

Merchant of venice: mercy and justice

Literature, Russian Literature



Ever been in a situation where you do not know whether to be fair or bend the rules a bit? In *The Merchant of Venice*, mercy and justice are the continuing predominant themes. Situations occur, that doing the just act does not seem to be correct or the right thing to do. Technically, the correct thing to do is to follow and abide by justice and the law. For, in this case, justice means the taking of a man's life for the greed and sick revenge of another man. One of the true morals in this play is to be careful about what you wish for. Just as Shylock asked for justice, and in the end, justice was served.

Throughout *The Merchant of Venice*, the themes of mercy and justice are continuously contradicting when it comes to Shylock's situation with Antonio, in the court scene. In the play, Shylock has a deep desire for his bond to be satisfied and justice to prevail. In this Shakespearian time period, Jews are looked down upon. They are not treated as equals to the Christians. Shylock had a well-justified reason to hate Antonio after Antonio would treat Shylock like a dog and spit upon him. Shylock said that Antonio's reason for disrespect is because he is a Jew. Shylock talked of how Jews and Christians are the same things, except they follow different beliefs.

Once Antonio admits he cannot repay his debt, Shylock is eager for his bond and justice. However never did he show mercy, even towards his own daughter, he said, " I would my / daughter were dead at my foot and the jewels in her / ear; would she were hearsed at my foot and the / ducats in her coffin," (III. 1. 87-90). Since he lacked mercy and kindness, he was shown no mercy when Antonio was to set his demands. Antonio begged for mercy and said, " I pray thee, hear me speak".

Shylock showed no mercy for Antonio and persisted that he will have his bond. Solanio reassures Antonio that the Duke will not abide to a contract of this nature. Antonio replied saying that, “ The Duke cannot deny the course of law,” (III. 3. 29). That is where the justice falls into play, if the Duke does not allow Shylock’s pound of flesh to be taken, then the whole Venetian courts and government would be a disgrace.

This meant that for the trial to be fair, the bond will need to be satisfied. It looked bad for Antonio until Portia came dressed as Balthazar, a lawyer. Portia’s first approach was to ask Shylock to be merciful. Shylock however was disgusted by the idea like proven before. Portia talks of God and how Christians beg for mercy to reach salvation. She said that “ Therefore, Jew, / Though justice be thy plea, consider this: / That in the course of justice none of us / Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy, / And that same prayer doth teach us all to render / The deeds of mercy,” (IV. 1. 203-208).

Being as deliberate and stubborn as he is he said that “ My deeds upon my head! I crave the law, / The penalty and forfeit of my bond,” (IV. 1. 212-213). After that plan fails, Portia tells Shylock that Bassanio is offering nine thousand ducats. Portia tells Shylock, “ there’s thrice thymoney offered thee,” (IV. 1. 235).

The stubborn and immovable Shylock insists on his bond even after three times the original three-thousand ducats are offered to him. Finally, Portia agrees to Shylock’s demands and tells him to cut and retrieve his one pound of flesh. Just before he starts the process she brought up a very significant point to be noticed that changes the fate of the whole trial let alone

Antonio's life. She said, " This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood / The words are expressly are a pound of flesh," (IV. . 319-320).

She points out that the contract specifically said a pound of flesh not including blood. She follows to say, " if thou dost shed / One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods / Are by the laws of Venice confiscate / Unto the state of Venice," (IV. 1. 322-325). The second Shylock heard this part of the contract, he immediately took his words back. He said, " I take this offer then.

Pay the bond thrice / And let the Christian go," (IV. 1. 332-334). He has taken back his lust for justice and wants his money back so he can just leave.

Portia however makes his situation worse for Shylock by bringing out more laws that get Shylock in bad situations. She insists that Antonio's flesh be cut and given to Shylock. Portia as her final attack at Shylock said to the court, " If it is proved against an alien / That by direct or indirect attempts / He seek the life of any citizen / The party ' gainst the which he doth contrive / Shall seize one half his goods; the other half / Comes to the privy coffer of the state / And the offender's life lies in the mercy / Of the Duke only, ' gainst all other voice," (IV.. 364-371).

It turned out to be very ironic how Shylock had held grasp of someone's life and now his life is in the hands of the Duke. Antonio begged Shylock to rethink the contract and be merciful. Now Shylock is asking for mercy and half of his property and goods is going to the very man he swore an oath to kill. It is very funny how such a small missed detail caused such a great deal

of events to occur. Portia then asked Antonio, “ What mercy can you render him, Antonio? ” (IV. 1. 394).

At the end of the great turn of events, Shylock is forced to agree on the terms that he will give his money to Jessica and Lorenzo, he will make a will leaving everything to Jessica and Lorenzo, and finally, he will become a Christian. The major themes shown are clearly and evidently in the play, especially when Portia is able to use the desire for Shylock’s justice to her advantage and turn the tables on the old Jew. Not only does she free Antonio, but she did the whole case legally and with tremendous justice but lacking mercy. Just as Shylock showed no mercy towards Antonio, he was rendered no mercy either.