

Shakespeare's impression



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William Shakespeare's Impressions of Venice from his plays and Themes of Venetian Republic from the plays: The Merchant of Venice and Othello

Introduction

This essay is aimed at looking at William Shakespeare's impression of Venice by analysing his two famous plays, The Merchant of Venice and Othello.

Then, after taking Shakespeare's impressions, a closer look will be taken at the main themes brought out of the two plays and compare and contrast them with Shakespeare's impressions. Such themes include; Anti-Semitism and the Jews and their role in the economy and society of Venice, law and justice in the Republic of Venice, the role of women in Venetian society, foreign mercenaries in Venice and racism and jealousy in Venice. Such themes will be analysed in order to see if Shakespeare's impressions of Venice from his plays are compatible with real life in Venice.

Major Themes: Merchant of Venice

The Jews of Venice and their role in society and the economy and Anti-Semitism

One must always take the context in which Shakespeare lived. This means that the English society in which Shakespeare lived is extremely important since this is reflected in his plays. Shakespeare must surely have been influenced by the society in which he lived in especially when it comes to the Jews. It was known the people in London were hostile to foreigners (xenophobic) and that anti-Semitism in Elizabethan England was very a common feature of society. So, anti-Semitism is already emerging as a major theme in this play. This is all personified in Shylock who is hated and treated

badly in society due to him being a Jew. One must always take into account that the Jews were frowned upon because they were the killers of Christ. So, in Christian societies of the time of William Shakespeare, the Jews were not so much welcome. In fact, they were put in ghettos and this was also in Venice. However, they could play a role in economy

Antonio the Merchant is used by Shakespeare to portray the general people's negative attitudes towards the Jews. Here comes the element of anti-Semitism. In the play, especially in Act One: Scene Three, Act Three: Scene One, Antonio the Gentile is seen bullying Shylock because of his Jewish religion. It is seen in Antonio spitting on Shylock's beard. In Act Three: Scene One, Shylock speaks about his suffering which is induced by Antonio's constant bullying. The next excerpts taken from this Act and Scene prove this:

Line 43 - hindered me half a million

Line 44 - 52 - laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies - and what's his reason? I am a Jew. 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? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die?

In Act 1: Scene Three, there is also reference to Shylock being bullied by Antonio:

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- Line 103 - dog
- Line 109 - void your rheum - referring to Antonio spitting on Shylock's beard.

Now, when one looks at such lines from the play, he gets the impression that the Jews were made to live through hell and that anti-Semitism in Venice was very much present. It is true that there was anti-Semitism in Venice mainly due to religious reasons (the Jews were the ones who chanted for Christ's crucifixion). However, Shakespeare puts too much emphasis on anti-Semitism in Venice. This is seen all throughout the play. Maybe Shakespeare was too much influenced by the society he lived in and puts focus on anti-Semitism in order to satisfy his audience. This factor has to be taken into account in order to analyse the play well. The play focuses too much on Shylock being bullied due to his Jewish origin but his social role as usurer is not given any importance at all in the play[1].

If one had to look into real life in Venice, he would observe that the Jews were important players in the Venetian economy due to their money lending. They engaged in trade and they helped very much helping the authorities avoid the hassle of creating loan banks. However, it was true that the Jews had to live in ghettos and had to wear the yellow Star of David in order to be recognised as being Jews. But on the whole, they were tolerated, especially when it comes to their contribution to the Venetian economy. So this leads to the conclusion that the Jews in Venice were tolerated out the need the state had for them not out of human kindness.

The question is: Were Venetians tolerant of foreigners? The answer would be that overall; the Venetians were tolerant of foreigners. One must not forget

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that foreigners had the right to access law courts in Venice for example. In the play, the phrase 'freedom of the state' (3. 2. 277) is mentioned which refers to the right of foreigners to access Venetian law courts and the recognition of "bonds to foreigners entered into by its own citizens"[2] (M. M. Mahood, 2003). These are also words of praise to the Venetian justice system in which privilege or nationality did not matter. There were communities of people of different cultures who came to Venice due to its commercial importance bringing with them knowledge and commercial goods. The Venetians were very proud of this and outside observers tend to admire Venice for this.

So, as a conclusion, one may say that racism in Venice is a bit exaggerated by Shakespeare when in fact Venetian society was overall tolerant even if sometimes slightly suspicious of foreigners.

Law and Justice in Venice

William Shakespeare's form of justice in this play is seen in Portia telling Shylock to cut a pound of flesh from Antonio and that he should not spill a drop of blood. The Duke also features in this. When Shylock discovers that he could not cut a pound of flesh from Antonio without spilling a drop of blood, he had to lose all his property and the Duke is the one to decide whether he would live or not. In the play, the Duke decides to pardon Shylock and Shylock has to convert from his Jewish faith to become a Christian, apart from losing his property.

Here, Shakespeare portrays the Duke as having quite a say in law courts in Venice. How realistic was this in real life in Early Modern Venice? It was real.

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However, the Duke (Doge) was never the judge himself at the law court. The Duke could only voice his opinions along with the opinions of the judges, but never the judge by himself. The Duke used to receive appeals for mercy[3]. Shakespeare brings this out in the play and by this; he shows that he had a good grasp of the justice system in Republic of Venice. In the play, the Duke grants mercy to Shylock (on condition that Shylock the Jew become a Christian and no longer engages in usury).

When approaching the law and justice theme in the Merchant of Venice, one must leave out the fact that the Venetian Republic's justice system was a fair one. Firstly, everybody from the Patricians downwards to lower strata of Venetian society was considered equal before the law; and secondly, there was the system of appeal in which appeals could be made to the Duke[4].

Economy of Venice

The Rialto is mentioned in the play along with its economic importance regarding trade in the Republic of Venice. The Rialto was the center of much of Venetian trade with different states in the Mediterranean, especially the Levant. This also shows how William Shakespeare was very much knowledgeable about certain aspects of Venice, especially regarding commerce. This may have come from some of his friends who visited Venice and who told him about what they saw in the city.

Gender in Early Modern Venice

In the play, Portia is portrayed as a rich woman. The social status of women in Venice differed according to their class. If they came from rich and

Patrician classes and were educated, they were respected in society. In the 16th century, the Republic of Venice was known to have had women who enjoyed respect in society. They were known as courtesans. A quote (see below) from the book, *Women and Men in Early Modern Venice* by Satya Brata Datta describes very well these courtesans.

“ The Venetian Republic was renowned far and wide for its large number (210 in 1566, for instance) of beautiful, independent and often intellectually inclined courtesans, who enjoyed a special but ambivalent status in society.”

The quote (above) from the book mentioned gives a clear indication that certain women were treated differently from other women in Venice. William Shakespeare may have been aware of this fact and he portrays all this in the character of Portia, who is portrayed as a rich, independent (still seeking the right man to marry) and intelligent. Her intelligence is seen in the way she manages to save Antonio from Shylock.

Venetian women were categorised when it came to social status. There were the Lady (Signora), the Courtesan (Cortigiana) and the Prostitute (meretrice).

The courtesans were respected to the point that they could go to the law courts in order to stress their importance in Venetian society and they would not find it difficult to go to the law courts/tribunals at all[5]. So, this shows that Venetian society was not that strongly masculine. Another quote from Satya Brata Datta's book describes the courtesans' qualities (see below).

“ The courtesan defined herself as a woman with three characteristic features: she was a woman of her own kind, that is, neither a virgin nor a

housewife; she was a ' free' woman, not least sexually; and she was a creative, intelligent woman.[6]"

The above quote can be considered as a reference to Portia and this can give an insight of how much William Shakespeare was knowledgeable about aspects of life in Venice (which come out as themes in the play).

As a conclusion, one must keep in mind that Venetian society was a patriarchal one (i. e. a male-dominated society) but women such as the Courtesans and Prostitutes were respected by the male-dominated leadership in Venice which helped the Republic of Venice to be widely known in foreign countries for its tolerance when it came to society[7].

Major Themes: Othello

Foreigners in Venetian Wars

The Republic of Venice was not used to sending its own townspeople to fight its wars. It made use of foreign mercenaries and the generals appointed to fight Venice's wars were always of foreign origin. The Republic of Venice preferred to make use of foreign mercenaries in its wars and in defending both land and maritime territories under its rule. This notion is strengthened by the fact that Venice had a law which strictly stipulated that a general in the army had to be a foreigner and not born in Venice[8]. It was also known that Italian city-states used to employ foreign mercenaries to fight their wars and the Republic of Venice was one of them. It also shows how Venetians were tolerant to foreigners

Racism and (3)Jealousy

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The two most outstanding themes of this play are racial differences in Venice and jealousy. Out of all European states, Venice contained people from diverse backgrounds which made it a melting pot. Its commerce brought it many people from different lands. But there must have been some dislike of foreigners. In the play, this is personified in Iago. Iago hates the fact that his superior is a foreigner and of a different religious faith. Also, Desdemona's marriage to Othello the Moor is not liked at all. One also has to take into account the fact that Desdemona was the daughter of a Venetian nobleman, Brabantio. Again, racism comes to the fore in the sense that Desdemona's choice of Othello the dark-skinned general could be an embarrassment to her father. It shows once again that racial intermarriages were not liked by all people in Venice although Venice was known to be a city-state where many foreigners lived and brought their cultures and religious faiths with them.

In the play, it is assumed that Othello might have attracted Desdemona to him by magical practices. In fact, Desdemona is impressed by his military talent which makes her disregard the fact that he is black and a non-Christian. Desdemona's love for Othello is referred to as "downright violence" (Act One: Scene Three, Line 245). This phrase shows that Desdemona's love to Othello is considered as a violation of the norm (especially by the villain Iago). Desdemona can be considered the good character while Iago is the villain.

Iago is jealous of Othello because Othello is talented and he does all he could to damage him and in various scenes he is seen trying to ridicule Othello and spewing his hatred for the Moor. Racism against Othello the Moor is very

much emphasized throughout the whole just like hatred towards Shylock in The Merchant of Venice.

Act One: Scene Two

Line 79 - of arts inhibited and out of warrant

The above line refers to magical practices which were totally forbidden in Venice. Othello is accused of magical practices to attract Desdemona which shows the hatred against him because of his origins.

The term " Moor" was used in the time of Shakespeare to describe a dark-skinned person.

Line 343 - erring Barbarian

This line once again emphasizes Iago's hatred of Othello and " erring refers to Othello's religion and " barbarian" refers to Othello's origins.

Even in The Merchant of Venice, Portia displays this racial difference when it comes for her to choose the man she wants marry. This is seen when she is to meet the Prince of Morocco in the quote from the play (below):

" If he have the condition of saint or the complexion of a devil, I had rather he should shrive me than wive me." (Act 1: Scene 2 lines 106-108)

So, this is already showing Portia's dislike for the Prince of Morocco due to his colour.

Conclusion

When one compares William Shakespeare's impressions on Venice from his plays with real life in early modern Venice, one can find that Shakespeare was knowledgeable about life in Venice in those. Though he exaggerates the theme of anti-Semitism in *The Merchant of Venice*, one must also keep in mind that he was also influenced by the society he lived in and that must surely affected and it comes out in his writings.

1. *The Merchant of Venice*, by William Shakespeare, Edited by M. M. Mahood, Cambridge University Press, 2003, pg 18.
2. *The Merchant of Venice*, by William Shakespeare, Edited by M. M. Mahood, Cambridge University Press, 2003, pg 15.
3. *The Merchant of Venice*, by William Shakespeare, Edited by M. M. Mahood, Cambridge University Press, 2003, pg 16.
4. *Women and Men in Early Modern Venice*, Satya Brata Datta, Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2003, pg 54
5. *Women and Men in Early Modern Venice*, Satya Brata Datta, Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2003, pg 178
6. *Women and Men in Early Modern Venice*, Satya Brata Datta, Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2003, pg 178
7. *Women and Men in Early Modern Venice*, Satya Brata Datta, Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2003, pg 179
8. *Othello*, by William Shakespeare, Edited by Norman Sanders, Cambridge University Press, 1984, pg 10