

# Questioning anti-semitism in the merchant of venice

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



The Merchant of Venice has been interpreted over time as both a defense and an attack on Jews. (" Shylock") While it would seem improbable that Shakespeare was forward thinking enough to completely reject the anti-Semitic sentiment of his time, the play is too complex to be classified as a simple attack on Jews. Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice was not written to make a precise statement about anti-Semitism, but instead was written to push his audiences to question their own preconceived notions about Jews in England during the Renaissance. There is no doubt that Shylock is not a pleasant character. As the play progresses, he goes from simply scheming about getting revenge on the Christians to becoming fanatical about killing Antonio. The portrayal of Shylock as a devious and scheming Jew who is virtually a " devil" would have greatly appealed to the anti-Semitic audiences of Shakespeare's time. (" Shylock") However, if this was Shakespeare's sole intention, he could have easily made the character of Shylock both single-dimensional and an excessive caricature of a Jew. Instead, Shylock is a fascinating and multi-layered character. In Act III, he gives a powerful speech about acceptance that is difficult to ignore: " 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?" (3. 1. 52-58). Shylock uses this argument to explain why he wants to get revenge on the people who have wronged him. However, it is too eloquent to be merely the distorted reasoning of a villain. When one learns what has been done to Shylock, he suddenly sees the world through Shylock's eyes and

sympathizes, if only briefly, with his desire for revenge on Antonio. This reversal most likely made the audiences of Christians of that time feel uncomfortable (“ Shylock”), which was exactly Shakespeare’s intention – to make the audience question their assumptions about Shylock’s “ evil” character and, by extension, their stereotypes of Jews as a group.

Shakespeare also compels the audience to question the standards of their society by his characterization of the Christians. Though he portrays none of them quite as badly as Shylock, they are all far from perfect, especially in their hypocrisy. Antonio condemns Shylock for both his religion and his practice of usury as he simultaneously asks to borrow money from him. Also, though Shylock’s shallowness is made fun of in the form of his fixation with money, the characters of Portia and Bassanio are also portrayed as shallow because of the significance they place on beauty. However, the most substantial show of hypocrisy by a Christian is Portia’s actions during the trial in Act IV. At the beginning of the trial Portia, as the doctor of laws, greatly emphasizes the concept of mercy in trying to convince Shylock to be merciful to Antonio: “...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.” (4. 1. 93-98). Soon after this, Portia twists the law and is given an immediate chance to show the same mercy to Shylock that she had asked Shylock to show to Antonio. She determinedly decides not to be merciful: “ The Jew shall have all justice,-soft no haste! / He shall have nothing but the penalty” (4. 1. 317-318). If Shakespeare had really wanted to emphasize the Christian values of compassion and forgiveness, he might

have made Portia and Antonio show mercy to Shylock. Though he doesn't make an overt statement about hypocrisy, Shakespeare makes it just evident enough to make some of the Christians in his audience feel uncomfortable. Though the revelation of the Christians' hypocrisy is important, the end of the play and the audience's reaction to it are even more important to Shakespeare's point. When the trial is over, one thing that Shylock has to do is give up half of his money. One way to interpret this is that Shylock is being punished, which would result in the ending being the archetypal good triumphing over evil. However, because at this point in the play all Shylock has is his money, this seems far too great of a punishment. Instead, with Shylock's graceful acceptance of a punishment that takes away what he loves and depends on, Shakespeare coerces the audience into feeling sorry for Shylock. Furthermore, another stipulation of the verdict of the trial, as stated by Antonio, is that Shylock has to convert to Christianity. This could be understood in two ways. One would be that Antonio is actually being merciful to Shylock by "saving him." However, several things in the play suggest otherwise. One is the establishment of Shylock as a devout Jew who detests Christians. The thought of him becoming a sincere Christian is entirely improbable. Another is the fate of Jessica. Though she is praised for her conversion to Christianity, even at the end of the play she can't fully integrate with the Christians and is left being the odd one out. Also, in Act III when Launcelot is talking to Jessica he asserts his belief that Jessica is still damned even though she converted. These examples illustrate the difficulty of simply changing something as central to one's life as religion, as well as the uneasiness of the time about the legitimacy of conversion. Shakespeare

wrote this condition of the verdict in order to make the audience feel even greater sympathy for Shylock and to underscore the Christian's lack of mercy in sentencing. At the end of the trial the audience most likely doesn't feel a sense of justice at Shylock's fate. Instead, due to Shakespeare's clever writing, they are induced to wonder if everyone really got what they deserved. While *The Merchant of Venice* can be controversial because of its association with anti-Semitism, it is still an important work that gives further insight into Shakespeare's views and objectives. One senses in this play that Shakespeare himself felt ambivalent about Jews and wanted his audiences to question their beliefs too. The provocation continues to the present day, as modern readers and audiences still find *The Merchant of Venice* an uncomfortable reminder of religious tension and bias. Work Cited " Shylock." Films for the Humanities and Sciences. VHS. Princeton, NJ, 1999.