

Christian prejudice and racial discrimination of marginalized in the merchant of ...

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In Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, there are quite a few cases in which the non-Christian characters are marginalized and victimized of Christian prejudice and absolute racism. The Christian prejudice and racial discrimination transpires through the use of language and terms of reference. In sixteenth-century Europe, Jews were a despised and persecuted minority. England, in fact, went beyond mere persecution and harassment by banning Jews from the country altogether.

In theory at least, there were no Jews at all in England in Shakespeare's time, and there had not been since the year 1290 when they were officially expelled by King Edward I. For some time it was thought that Shakespeare had never actually met a Jew and must have created the character of Shylock of *The Merchant of Venice* entirely from his imagination, however it is now believed that this was not necessarily the case. Despite what the law said, there was a small community of Spanish Jews living in London during Shakespeare's time. These exiles from Spain managed to evade the intent of the law by nominally converting to Christianity.

Shakespeare may have been aware of this community, and possibly even have known some of its members. However, there is a reason to believe that he viewed the existence of Jews in London as a major social problem. During Shakespeare's time the English people viewed the Portuguese and the Spanish, their national enemies and rivals in trade, with great distrust. In any event, the most influential models for the character of Shylock were no doubt drawn from literature, not real life. The Jewish villain was a stock character in medieval literature.

Medieval passion plays, reenactments of the story of the crucifixion of Jesus, invariably portrayed the disloyal disciple Judas Iscariot as a stereotypical Jew. Of course, historically, Jesus and all of his disciples were Jewish, but this was ignored. Subsequent authors, when they portrayed Jewish characters at all, they always cast them as villains. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock is a Jewish moneylender in Venice. He is annoyed and frustrated by his mistreatment at the hands of Antonio and Christians of Venice. Shylock makes a scheme to take his revenge by demanding a pound of Antonio's flesh as payment.

Sometimes, he moves away from his inhuman monster character and reveals himself as a quite human. These contradictions of his characters and his powerful expressions of hatred gave him a place as one of Shakespeare's most memorable characters. He is a spokesman of the Jewish race. In his famous speech, he asks; 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? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. 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. (Act II, Scene I) Here Shylock speaks in a convincing manner about the rights of the Jews and shows him as a

representative the much-abused Jewish race. It is needless to say that The Merchant of Venice is concerned with Jewry and Usury that were of significance in the Elizabethan Age.

It is usually assumed that the Elizabethan attitude to Jewry was hostile and that the capital punishment of Roderigo Lopez in 1594 was characteristic of the Christian rejection of all 'Jews, Turks, Infidels and Heretics', who were considered to be "misbelievers". However this could also be a false supposition because though the Jews were forced to convert to Christianity to live in England, once they did they were generally left alone. Marlowe in The Jew of Malta portrays a Machiavellian Jew, but one who is 'rarely mean' in his villainy. Usury was an important issue during Shakespeare's time.

Shylock is the negative and stereotype picture of the usurer whom most of the Elizabethans had seen as a 'greedy dog', 'a leech'. For instance, in Act III, Scene II, Salerio and Solanio are on a street in Venice. They are engaged in a talk on Shylock's reaction to his daughter's elopement. Salerio tells his friend that when Shylock will learn of Jessica's elopement, he will go through the street in tears, 'O my ducats! O my daughter!' The meaning is that Shylock is a heartless man who thinks of his daughter as just another possession like his gold ducats.

Here, Solanio attempts to suggest that Shylock ranks his wealth equal to that of the love of his family. In The Merchant of Venice, it doesn't seem to matter who is making the racist comments since the fact remains that these statements are so apparent throughout the text that they cannot be put aside. The reader is not allowed to forget that Shylock is foreign and subject

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to stereotypes and only at rare moments we are allowed to see the humanity and great sympathy he is capable of. He seems to be aware of his status as an outsider and attempts to handle this.

However, Shylock handles this quite differently. Instead of bowing to the social pressures that demand him to be more "Christian" in his lending business, he is angry at the slurs and treatment, therefore he seeks to enhance his difference by being cruel. Shylock is seen as an exotic and desirable personage, mostly because of his status in society, but also because he is someone unique. In *The Merchant of Venice*, we are being constantly reminded of Shylock's status as "other" and by the end of the play, it seems this status has somehow been resolved.

At the end of the play, Shylock goes against these stereotypes by almost admitting that being a Jew is wrong, thus converting to Christianity.

Moreover, Shylock makes a direct appeal to the audience for sympathy and understanding when he pleads by saying... To bait fish withal. If it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge. He hath disgrac'd me and hind' red me half a million; laugh'd at my losses, mock'd at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies. And what's his reason? I am a Jew. Act II, Scene I) It appears that in his speech, he wants to emphasize his humanity and sameness despite all of the racially motivated criticism he faces from his peers and wishes the audience to see that much of his seeming cruelty is not so much the result of being Jewish but because he is constantly being upbraided and demeaned because of being Jewish. Thus, there is no doubt that *The Merchant of Venice* is filled

with racist comments and stereotypes nonetheless succeed in presenting the reader with a “ whole” picture of Shylock.

Though Shylock does adhere to certain stereotypes that he is criticized for being a greedy money-lover that is cruel and exacting, he is not represented as being only what the stereotypes dictate. For example, Shylock finds out that Jessica has given the ring from his wife away in exchange for a monkey, he is grief-stricken, not because the ring was valuable, but rather because it was personally precious to him. ‘ It was my turquoise,’ he says. ‘ I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor. I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys’.

Here the readers are informed that the ring is not of diamond or pearl for him but of a non-precious stone. This is also the first time we are given much information about the inner life of Shylock, which convince us to believe that he is capable of love and emotional attachment. This is truly a heartbreaking scene, not just because the reader realizes that the story of the ring is itself sad, but because we realize the Shylock is very much human and given to the same desires and passions of the Christian characters rather than being a mere stereotype of a Jew in Shakespeare.

Though, the reader begins to feel through the speeches and actions of the Christian characters that one of the main themes of *The Merchant of Venice* is the theme of prejudice, what is less noticeable is the way in which Shakespeare is able to evade these ideas and present Shylock as a fully developed non-Christian as well. Even more interesting is the way in which Shakespeare uses the racial stereotypes while at the same time he rejects

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them by presenting fully-developed character that is at once true the stereotypes.

The Merchant of Venice is simply a text about a villainous Jew that is eventually 'conquered' by his conversion, it is more rewarding to view it as a treatise on the fallibility of stereotypes since we are allowed to understand that Shylock's actions are more a result of his anger at insult rather than because of something inherent in his nature. Another issue that arises when one tries to interpret racial discrimination and prejudice that Shylock suffered through out the play in The Merchant of Venice is that is Shylock "A man more sinned against than sinning? It is very difficult to put Shylock in one basket as he possesses several features. Sometimes, he appears to us as a tragic as well as comic character. He has virtues as well as vices. He is cruel as well as generous. He is a villain as well as a hero. Shakespeare has portrayed Shylock as a complex character; it is not easy to categorize him in one category. Shylock shows mix features of his character at different occasions; therefore he arouses different feelings in us at different times. He appears differently at different occasions and presents different traits of his personality.

Shylock gets our sympathies during the trial. Though, Shylock, the Jew, appears to us as a monster, a devil, a blood-thirsty, and a monstrous person, we feel that the punishment awarded to him is very cruel and unjust. As a part of punishment, he lost almost all his wealth and he is forced to turn a Christian, Thus, in his punishment he wins our sympathy, we feel that he has been victims of the Christian prejudices. Thus, we feel that it is too much to

force him to change his religion and compel him to become a Christian. At this point no one speaks a word of comfort to him.

Such punishment might not have moved the Elizabethan audiences but it moves our sympathy for him. We feel that he is a victim of Christian harassment. Shylock receives our sympathy when the Christians of Venice who were appealing for mercy to him do not show mercy to him when he is in the trouble! Even Portia also forgets to plea mercy for him. Portia allows the Christian of Venice to treat Shylock in any way they like. Gratiano finds himself so lighthearted that he rejoices over Shylock's dilemma and suggests that he ought to go home and hang himself to save the government the price of the rope.

The Duke rules that Shylock's life will be spared, but his wealth will go half to the state and half to Antonio. He suggests that state's share may even be reduced to a mere fine. Antonio adds that if the Duke will be satisfied with a fine, he will agree to keep his half of Shylock's goods for Shylock's son-in-law Lorenzo, so that after Shylock's death he will have an inheritance. However, Antonio also adds two other conditions: First, Shylock must agree to leave the rest of his goods in his will to Lorenzo and Jessica. Second, he must promise to convert to Christianity. To all this, Shylock answers simply: " I am content. It is very difficult to believe that Shylock is being sincere when he simply answers " I am content. " Once the trial is over, Shylock walks out of the court, at that time he appears completely broken man. We also feel that the Christians have done wrong with him. We feel that " he is more sinned against than sinning. " Thus, at the end of the play, he becomes a tragic

figure. He also wins our sympathy for him. We do feel sympathetic to him on certain occasions. Shakespeare has portrayed his character in different relations. Shylock is a complete picture of the man, a mixture of vices and virtues.

The worst characteristic of Shylock is his savage and blood-thirsty nature. He hates Antonio brutally. In the Trial Scene, we find him with his knife "To cut a pound of flesh from the bankrupt there" He wants money not to spend it on the comforts and the luxuries of life but only to accumulate and hoard it. He is a very cunning and crafty fellow who can hide his real feelings and his real thoughts beneath a smooth exterior. In consequence, Shylock is one of the most controversial characters in the entire range of Shakespearean drama. Though, he is an evil incarnation, he wins our sympathy.

Shylock, a money-lender, is a cunning and crafty man. At first he expresses his unwillingness to give a loan to Antonio, and then he agrees to give the loan with a view to cut off a pound of Antonio's flesh from his heart if Antonio fails to repay the loan within a period of three months. Shylock is a defender of his race. He speaks powerfully about the injustice which the Jews have always suffered at the hands of the Christians. At the same time, he is essentially an evil man full malice against the Christians. He looks like a devil when he sharpens his knife in order to cut off a pound of flesh from Antonio's heart.

The Merchant of Venice is concerned with Jewry and Usury. It is generally assumed that the Elizabethan attitude to Jewry was hostile and that the execution of Roderigo Lopez in 1594 was characteristic of the Christian

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rejection of all ‘ Jews, Turks, Infidels and Heretics’, who were considered to be “ misbelievers”. But this could also be a false assumption, for although the Jews were forced to convert to Christianity to live in England, once they did they were generally left alone. Marlowe in *The Jew of Malta* portrays a Machiavellian Jew, but one who is ‘ rarely mean’ in his villainy.

Usury was a contemporary and important issue during Shakespeare’s time. Shylock is the negative and stereotype picture of the usurer that most of the Elizabethans had seen as a ‘ greedy dog’, ‘ a leech’. It could also be that Shakespeare created Shylock as a match for Marlowe’s Jew- one that was terrible, imposing but also human. He is the tragic protagonist he ‘ usurps the center of the stage. ‘ Shylock “ represents the killjoy against whom the pleasure-loving characters unite. ” He represents “ a-social miserliness” and thus his villainy is somewhat mitigated and brought within the scope of humanist debate.

As John Palmer has said, Shylock is “ An imaginative realization of what it means to wear the Star of David. ” Shylock is a Jew in a Gentile Society, an alien who is never accepted. He is proud of his race, his religion but he is up against a Venetian society that is insufferable to the outsider. Even his daughter attacks all that he holds dear. She marries a Christian and takes away his money, his family pride, the only “ props” in his life. He is humiliated and scorned at by the Christians. One feels sympathy for such a man, who is “ more sinned against than sinning. During the trial scene it is even less easy to make a moral decision, a comfortable discrimination between the gentle Christian and rapacious Jew. The reader’s and the

audience's sympathies are directed towards Shylock who earlier had pleaded his humanity. Our compassion is due to Shylock's plight but also because of the unease that we experience at the behaviour of the Christians : " A Daniel...! Mark Jew! " Here the Christian cruelty is on par with that of the Jew. However in the 20th century we are more sensitive and conscious about political correctness.

The issue of racism has further complicated Shylock's character. Shylock's role attracts greater sympathy. One feels that the Venetian Christians have denied Shylock's humanity and we are all the time reminded of the Anti-Semitism of the Nazi's and of the Genocide that took place during the holocaust. We are more concerned with alien rights than the Elizabethans were. These modern attitudes then in the words of Edwin Booth, tend " to lift (Shylock) out of the darkness of his native element of revengeful selfishness into the light of the venerable Hebrew, the Martyr, the Avenger. "

Shylock can also be seen as a product of centuries of racial persecution. Thus Shylock's character has oscillated between the malignant caricature and the dignified tragic hero. Is Shylock a representation of the Jewish hatred for Christians or is he motivated due to his personal hatred for Antonio? When Shylock says, " I hate him for he is a Christian: But more for...He lends out money gratis..." one realises that his hatred is based on money and he is not the religious martyr that he portrays himself to be. He takes a gamble when he lends the money and makes Antonio sign the " merry" bond.

He has no way of knowing that all of Antonio's fortune will sink and that he will be able to take the forfeit. His hatred for Antonio and the rest is apparent

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throughout. Shylock is the representative of the money code, the greed and the hoarding that is contrasted to the Christian code of honour. But does he embody the evil side of the power of money? Or is he just a scapegoat who embodies the qualities embedded in the Venetians? As mentioned earlier, Shylock's character raises a lot of questions. He may have been victimized due to the Christian hypocrisy.

It could be that he is a villain who is allowed to express the sort of treatment that has made him what he is and he justifies his route to villainy. We, with our modern considerations for alien rights, could be turning a plea for the right to revenge into a plea for equal treatment. His cause might win our sympathy but the ferociousness of the means loses it. However the humanity of Shylock as seen here is an unconscious byproduct of the Shakespeare's dramatic genius. It is an example of the interplay between technical craft and creative imagination.

It is an example of a character so dynamic that it takes over from the writer and assumes dimensions of an independent entity. He evokes an interest that is beyond the scope of the play. Shylock for us is not just a Jew; he stands for all the people that are discriminated against, people who suffer injustice due to their colour, religion and even caste. And this is the universality of Shakespeare; he created a character not for his time but for all times. But Shakespeare also set a dramatic problem when he established 'the villain as hero' as Shylock does 'steal the show' and overshadows the formal hero.

We have to be aware of the 'intellectual and 'emotional limits' that Shakespeare might have faced when dealing with these issues during his time. One's view of Shylock influences the interpretation of the other major characters and also determines that of the whole play. And it is true that, as E. W. Godwin said, "at Shylock's exit the play is virtually over." Shylock evokes multiple reactions in the reader and the audience. When we view the Christian smugness and hypocrisy we see a modern parallel to the treatment of the American Negro.

But one is also repulsed by his treatment of his daughter and his mercenary attitude. If we wish to do full justice to the character of Shylock as well as to Shakespeare's dramatic genius in creating such a character we have to explore the Elizabethan aspects of the play and not view it only with our present concern for racial discrimination and economic conflict. In the Elizabethan times, Shylock was regarded as an evil person and an absolute devil as the Jews in general were considered worse than dogs. In those days, the question of showing sympathy for him was never aroused.

For the audiences, he was a hateful person. Even at the end of the play, the Christians used to get mirth and laughter. However, we live in different times. In 21st century, the Christians are now very friendly with the Jews. So we must look at his character through open eyes. The attitude of the modern people towards Shylock has changed. Shylock is an evil incarnation, but he also gets our sympathy as well. Modern audience feels at the end of the play that "the poor man has been wronged." We do feel that "he is no less sinned against than sinning" We experience a bit of sympathy for Shylock.

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