

# The merchant of venice by william shakespeare



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

The Merchant of Venice by William Shakespeare is a play composed of multiple narratives, the most interesting to me being the fate of Shylock, an unfortunate Jew. An unfortunate Jew was not an uncommon thing in 16th century Venice where the play is set: it was a society ruled by Christians to whom Jews were second class citizens. I think Shylock represents the entire Jewish community; he is a symbol of their suffering.

But to what extent was Shylock's misfortune due to anti-Semitism and to what extent did he bring it upon himself? In this essay I will be exploring the balance of these two factors as causes for Shylock's unhappy ending in the play. As a Jew, Shylock has been subject to much abuse before the play has even begun - a whole lifetime of abuse in fact. When he first appears Shylock does not delay in conveying this to the audience: " he rails..

. on me, my bargains, and my well-won thrift", he spits in an aside. Shylock elaborates on this statement - almost, it seems, with the intent of winning the audience over to his side - when approached by Antonio, the Christian merchant and the very man to whom Shylock was referring and who is looking to borrow 3000 ducats from him. Shylock cites to Antonio the occasions on which he has both verbally and physically insulted/assaulted him, for instance how " he spat on him Wednesday last", also " called him dog", " mis-believer" and " foot[ed] him as he spurns a stranger cur over his threshold".

I would argue that, with the understanding that until now Shylock has never retaliated, he is actually a very tolerant man; he has been highly provoked and there is a limit to what every wo/man can put up with. It is no wonder

that Shylock is looking for revenge... From Shylock's point of view (bearing in mind that he is a very clever man) Antonio coming to him for a favour is an opportunity too good to miss - he sees straight away how he can manipulate the situation to his own advantage. It is clear that Antonio is desperate for Shylock to agree to a loan (in order to subsidise his friend Bassanio's quest for love); so desperate he would agree to almost any terms.

Shylock, all the time putting on a jovial air of innocence, sets the conditions for the bond: if Antonio fails to repay him by the prescribed date he must forfeit "an equal pound of his fair flesh, to be cut off and taken in what part of his body pleaseth Shylock". The merchant does not see through Shylock's mask of unconditional kindness and agrees. I believe that Shylock is setting himself up for disastrous consequences by coming up with such a blood-thirsty bond; he has suddenly raised the stakes a great deal. Here, it is Shylock's own choices in terms of how to bring about justice for himself which are pre-empting a spectacular fall from grace if he is serious about the bond (Antonio is bound to stand up for himself and he is a Christian and therefore he has an unfair advantage in everything). It is unclear whether or not Shylock would be prepared to follow through with the terms of his bond until his daughter, Jessica, runs away from home to marry a Christian.

Shylock's reaction to the news of his daughter's flight is an uncensored fit of pure, yet eloquent, rage and it is at this point in the play that he delivers his famous 'Hath not a Jew' soliloquy. The combination of coherent justification for his cause against Antonio ("If a Christian wrong a Jew what should he sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge!") and his unshakeable stubbornness that "I will have my bond" quench any doubt, that Shylock will

not do everything in his power to take his pound of flesh. Because Shylock resolves to pursue his bond to the bitter end just after his daughter's desertion, it might be argued that he was pushed over the edge by uncontrollable circumstances. However, Jessica left largely due to Shylock's doing: "Our house is hell" she tells Launcelot (her father's servant) when he is about to leave Shylock's service for good - which can only be Shylock's fault. Perhaps Shylock has forgotten that it is best to keep one's friends close, particularly at times of hardship, and it is because he is isolated by society and himself that he becomes so imprudent in his actions. Near the denouement of the play, in the courtroom, almost the entire cast is assembled to discuss Shylock's bond and pass judgement - a judgement which, ultimately, will always be skewed by anti-Semitism.

Shylock presents his case to the Duke (acting as a judge) seeking justice although he is unlikely to ever find it in a Venetian court - something Shylock seems to be aware of deep down ("I follow thus a losing suit against him [Antonio]"). Nevertheless, when offered three times his money and pressed by Portia to take it - "bid me tear the bond", she says - Shylock insists on taking the flesh. This, on behalf of Shylock, is a wrong decision for more than the simple reason that it is immoral but also because ironically (even though Portia preaches that "the quality of mercy is not strained") he will never be shown mercy by the Christians for his misjudged attempt on Antonio's life. Therefore, I would say that in the end, and overall, it is the anti-Semitic culture in which he lives that leads to Shylock's downfall. Apparently, it was all right for Christians not to show any mercy and it was just Shylock who did not have the right to be ruthless. In conclusion,

Shylock's unhappy ending is the result of his circumstances and of his choices (although obviously his choices are made harder for him by his circumstances).

I stand by what I said: I think Shylock is a tolerant individual. The fact that he was in the end forced to become Christian, in my opinion, epitomises one of the major (maybe unintended) points of Shakespeare's play which is that being Jewish was not accepted. Whether Shakespeare empathised with Shylock we cannot know, although I have a strong hunch that he did (otherwise he would not have been able to write so powerfully from the perspective of Shylock). Personally, I am able to empathise with Shylock a great deal as I believe that he was put in an impossible position and in the end was only human.

“ Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions... ”  
- of course he has.