

# Justice in the merchant of venice



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The Oxford English Dictionary explains ‘just’ as ‘that which is morally right’; this definition would lead a person to believe that there is an element of humanity in justice. This, however, happens to be a particularly modern view on justice, a view which has been altered and warped over the years but it is reflected in the views of the Christians of the Merchant of Venice. This is because they are sympathetic to Antonio, however, Shylock’s definition of justice is somewhat different to this, and it is his definition of justice, which later is his ruin. He sees himself as someone who has done no wrong and therefore has no need for any compassion towards him. This is shown when Shylock says

“What judgement shall I dread, doing no wrong?” line 89

Because of this, Shylock sees justice as the letter of the law, precisely what the law dictates and thus comes across to the audience as a monster, as many Jews were viewed when Shakespeare wrote this. Shylock is the exact personification of the Elizabethan stereotype of a Jew, with a hatred of Christians and his practice of usury (the lending of money) is described as a fiend right from his entrance to the play in act 1 scene 3 where his first words are over money.

“Three thousand ducats, well”

This scene moulds the minds of the audience in their opinions of Shylock as he seems calculating and sinister as he dwells with great deliberation on the terms of the loan, almost savouring the moment where he has control over the Christians; this is later mirrored with the very same bond in the trial

scene. Shylock insists on the exact words of the bond, obsessing neurotically with his sudden surge of power and control

“ So says the bond, doth it not, noble judge?

‘ Nearest his heart’: those are the very words” lines 249-250

Shylock keeps this control through his view of justice, the exact letter of the law. But Shylock is not just a monster; his actions are a product of constant degradation of him, his culture and Judaism as a whole.

“ Laughed at my losses ... mocked at my gains”

This has left him bitter and twisted with a hate to Antonio, Bassanio and the rest of the group of Christians.

“ These be the Christian husbands!” line 291

This is one of the reasons the trial scene is so effective. Throughout the play, there has been tension rising between Antonio and Shylock and this continues through Act 4 Scene 1 until it reaches a climax in the form of the confrontation between Shylock and Antonio where Shylock is about to take a pound of Antonio’s flesh but Portia stops him. Shakespeare takes the audience so close to Shylock killing Antonio that when Portia stops him, they are left with an anti-climax that provokes a great level of emotion in them.

But it is not only the mockery by Antonio and his friends that produces the monster of Shylock, another major event in this play has left Shylock emotionally wounded; his daughter – Jessica – eloped with her Christian lover. She also took with her a large sum of Shylock’s wealth and

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possessions. With Shylock in terrible state, what he can take from Antonio, what he believes is rightfully his, will help in regaining his emotional well-being.

“ The pound of flesh which I demand of him

Is dearly bought; 'tis mine, and I will have it.” lines 99-100

It is this thinking which drives Shylock for what he believes is justice, and for everyone to get what, in turn, they each deserve is the focus of this scene.

However what they each get is determined by their definition of justice.

Shylock sees justice as exactly what the law dictates, and when it comes to his turn to be punished, he receives little mercy. Whereas the Christians, and everyone else in the court room, see justice as a concept which has to be enforced with mercy to produce fairness so when Antonio is being punished, they are constantly plaguing Shylock with pleas of mercy.

” ...and then 'tis thought

Thou'lt show thy mercy and remorse” lines 19-20

The mortification of Shylock continues throughout the trial scene with any character opposing him addressing him at some point or other as ‘ Jew’ or another derogatory term, even Portia; emphasising the fact that the whole court is against him. Even at the beginning of the scene it is Shylock who has to explain himself to the Duke, rather than Antonio, who is officially in the wrong. In the first 15 lines of the scene, Shylock is described as

“...an inhuman wretch” line 4

and " Go and call the Jew into the court" line 14

Shylock does not only have control over Antonio and therefore the rest of the Christians but also, until Portia catches him out, the court of Venice and the Duke. This occurs because Shylock, as well as Portia, knows that the bond cannot be merely broken, as this would lead to pandemonium in Venice. A bond would mean nothing if it could be simply broken by the Duke. Portia says

" ...there is no power in Venice

Can alter a decree established." lines 214-215

Portia knows that the bond cannot be broken, so the question that is asked is ' why does Portia not simply stop Shylock at the beginning?' the answer is simple. For one, it gives the audience the climax they need after the build up throughout the play, the tension between Antonio (and the Christians) and Shylock finally reaching its peak. The main reason is that it allows Shakespeare to convey the message the play is about; that justice is nothing without mercy. He does this through Portia, who gives Shylock every possible opportunity to be merciful to Antonio before she stops him, so that he doesn't need to be so severely punished later. First she gives Shylock the chance to take the money offered by Bassanio so that at least he can get the money (plus a handsome profit) he lent out, he rejects this saying

" An oath, an oath. I have an oath in heaven!

Shall I lay perjury upon my soul?'

No, not for Venice” lines 224-226

After this Portia sees that Shylock will not take the money as he truly wants revenge upon Antonio but decides to give him yet another chance to show mercy, as she does, in order to give him softer punishment later, but he does not take it. Portia asks Shylock if he will allow a doctor to help Antonio and try to save his life when Shylock cuts out the pound of flesh.

“ Portia Have by some surgeon...

...Shylock I cannot find it, 'tis not in the bond” lines 253 and 258

It seems the Christians are getting exactly what they deserve, by the letter of the law, through the death of Antonio, but as we all know, this cannot happen as they are the heroes of this story and Shylock is the villain, and Shakespeare’s comedies tend to always finish with a happy ending. But Shylock would not be the villain if the Christians had not made him into one; it is their constant degradation of Shylock that leads to the hardness of his heart. Not only does Portia show him the opportunities to be merciful but she speaks of it as well, promoting Shylock in vain

“ The quality of mercy is not strained” line 180

“...in the course of justice, none of us

Should see salvation.” lines 195-196

Portia leads him into the trap she has set this way; giving Shylock the opportunity to show mercy but with every opportunity he does not take, he digs his own grave deeper. Portia allows Shylock to believe that she is on his

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side right until he is about to cut Antonio where she prevents him using the very tactic Shylock had been using to punish Antonio: keeping to the exact words of the bond.

“ The words expressly are ‘ a pound of flesh’.

Take then thy bond” lines 303-304

She still allows Shylock to have his pound of flesh, but states that

” if thou dost shed

One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods

Are by the laws of Venice confiscate” lines 305-307

Shylock has been foiled by his own ways. The tables turn and as soon as Shylock hears this he goes back on his words, losing face in the eyes of the audience, which shows that he is headed for a fall. Much like in any Shakespeare play, whenever a character becomes arrogant, they are setting themselves up for a great fall, and here is where the fall of Shylock truly arrives (as opposed to when Jessica runs away).