

Modern audiences
probably find it
difficult to accept
shylock essay



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'The Merchant of Venice' is a play written by William Shakespeare in around 1596. Due to the prejudices of its target Elizabethan audience, it was intended to be a comedy and by using comic devices such as: disguises, comic characters, a happy ending and tricks, as well as using the discriminatory stereotypical Jewish character in theatre, that is how the play was perceived.

However, 'The Merchant of Venice' is rarely regarded, by a modern audience, as a comical play but more of a tragedy, due to its controversial ideas of racial and religious prejudice. 'The Merchant of Venice' is a play about the quarrel between Shylock, a Jewish moneylender and Antonio, a Christian businessman. Throughout the play Shylock persists in pursuing a bloodthirsty bond involving the two characters, to the extent that Antonio almost loses his life. Antonio agrees to the bond on behalf of his friend Bassanio, who is chasing the beautiful and rich character Portia's hand in marriage.

Due to the fact that Queen Elizabeth I was a Protestant, and religion in Elizabethan England was firmly in the hand of those adhering to the beliefs of the reigning monarch, anti-Semitism was common in Elizabethan England. All that was known about Jews and their religion and customs were from vague rumour and reputation mixed with horrifying wives tales. Christians believed that Jews possessed magical powers, which they had acquired by making a pact with the Devil.

Jews were therefore associated with Elizabethan witches. The stereotypical Jewish features consisted of a long, hooked nose, a swarthy complexion and

Jews were believed to worship the devil. Theatre audiences also expected Jews to be portrayed according to the Jewish stereotype and the playwrights of the Elizabethan era gave their audiences what they anticipated to see, emphasising the hilarity of 'Christ - killing' characters by dressing them in exotic clothes and giving them ridiculous hair styles.

Jews had long been restricted to only two occupations - money lending and peddlers, so Jewish characters would often be portrayed as one. Elizabethan Jews would have had to seemingly conform to the Christian Protestant religion. Any adherence to the Jewish religion would have been undertaken in utmost secrecy. None the less, the persecution of English Jews dates back to the medieval era of King Edward I. In 1255 a number of Jews were imprisoned in the Tower of London awaiting execution for an alleged murder resulting in eighteen Jews being hanged.

In 1270 the anti-Semitic feeling grew, until King Edward I decreed that the Jews were a threat to the country, ruling that all Jews must wear a yellow star to identify them in public. All the heads of Jewish households were arrested, many taken to the Tower and executed. Finally, in 1290 King Edward banished all Jews from England. The exile of Jews lasted until 1655, when a Jewish scholar obtained Oliver Cromwell's assent for Jews to return to London.

Jews had initially come to England following the Battle of Hastings and the Norman conquest of 1066. The expulsion of Jews from England initiated a further decline in the reputation of the religion. Jews were looked upon as heretics. Throughout the play Shylock, the Jewish money lender, would have

been ridiculed by an Elizabethan audience. Act 1 Scene 3 opens with Shylock saying “ Three thousand ducats; well? ” by directly referring to money, the audience would immediately associate his character with their common conception of ‘ greedy Jews’.

Due to the fact that most of this conversation is money orientated would imply that Shylock judges characters mainly on their riches. In Act 2 Scene 5 of the play, Shylock leads the audience to believe he is even more of a miserly character; when his servant, Launcelot, is leaving to work for, the Christian character, Bassanio. Shylock does not seem unhappy about this and in fact accuses Launcelot of being too expensive and lazy to keep; his anger towards Launcelot may allow the audience to empathize with the servant, causing them to dislike Shylock even more.

An Elizabethan audience would have been outraged, in Act 1 Scene 3, when Shylock expresses his dislike for Antonio (“ I hate him for he is a Christian”), but the manner in which he expresses his detest, aside, suggests Shylock is two-faced and should not be trusted. The Jewish character also criticizes Christianity in Act 2 Scene 5 by saying “ To gaze on Christian fools... ” which would have belittled Shylock to an Elizabethan audience due to the importance of faith to the people of the time.

When Shylock continues to stand up for his rights and lecture Antonio on how he has mistreated him and called him “ misbeliever” and “ cut-throat dog,” – in Act 1 Scene 3- an audience, hundreds of years ago, would have been confronted by the impact of their cruel words, but it is believed that this speech would have been performed in a comical way – to lighten the

mood and once again build ' the Jew' up to look foolish. To make Shylock's character appear even worse to an Elizabethan audience, Shakespeare continues to add more stereotypical, Jewish, features.

For example, Shylock proposes the bond to which Antonio must agree if he is to borrow the 3000 ducats, " let the forfeit/Be nominated for an equal pound/Of your fair flesh, to be cut off and taken/In what part of your body pleaseth me" making Shylock sound blood-thirsty and almost cannibal-like. Another example of Shylock being murderous is in the court scene, when he becomes obsessed with wanting Antonio dead – he even turns down Bassanio's offer of six thousand ducats in order to see his rival suffer, evidently showing that Shakespeare wanted to make Shylock look as demon-like as possible.

Liv Gell However, in " The Merchant of Venice" William Shakespeare created more than just a stereotypical Jewish character; he produced a temperament within Shylock that was capable of questioning an Elizabethan audience's prejudices – a character with the ability to go against Elizabethan norms. Shylock's famous speech in Act 3 Scene 1 queries Elizabethan's beliefs between Christians and Jews, appealing to the audience to view him as an equal human being. The speech begins with " To bait fish withal... " and includes the well-known lines: " 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? " By asking these questions, Shakespeare forces his audience to acknowledge the fact that despite religious beliefs, we are all physically the same. Furthermore, in Act 2 Scene 5 there is additional

evidence that Shakespeare set out to create more than just a miserable Jewish character; when Shylock wants to shelter his daughter, Jessica, from the abundant lifestyle of Christians, suggesting he is a good, compassionate father figure.

Despite the hilarity Elizabethans felt towards Shylock, many historical and political events have influenced the 21st century's opinion of Jews – and any other once mistreated group for that matter, to the point of it being highly unacceptable for anyone to discriminate against anybody. Due to this significant change in belief, it would nowadays be viewed as racially prejudice to mock Shylock because of his religion or to even dress him up as a stereotype on stage.

Shylock, in this day and age, is seen as more of a victim than a gluttonous villain, the play includes many examples by which a contemporary audience would react in contrary to an Elizabethan audience. For instance, in Act 1 Scene 3 an audience, at the present time, would be outraged at hearing of the abuse inflicted upon Shylock. This response would only be made worse when Antonio informs Shylock “ I am as like to call thee so again/To spet on thee again, to spurn thee too. ” In addition, Shylock talks to his daughter in Act 2 Scene 5 using expressions of endearment but fails in receiving any kind words back.

Jessica is cold towards him and does not show feelings of remorse over leaving him; though an Elizabethan audience would deem he earned such treatment, a present audience would sympathise with the unfortunate character. In Act 3 Scene 1, after Jessica has departed, Shylock gives the

impression that he is anxious to hear word of her and immediately turns the conversation with Salerio and Solanio onto his daughter, despite the fact that Salerio had invited him to discuss business.

This implies that Jessica is dominant in his mind and that Shylock is a concerned and devoted father, which encourages the audience to empathise with his dilemma. Still, Salerio and Solanio taunt Shylock about his daughter, and though this would have amused Elizabethan audiences, Shylock illustrates himself as a dignified, strong and highly regarded character, worthy of a modern audience's respect. In addition to his sensitive side, Shylock appears to have a sense of humour that a modern audience would be able to relate to.

One example of this is when Shylock says: " Should I not say/ ' Hath a dog money? Is it possible/ A cur can lend three thousand ducats? '" This sarcastic wit makes Antonio's threats and insults seem petty and groundless, leaving a modern audience preferring Shylock – in comparison to the arrogant and unpleasant personality of Antonio. The court scene in Act 4 Scene 1 is a critical moment in " The Merchant of Venice".

Shakespeare chose to make the court biased against Shylock; the Duke appears to be an acquaintance of Antonio's; the two men converse before Shylock has entered the court – a conversation in which the Duke speaks of how Shylock fails to have human feelings and is already considering Antonio to be the victim: " I am sorry to thee; thou art come to answer/ A stony adversary, an inhuman wretch,". The Duke also repeatedly shows no respect towards Shylock by referring to him as nothing more than ' the Jew'.

In the scene, Shylock sticks firmly to his principals: "And by our holy Sabbath have I sworn/ To have the due and forfeit of my bond" This quote suggests that Shakespeare is attempting to portray Shylock as a moral and honest man – quite the opposite of the typical Elizabethan stereotype. Towards the end of the scene, after Shylock is told he can take no more or no less than a pound of flesh, and he is forbidden from drawing blood from Antonio, the penalty for breaking the bond is enforced upon Shylock; he is to give up all his riches and adhere to the ultimate sacrifice of his religion and " presently become a Christian;".

A modern audience recognizes this punishment to be unreasonable and impossible- as your religion is a personal belief which no one has the power or authority to change. On the other hand, an Elizabethan audience would see Antonio's demand as a way of saving Shylock's soul, and more of a blessing than a penalty. I agree that modern audiences probably find it difficult to accept Shylock as a comic villain who deserves his ultimate fate in " The Merchant of Venice". My immediate response towards Shylock was that I believed him to be a miserable, greedy old man whose main priority was to make other people suffer.

However, after studying Shylock in greater detail I now react sympathetically towards his situation and consider him to be a very cleverly thought out character. Due to the fact that Shakespeare frequently indicates towards a more complex side of Shylock's character – rather than just a stereotypical Elizabethan Jew – implies to me that he is trying to build Shylock's position as a victim in the play, in spite of the controversy he would have

encountered at the time. Liv Gell

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In my opinion Shakespeare fully intended to create Shylock's contentious character as such a realistic portrayal of the minority of English society – that was forced to fight against the shameless prejudices of the majority. Finally, I think that “ The Merchant of Venice” has remained such a popular play to this day, for the reason that it is not a typical Elizabethan anti-Semitic play, but a meaningful presentation of medieval prejudices in which the audience are encouraged to make their own decisions about each character.

Furthermore, a lot of current issues involving racism and other prejudices are featured in the play, but unlike most present sources, viewers are invited to see both sides of the matter. How Shakespeare deals with the circumstances and shows neither side of the prejudice as inferior encourages audiences to reconsider their beliefs and it promotes equality.