He must also become a Christian and leave all his possessions in a will for Jessica and Lorenzo, " The gentleman that lately stole his daughter". Shylock is completely defeated, he says; " 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" However after that he is nearly silent, talking very little, obviously stunned and dismayed at this turn of events. When he goes to leave the court he 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." The language used shows there is no fight left in him and despite the talk of thanks and payment once he has left his parting words linger over the scene. It is the court scene and Act 3 Scene 1 where Shakespeare gives Shylock dialogue which shows him at his most compassionate. Shylock's " Hath not a Jew eyes?" speech is moving and

gives the audience a real chance to understand his bitterness. He says; " I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?... If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh?... And if you wrong us, do we not revenge?"

Shakespeare's use of rhetorical questions makes it easy for the audience to see the answers. Shylock is telling the audience how he is no different from them, to say no to any of the questions in his speech would be to contradict their own humanity. His use of short sentences and long lists of words brings a beat to the speech, " senses, affections, passions". This effective use of language means that Shylock drives the point of the speech home. Any other sympathy for Shylock comes from the way other people treat him. When Antonio comes to borrow money off him Shylock reminds him of all the times Antonio has mocked him in public, he says; " You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog, And spit upon my Jewish gabardine." Despite Shylock's unpleasant behaviour it is understandable that he should hate Antonio.

When Jessica runs away Shakespeare does not let us see Shylock's anguish first hand because that would arouse too much sympathy, instead we hear it from Salerio and Solanio who joke about it and mimic him. Salerio says " Why, all the boys in Venice follow him, Crying his stones, his daughter and his ducats." He is saying that all the boys from the town followed Shylock and copied what he was saying. Shakespeare is making the audience laugh at the Jew's situation and comedy can take away the sting of prejudice but it also reinforces the audience's awareness of difference. When we finally do see Shylock, his passion has turned into bitterness and he earns the

audience's pity when he says; " my daughter is my flesh and my blood" showing that he was truly affected by the loss of Jessica and not just because she took his money. Another scene where there is some sympathy for his character is when Jessica runs away. She not only takes one lot of money but she purposely goes back to get another lot, she says; " I will make fast the doors and gild myself With some more ducats, and be with you straight" This shows her greed and creates pity for Shylock because his money is the most important thing to him and Jessica knows this so she deliberately takes more than she needs. Also to create pity and to make Shylock seem more like an outsider, Shakespeare writes his dialogue as though Shylock's grasp on the English language is not that good, he says; " moneys" and " sheeps". This would be comical to a Shakespearean audience but to a modern day one it would simply emphasize the fact that Shylock does not belong. His language, however, is often very powerful such as the speech in Act 3 Scene 1 and he often uses rhetoric in his dialogue. Language is also used against Shylock. He often referred to, throughout the play, as the devil. Antonio says in their first meeting " The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose", Jessica refers to their house as " hell" and Solanio says " Let me say ' amen' betimes, lest the devil cross my prayer, for here he comes in the likeness of a Jew." This shows how hated Shylock is but it also emphasises the difference in religions for, as a Jew, Shylock would be damned in the eyes of a Christian. Structure is used to affect the way we feel about Shylock too. He does not come back after the Act 4 Scene 1, probably because his presence would break the happy mood of the final scenes. His story is left more or less unfinished where as



everything else it tied off neatly. This means that the audience will keep on thinking about Shylock long after the play has ended because his fate is not certain. Shakespeare is unusual for his time because he actually gives Shylock a voice and speeches which talk of his suffering. In a time when Jews were hated, it would have been very uncommon to give their side of the story. And although Shylock is mainly an unpleasant character he is given a few long speeches where the audience is able to sympathise with him. The overall impression is that Shylock is mean and tight-fisted however his parting scene means that the audience cannot completely hate him nor forget him. He seems utterly broken and there will always be the worry that he has not been treated like an equal or given a fair chance, for example in the court scene it is clear that the duke is biased, he says "Go on, and call the Jew into the court". By calling Shylock Jew he has made it clear that he sees him as an object, 'a Jew', not an actual person. His punishment at the end of the scene seems very harsh and it should be apparent to the audience that the loss of his religion is worth far more to Shylock than a pound of flesh. Shakespeare has created a very complex character that we are able to sympathise with because we are shown the reasons for his bitterness. We cannot completely agree with his decisions or need for revenge but we can understand it. A modern day audience is likely to view the play in a different light; one reason for this is the fact that the Holocaust and the terrible way in which the Jews were treated in the Second World War are still fresh in our minds. Shylock says, "Still I have borne it with a patient shrug, For sufferance is the badge of all our tribe." These lines run very true

to a modern audience who can see that Jews have had to deal with discrimination and suffering throughout history. The treatment of Shylock therefore would be more noticeable and a modern audience would be more likely to sympathise with him. The second reason is the fact that the modern world is less prejudiced. When the play was written Shylock would have had two main disadvantages for the Shakespearian audience. Firstly he is a Jew, and in a predominantly Christian country would have been hated for his religion, and secondly a money-lender, the main profession open to the Jews. To a modern audience neither of those things would affect how they perceive the character. This means they are more likely to give Shylock a chance before they judge him and would be more willing to let their views about him change. In the Elizabethan period Jews were hated for two main reasons. The first was superstition, myths and legends told tales of brutal murders carried out for the Jewish faith. The second was dislike of anybody who was different, and religion gave the Christians a good reason to persecute the foreigners who lived among them. Although the modern world is not completely free of prejudice it is certainly less narrow-minded than before. Nowadays the racism and anti-Semitism shown in the play would not be considered acceptable.