

Shakespeare analysis: antonio and shyloc

Literature



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In Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, the use of oaths and exchange often help to forge personal bonds. For instance, Bassanio's marriage to Portia is based off of both characters' oaths to honor the instructions of Portia's dead father; the exchange of wedding rings further seals their bond. Similarly, the bond between Shylock and Antonio is first formed when both characters pledge to recognize the stipulations of Antonio's loan, and solidified through the exchange of money (and the promising exchange of flesh). In both examples, bodies are used as a contractual form of gain.

As Tony Tanner explains in his article¹, "there is a recurring linking of law (oaths, bonds, rings) - and flesh" in Shakespeare's play. This link exposes the give-and-take nature of personal bonds-where each participant plays an equally crucial role. In the case of Antonio and Shylock, their monetary bond enacts a personal relationship, one that goes beyond just their financial transaction. Though their relationship can be perceived as both an extension and illumination of the explicit anti-Semitism in the text, it can also be seen as an exposition of partnership.

The bond between the two characters is forged by more than just monetary exchange and torn by more than monetary forfeit. The dichotomy between Christianity and Judaism underlies the bond between Shylock and Antonio. Both characters are developed according to their religious affiliations. Beginning in the *dramatis personae*² of the text, Shylock is identified as "a rich Jew." This identification follows him throughout the play, both through descriptions made by other characters and himself. During Solanio and Salerio's conversation about Jessica's disappearance with Lorenzo, Solanio refers to Shylock as "the villain Jew" (2. 8. 4).

In Shylock's infamous monologue, he passionately exclaims, " I am a Jew" (3. 1. 58). Judaism is established as the major facet of his identity. Similarly, Antonio is characterized by his relation to Christianity. As James O'Rourke³ acknowledges, " the words " Christian" and " Christians" appear twenty-seven times in The Merchant. " These words are primarily used in reference to Antonio. In Act 2, scene 5, Shylock refers to Antonio as " the prodigal Christian" (2. 5. 15) and a " Christian fool" (2. 5. 33). Both characters are continually identified by their religion.

Not only does religion play a key factor in shaping each character's personal identity, it also shapes the relationship between the two characters. Shylock's hatred for Antonio is fueled mainly by Antonio's Christianity. In Act 1, scene 3, Shylock admits that he " hate[s] [Antonio] for he is a Christian" (1. 3. 42). In the same way, Antonio abhors Shylock because he is a Jew. Shylock laments, "[Antonio] hath disgraced me, and hindered me half a million; 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..." (3. 1. 54-58).

Shylock correctly identifies his religion as the cause of Antonio's despise. Their bond represents a relationship between Christianity and Judaism in general. Shylock explains, " cursed be my tribe, if I forgive him" (1. 3. 51). By implying that the success of his " tribe" is contingent upon his relationship with Antonio, Shylock recognizes himself as the representation of Judaism. His desire to extract revenge is fueled by his hate for Christianity overall. For Shylock, Antonio represents the entity which separates him from Venetian society.

Though Shylock is a working participant in Venice, he is still considered “ an alien” (4. 1. 139), which places him outside of the protection of Venetian law. As he fights to extract the bond which Antonio has forfeit, religion stands in the way of his ability to do so. Portia explains, “ if thou dost shed one drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods are, by the laws of Venice, confiscate unto the state of Venice” (4. 1. 309). While Venetian law is used against Shylock’s Jewishness, it protects Antonio solely because of his Christianity.

Just as it solidifies their bond throughout the play, religion also helps to transform the bond between Shylock and Antonio. At the end of the court scene, Antonio commands that Shylock “ presently become a Christian” (4. 1. 387). Shylock’s ultimate demise comes as a result of a transformed religious identity and a shifted bond with Antonio. While religion is a dividing factor in Shylock and Antonio’s relationship, their individual dispositions help to tighten their bond. Both characters present unstable temperaments throughout the play. Act 1 opens with Antonio lamenting over his melancholy state.

He explains, “ in sooth, I know not why I am so sad: It wearies me; you say it wearies you” (1. 1. 1). Antonio presents himself in an inexplicable state of sadness. Solanio and Salerio attempt to assess his mood. Salerio asserts, “ your mind is tossing on the ocean...where your argosies with portly sail” (1. 1. 8), while Solanio tries to comfort him, saying “ had I such a venture forth, the better part of my affections would be with my hopes abroad” (1. 1. 15). Both characters pinpoint Antonio’s financial situation as the cause of his gloom.

When Antonio assures them that “[his] merchandise makes [him] not sad,” (1. 1. 45), Solanio refutes: “ why, then you are in love” (1. 1. 46). While Antonio offers no resolution, readers can effectively use Solanio and Salerio’s suggestions as adequate reasons for Antonio’s sadness. Money can be seen as the main source of his frustration. As Drew Daniel explains⁴, “ melancholic speculation of capital can articulate a hidden knowledge of negation which is always threateningly present within it, if only as a latent possibly. ” That is, simply the thought of financial loss could have brought about Antonio’s sudden episode of melancholy.

The thought eventually becomes reality when all of Antonio’s ships are lost at sea. Solanio’s latter suggestion of love being the reason for Antonio’s sadness is supported widely by literary critics. Scholars like Steve Patterson⁵ assess Antonio’s melancholy as the result of frustrated homoerotic desire for Bassanio. Whether or not his friendship with Bassanio is fueled by sexual interests, their friendship does appear to be the secondary cause of Antonio’s sadness. In the final act of the play, all of his friends are united with women in Belmont, with the exception of Antonio.

It is perceived that at the play’s end, Antonio will return to Venice alone while Bassanio stays in Belmont with Portia. This loneliness and loss of love fuels the melancholy Antonio laments about at the beginning. It could be that this impending loss also prompts Antonio’s docility before and during the court case with Shylock, where Antonio never tries to defend himself. In his letter to Bassanio in Act 3, Scene 2, he explains, “ all debts are cleared between you and I, if I might but see you at my death” (3. 2. 318).

The grief Antonio experiences at the loss of his dear friend far outweighs the distress of his financial situation. When Solanio tries to comfort him, Antonio exclaims, “ these griefs and losses have so bated me...pray God, Bassanio come to see me pay his debt, and then I care not” (3. 3. 32). At the point of losing his life, Antonio’s main concern is having Bassanio back in Venice. Perhaps Antonio takes advantage of his condition to get Bassanio to come see him. Nevertheless, Bassanio’s expedient return to Belmont furthers Antonio’s melancholic state.

The use of human bodies as a means of exchange is further exemplified in the the bond made between Shylock and Antonio. Shylock’s monetary transaction with Antonio represents his stake in Antonio’s body. He only agrees to the conditions of the bond because it affords him the opportunity to extract revenge on Antonio. Shylock reasons, “ If I can catch him once upon the hip, I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him” (1. 3. 46).

In comparing Shylock’s character to Barabas in *The Jew of Malta*, Aaron Kitch⁶ acknowledges that for both characters, “ commerce provides [them] with new types of power...such power elevates Jewish mercantilism over a Christian poverty. ” Shylock’s bond with Antonio allows him to exert force over his enemy. He taunts Antonio with his newfound power, saying “ well then, it now appears you need my help...moneys is your suit what should I say to you? ” (1. 3. 114). Shylock’s intent is never to genuinely help Antonio or Bassanio; but rather to exercise power over Antonio and finally extract revenge.

Both characters seem to be conscious of Shylock’s intentions. Bassanio says “ I like not fair terms and a villian’s mind” (1. 3. 179). Antonio acknowledges

Shylock's hatred for him and advises him to "lend it rather to thine enemy, who, if he break, thou mayst with better face exact the penalty" (1. 3. 135). Although both characters are aware of Shylock's deceit, they still take his loan- opening the door for Shylock to carry out his desire. And once Antonio's forfeiture presents the opportunity, Shylock stops at nothing to take his revenge.

Since vengeance was his primary focus upon creating the bond, the desire is heightened when Antonio cannot pay back the money. While characters plead with Shylock to use mercy in dealing with Antonio, Shylock is set on retaliation. He says "my deeds upon my head! I crave the law, the penalty and forfeit of my bond" (4. 1. 206). Kitch asserts that Shylock's vengeance is spurred by the Christian hypocrisy which surrounds him. Despite the reason, Antonio's bond with Shylock places him in the forefront of punishment.

Perhaps Antonio knowingly deals with Shylock's deceit because he harbors deceitful plans of his own. Antonio's despise for Shylock is deeply rooted in his Christian beliefs. Shylock gives us insight into Antonio's past behavior against him. He says "[Antonio] call[s] me misbeliever, cut-throat dog, And spit[s] upon my Jewish gaberdine, And all for use of that which is mine own" (1. 3. 111). Antonio never refutes or excuses his behavior against Shylock. Instead, he defends his behavior, admitting "I am as like to call thee [dog] again, to spit on thee again, to spurn thee too" (1. 3. 130).

Antonio shows no remorse for the way he treats Shylock, particularly because his mistreatment is intended to offend Shylock's Jewish heritage. Kitch explains that while "...Jews remained obstacles to the universal church," they could "[only] be redeemed through conversion. " In order to

eliminate the threat that Shylock poses over Venetian mercantilism, Antonio feels the need to convert him to Christianity. After their initial bond is created, Antonio remarks to Bassanio “ the Hebrew will turn Christian: he grows kind” (1. 3. 178). His use of the word “ will” implies certainty- as though he himself will be the factor that “ turns” Shylock Christian.

And in fact, Antonio is ultimately the reason for Shylock’s conversion. His verdict that Shylock “ presently become a Christian” (4. 1. 387) is chosen over a penalty of death. In the end, Antonio successfully carries out what Shylock was unable to do- revenge. By taking away his Jewishness and forcibly turning him into a Christian, Antonio takes away Shylock’s identity and ultimately ruins the character.