

Does shakespeare's
presentation of the
character of shylock
encourage us to view
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In the Shakespearean era, the majority of audiences would have been Christian, and therefore would carry with them contemporary views concerning Jews. At the time that the play was written, Jews had been exiled from England for around three hundred years, although some continued to inhabit the main cities such as London, forced to make a shady secret of their race and religion. Jews had traditionally been usurers, and most Christians despised this, (most probably because of the high interest rates charged by the Jews,) describing it as: " ugly, detestable and hurtful sin". (Thomas Wilson 1572)

Jews, however, often had no choice in their profession. They were forbidden to own land or engage in trade within England, and usury was the only lucrative business option available to them. It was a similar story in Venice, where the play was set, as the Venetians forbade Jews to own land. They were forced by the government to rent segregated areas of the city, now commonly known as Ghettos. Consequently Shylock, as a Jew, was predominantly viewed as a villain by Shakespeare's audiences right up until the 18th century.

There are plenty of valid arguments throughout ' The Merchant of Venice ' that could be used to argue that those audiences who viewed the play pre-18th century were right: Shylock was intended by Shakespeare to be interpreted by his audiences as a villain. One particular argument is Shylock's relationship with his daughter, Jessica, his feelings towards her, and how they effect her life. It is around the middle of Act II that we first witness an interaction between Shylock and Jessica. During this he orders

her about as if she were a servant and mentions nothing about her well being, only instructs her to look after his house:

“ Hear you me, Jessica, lock up my doors, and when you hear the drum... clamber you not up to the casements then, nor thrust your head into the public street to gaze on Christian fools...but stop my house's ears...let not the sound of shallow foppery enter my sober house.”

Shylock does not notice her strange behaviour on this night that she is due to elope with her Christian lover, Lorenzo, indicating that he is not a very attentive father.

Jessica would seem to feel the same way. Through her eyes Shylock seems to be villainous, she feels that “ I am ashamed to be my father's child, but though I am daughter to his blood, I am not to his manners.” This statement by Jessica may seem like typical rebellious behaviour of a daughter to her father, but in Shakespeare's day, Jessica's view of her father would have been widely respected. It would have been respected because Jew's believe that family is extremely important within life, and for a member of Shylock's own family to disrespect him in such a way shows the audience that she must have spoken the truth of him. Jessica's passionate and empathic speech about her treatment by Shylock is compared to Shylock's harsh and vicious attacks on Jessica's elopement with Lorenzo:

“ I would my daughter were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear: would she were hears'd at my foot, and the ducats in her coffin.”

The outcome is that the audience's perceptions of the characters become much more biased towards Jessica. Even Shylock's less emphatic speech relayed through Solanio doesn't encourage much more faith in him:

" My daughter, O my ducats, O my daughter, fled with a Christian, Oh my Christian ducats! Justice, the law, my ducats, and my daughter...stolen from me by my daughter...she hath my stones upon her, and the ducats."

Shylock's words here could be interpreted in two different ways. The question is whether Shylock is anguishing over the loss of his daughter Jessica, or the loss of his money. The last part of his speech, " she hath my stones upon her, and the ducats," compels the audience to think that Shylock only wants his money back, as he is behaving in a very miserly fashion. He is calling for his lost daughter merely because she is carrying his beloved ducats. On the other hand, the fact that he is calling first for his daughter, and second for his lost ducats, perhaps suggests that Shylock does care for his daughter, and does not wish to allow his feelings to be known to the Venetians. His revelation of " my daughter" as the first possession that he cries about could suggest a subconscious love for her that is masked by her wrongdoing at that time in the play.

Shylock is seen to be villainous in the way in which he treats other characters in ' The Merchant of Venice'. He appears to be cunning and devious, most prominently when dealing with Antonio and Bassanio's request to borrow money. It is in this scene where we also learn of Shylock's deep-seated hatred for Antonio and the Christians.

Dramatic irony is used for the audience when Shylock speaks in aside, telling the audience his truthful views on the Christians:

“ How like a fawning publican he looks. I hate him for he is a Christian.”

Shylock is able to hide his hatred beneath a facade of friendship in order to entice Antonio to become indebted to him, not just with money but with his life. Antonio is very naive regarding the terms of the bond taking the ‘ pound of flesh’ clause to be a show of friendship not hatred:

“ The Hebrew will turn Christian, he grows kind.”

This kind of throwaway comment would be perceived as very racist in today's ‘ politically correct’ society, but in Shakespeare's day, the audiences would have had the same views as Antonio, however, the audience were one step ahead through the knowledge of Shylock's aside. They knew that trouble was coming for Antonio through his naivety.

Perhaps Antonio receives the terms of the bond in this manner because he is confident that he will be able to repay the bond, although this seems rather foolish, as all of his current profit is a gamble on ships at sea. Antonio portrays himself to modern audiences as more than a bit foolish. Why should he risk so much to help a friend? Did he love Bassanio that much? Some people question the selfishness of Bassanio in allowing Antonio to go through with the bond, even when he felt that something was not quite right about Shylock's manner:

“ I like not fair terms, and a villain's mind”

Bassanio's words here are stating to the audience that Shylock is a villain. This would, as the audiences would have been Christian, and on the side of the Christians, start the audience off with the bias that Shylock is a villain. He then struggles throughout the play to turn their opinions, and view him as otherwise. Perhaps Shakespeare did not intend Shylock to be victimised at all, perhaps he was just using him as a tool to highlight prejudices in a way that his audiences would absorb. Using Shylock as a tool could have shown how prejudice and discrimination often exacts revenge, and revenge can backfire on the Christians.

Shylock feels justified in exacting revenge upon Antonio because he blames him for all his problems and is very bitter about the manner in which Antonio has treated him in the past:

" Signior Antonio, many a time and oft in the Rialto you have rated me about my moneys and my usances: still I have borne it with a patient shrug."

He is also resentful of the ridicule and torment of his race by the Christians, and tells Antonio how " sufferance is the badge of all our Tribe." Through the bond he feels he will be able to avenge the treatment of his " tribe":

" To bait fish withal, if it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge...If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility, revenge! If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example, why revenge! The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction."

Shylock seems intent on mimicking the Christians' behaviour towards him, although he has often complained vehemently about their behaviour towards him in the past. It seems villainous of him now to do to them what he has previously deplored when the victims of the behaviour were reversed.

It is during the trial scene and the scenes immediately before it that his obsessive hatred towards Antonio is clearly revealed. His repetition of "I'll have my bond" shows him to be openly aggressive and agitated. He warns those who have treated him as 'a dog' in the past to 'beware my fangs'. The reference to the dog also comes earlier in the play, when the bond is first being discussed, linking the two scenarios, and signifying their importance to one another:

"You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog." (Act 1, scene iii)

"Thou be damned inexecrable dog." (Act 4, scene i)

The dehumanisation of Shylock finally occurs in the court scene, but elements of it have been stacking up against him one-by-one throughout the play, until he has transformed into the cultural image of the Jew that Christians have been brought up to create wild superstitions about.

Shylock's wild nature in the courtroom is emphasised by the contrast between his and Antonio's behaviour. Antonio has realised Shylock will not listen to reason and has resigned himself to his fate:

"Let him alone, I'll follow him no more with bootless prayer."

Shylock's promise to himself and the audience to destroy Antonio continues during Act 4 in the trial scene. He refuses to show mercy when asked both by Portia and the Duke:

" on what compulsion must I? Tell me that."

Shylock is legally right, but Shakespeare is perhaps trying to convey to his audiences that morally he is obliged to show mercy as Portia's speech explains to him:

" The quality of mercy is not strain'd...it is twice bless'd; it blesseth him that gives and him that takes."

Shylock still will not listen to reason, and ruthlessly pursues his revenge on Antonio, showing him to portray the morals of a villain. However, even after having lost his case, he expects to be shown mercy by the Christians in having a portion of his wealth returned to him:

" You take my house when you do take the prop that doth sustain my house; you take my life when you do take the means whereby I live."

In this he shows himself to be arrogant in demanding mercy when he himself could render none.

I will now move on to illustrate the ways in which Shylock could be interpreted not as the villain of the play, but as the victim. It seems to me that Shylock has gone through a stage of metamorphosis during the course of the play. Nearer the beginning of the play, it seems that the character of Shylock can be sympathised with. He is only trying to earn a living, after all,

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but his living is being taken from him by Antonio's "lending out money, gratis" which "brings down the rate of usurance here with us in Venice".

However, during the later acts of the play, Shylock's continuing rage and anguish at the loss of his daughter and his money, sees him choose a course of justice when Antonio's bond cannot be paid, that is seen as sadistic and evil. This does not always signify a villainous nature though. Shylock may have been experiencing madness. Yet again, this madness would encourage people to view him as a villain. His life has been extremely hard, and he may have not been able to cope with it at the breaking point of the trial:

"Thy currish spirit govern'd a wolf...for thy desires are wolvis, bloody, starv'd, and ravenous."

What the Christians fail to see is that Shylock probably didn't have any choice over the profession in which he works. He has so little freedom within Venice that there was no opportunity for him to gain any other job. The Christians do not treat Shylock as an equal, they believe that he is beneath them in the hierarchy of the religions. This is very prejudiced on their part, and is shown by the way that they address him solely as "Jew" or "the Jew". This treatment is typical of the way that slaves were treated, and Jews were supposedly free men! The treatment of Shylock is also reflected through the treatment of Jessica. She is converting to become a Christian, yet is still treated as though she is some kind of scum by the Christians in Belmont:

"But who comes here? Lorenzo and his infidel?"

Jessica is never addressed by name whilst at Belmont, even though it is certain that her name was known, as Lorenzo's new bride.

The prejudice of the Christians is often seen throughout 'The Merchant of Venice', particularly around the time that Shylock is issuing the bond, and the moments after Jessica has run away. When Antonio and Bassanio go to Shylock to seek his services as a usurer, he points out that while they spit on him and call him 'a dog'; they still expect him to lend them money. Antonio is unmoved by Shylock's speech and says that he would call him this again. Antonio seems to be the one that Shylock focuses his anger on though a lot of other people behave in the same way towards him, for example Salerio and Solanio. This is most probably due to the fact that Antonio is indirectly stealing Shylock's money. Antonio does nothing to claim mercy, or a right to any of Shylock's money in the eyes of a modern day audience. In fact he has no problems about behaving in an openly abusive manner towards Shylock.

Shylock endures many other anti-Semitic comments and most of the Venetian Christians refer to him as 'the Devil':

"Let me say 'amen' betimes, lest the devil cross my prayer, for here he comes in the likeness of a Jew."

Salerio and Solanio are constant tormentors of Shylock and mock him over Jessica's elopement with a Christian:

"I never heard a passion so confus'd, so strange, outrageous, and so variable, as the dog Jew did utter in the streets in the streets: 'My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter!'"

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Salerio continues to mock Shylock when he is distraught over the disappearance of Jessica with his ducats. He taunts Shylock with knowledge when Shylock knows nothing:

Shylock: " You knew, none so well, none so well as you, of my daughter's flight."

Salerio: " That's certain: I, for my part, knew the tailor that made the wings she flew withal. "

Although he has an arguably unhealthy thirst for revenge, we can empathise with what Shylock is feeling because it is a natural human characteristic to want to revenge when you have been treated as Shylock was by the Christians. Shylock's passionate speech is designed to draw the audience's sympathy vote.

" I am a Jew...hath a Jew not eyes?...passions, fed with the same food...if you prick us, do we not bleed?"

Shakespeare is trying to promote equality through Shylock. However, the laws at the time when the play was written were in favour of Christians. Jews had few rights, they could not claim citizenship in any country, and they depended on the mercy of the society that they lived in. Consequently, after he loses the trial, Shylock's life was in the hands of the Duke:

" If it be prov'd against an alien...He seek the life of any citizen...the offender's life lies in the mercy of the duke only."

Shylock is foolish in the way that he believes that he can take on the entirety of the Christians and win, when Venetian law is designed to serve to the best interests of the Christians.

Shylock's punishment seems extremely harsh with Antonio forcing him to convert to Christianity, and seems hypocritical after Portia's long speech about mercy. Shylock's life is spared, which is merciful, but he may be better off dead because he has nothing to live on, all his wealth has been distributed among his sworn enemies. This does not seem to show mercy to me. Although Shylock continues to pursue his revenge until the very end, he still has the audience's sympathy because of the unfair and harsh punishment he now receives, causing him again to appear more as a victim of the judicial system of Venice. It would strike a modern day audience as unfair that the severity of his punishment reflects not his crime, but his race. He is a victim of the Christians' racism. Although he too is racist, and his crime partially reflects his racism, one person's racism cannot stand up to a whole city's racism.

In conclusion, I believe that ultimately Shylock is a villain. The way in which he treats those that he is close to, for example his daughter Jessica, exposes his vindictive and evil character. He lets his want for vengeance surpass all other aspects of his life and his complete lack of mercy towards Antonio renders him a villain in the eyes of the audience, as fellow Christians to Antonio.

I do, however, think that Shakespeare was also trying to persuade Christians in the audience that perhaps those who are different in society do deserve

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some forgiveness. Although Shylock was mostly believed to be a villain, I feel that Shakespeare used elements of his character to show to his audiences the unfairness of their highly prejudiced society. I think that Shylock was intended to be a victim. That he was created merely for the purpose of challenging Elizabethan ideologies.

Through Shylock, Shakespeare is able to explore the way in which the line between the oppressed and the oppressor can often become blurred.

If I was to play Shylock in a production of 'The Merchant of Venice' I would play him as though he was a victim, as that is how I believe Shakespeare intended him to be played. I would keep him as a dignified, although devious, character until his loss of Jessica. For Shylock I feel that the loss of Jessica is the pivotal part of the play, therefore after this loss, I would attempt to play him becoming more and more demented with rage, and finally show his complete loss of dignity at the trial.