

The Anti-Semitic tone of the Play: The Merchant of Venice



William Shakespeare wasn't above using stereotypes in his plays. He was, after all, writing popular stories that the audience of the time could relate to. And, when the audience saw a sniveling, conniving moneylender plotting an act of hideous revenge against the main character, the Elizabethan audience knew exactly that this character was the villain. After all, he fit the profile of that era's most stereotypical nemesis, the "Jew."

Antisemitism is not a trait often associated with a Shakespearean play. However, one can't escape it in *The Merchant of Venice*. To Shakespeare's credit, Shylock was a dynamic character who was driven more by revenge than outright evil. In fact, he appeared to be this way due to mistreatment and discrimination from the Christian citizens he lived with. Thus, despite being a villain, he was someone the audience of the time could have sympathized with.

However, it was uncertain if Shakespeare's intention was for the audience to feel any sympathy toward him. There was plenty of evidence to suggest otherwise. From an age-old myth of the Jews' supposed role in Jesus' death to a political scandal of the time, there was plenty of fuel to fire up antisemitism among the vast majority of

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Elizabethan England. And, possibly, Shakespeare was not only aware of it; he may have supported this view.

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Source: The Jew of Malta

Shakespeare drew upon two sources for Shylock. The first was a play written by his contemporary, Christopher Marlowe, called *The Jew of Malta*. Marlowe's play was a hit with the audience of its time. The story was about a Jewish merchant named Barbaras who, after losing his wealth to a Turkish sultan and the governor of Malta, plotted a no-holds-barred (and intricate) plot to bring down those men. He displayed a great amount of debauchery and evil in doing so.

After a complex plot that involved his own daughter and the son of the governor, he turned to murder his own child. Why? Upon learning she was a pawn in her father's plot, she left for the nunnery to become a Christian. As a result, Barbaras had her and the other nuns poisoned—along with a few friars who were aware of the plot. Later, he forced the downfall of the governor by helping the Turkish Army. Then, he did an about-face and persuaded the Knights of Malta to slaughter the Turks.

However, in a version of Elizabethan karma, the citizens of Malta killed Barbaras. In the end, the anti-hero, Barbaras, came out of the situation being even more evil than those who had done harm to him.

The Jew of Malta was a morality tale about the evil of vengeance and power. Whether intentional or not, the main character of the story happened to be Jewish. And with antisemitism firmly rooted in the public—even in a place with relatively few, if any, Jewish citizens in England at the time—the audience easily associated Judaism with the evils that the characters created.

A Folktale and Chaucer Become Inspiration for Shylock

The Merchant of Venice and The Jew of Malta weren't the only classic English literary tales to be associated with antisemitism. One such example came from Geoffrey Chaucer's collection, *The Canterbury Tales*. "The Nunn's Tale"—with the nun telling it in a bizarre and serene tone—told a tale about how the death of a boy led to the extermination of a Jewish community (which was a "happy" ending).

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This particular story was actually popular folklore that was passed on as fact during Chaucer's time. And, the story would keep feeding many who would believe it for years to come (It should also be noted that a law passed in 1290 banished Jews from England until their formal resettlement in 1655; however, there were a few notable Jewish figures in the country during this period).

The Trial of Dr. Rodrigo Lopez

Another influence and possibly the prototype for Shylock, was the scandal and trial of Dr. Rodrigo Lopez, Queen Elizabeth's personal doctor. Dr. Lopez (or Lopes) was formerly a Portuguese physician who had been raised as a "New Christian." This was a term given to Jews or

Muslims who had recently converted to Roman Catholicism. They didn't do this out of choice; they did it to avoid persecution by the Roman Catholic Church and its inquisitions.

Driven out of the country by the Portuguese Inquisition, he came to London where he quickly rose to prominence. Eventually, he became the Queen's physician-in-chief in 1586. By earning her favor, Lopez was granted a monopoly on the importation of aniseed and sumac.

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But the good times didn't last. He was accused of conspiring with Spanish emissaries to poison the Queen. The accusation came from questionable people with political motivations that would have placed them in a position of power. He was arrested on January 1, 1594, and was convicted a month later.

Despite the Queen's uncertainty of his guilt, and Lopez's insistence on being innocent as well as his admission to being Jewish, he was hanged, drawn, and quartered. Many citizens in England didn't shed tears for him. For them, he was guilty as charged. Even his last word—or gasp to save his life—in which he uttered he "loved Jesus"—was met with laughter and ridicule. Also, the already fragile and dim view of Jews became worse than before.

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Shylock : The Jew in The Merchant of Venice

There were not many Jews in Elizabethan London but those that were there did not have a comfortable time. They were outcasts and suffered extreme discrimination. Not many ordinary people had ever encountered a Jew and when playwrights put Jewish characters on the stage they presented them as villains. Audiences hissed and booed and threw things at the actors who played them.

It was forbidden to employ Jews and they were not allowed to enter the professions or conduct legitimate business and so, in order to survive they had to live on their wits. Many of them became money lenders, lending out money for interest. Jews therefore became associated with money-lending and those who borrowed from them accused them of charging unreasonable rates so the prejudice of their being thieves and swindlers took root and lasted for centuries.

The stereotype of the Jew as a mean, dishonest money-grabbing individual has persisted, even into the twenty-first century. And Shakespeare has been accused of being anti-Semitic as a result of his portrayal of Shylock in that way in The Merchant of Venice.

But nothing could be further from the truth. It is true that Shakespeare presents Shylock as a bitter, Christian-hating, money-grabbing, stingy man, dressed in the gabardine that set Jews apart from other citizens, but he gives Shylock a strong reason for hating Christians and wanting to get revenge for how they have treated him and the Jewish community.

Shakespeare also gives us insight into the inner Shylock – not only his bitterness and anger but also his more sympathetic feelings such as the hurt he has experienced, his thoughts about the injustice of anti-Semitism and his isolation from normal society. Throughout the action of the play we see how nasty the Christians are – their shameless selfishness and brutal discrimination against Jews. Shakespeare makes Shylock's hatred even more dramatic by having Shylock's daughter elope with a Christian.

In The Merchant of Venice Shakespeare created a small Christian society of wealthy merchants and their friends – mainly young men who had nothing to do but hang around and gossip. Shakespeare makes them attractive people on the surface but on closer examination they are all thoroughly nasty.

One of the merchants, Antonio, is having a problem with his ships being late in returning to Venice. One of his friends, Basanio, asks him for money. He needs it to woo a

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wealthy woman and has no money himself but, if successful, and he marries Portia he will be able to pay it back very easily. Antonio's money is all tied up in his business, which is in trouble and the only way he can help his friend is to borrow from a money-lender.

He approaches Shylock and even while asking for help he is unforgivingly insulting to him. He tells him that his ships will be in the port in three days and then he will be able to pay. Shylock agrees to lend him the money. He says, just as a little gambling game, more or less as a little joke, if he isn't repaid in three months Antonio should give him a pound of his flesh. Antonio agrees to that.

The ships are lost in a storm and just at that time Shylock's daughter, Jessica, runs off with a Christian, taking money and jewellery with her. Shylock, burning for revenge against the Christians generally, takes Antonio to court to claim his pound of flesh.

The Duke doesn't know how to deal with it but Bassanio, successful in his suit, recruits his clever fiancé Portia, who is schooled in matters of law, to appear as a judge, disguised as a man. The trial takes place and Portia grants Shylock the pound of flesh, and counsels him to show mercy. Shylock takes out his knife to cut the flesh from the area close to Antonio's heart and she stops him and tells him that it is against the law for anyone to shed a drop of Christian blood. Shylock pauses and she rules that for threatening the life of a Christian he will have to forfeit all his possessions and convert to Christianity.

The play ends with an image of a miserable Shylock and the Christian community celebrating their victory in grand style.

In *The Merchant of Venice* Shakespeare is decidedly not anti-Semitic. It is just the opposite. We are definitely attracted to the Christians and we can see how horrific Shylock's intention is but that is outweighed by the provocation he is subjected to: his social shunning, attempts to exploit him, daily insults about him and his religion, and the dramatic acts of the abduction of his daughter and the stealing of his property.

Any writer who could write Shylock's speech about being a Jew can see the anti-Semitic dialectic of his time for what it was. Shakespeare was far more in tune with the twenty-first century attitude than the sixteenth and seventeenth century view.

Two young Christian layabouts encounter Shylock just after his daughter has run off with Lorenzo. He is highly distraught but they mock him. He is furious and it all comes out at last.

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“He 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? 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? and if you wrong us, shall we not
revenge?”

In the way Shakespeare ends the play he shows how deeply-rooted anti-Semitism was in his time. A Twenty-first century audience will feel sorry for Shylock but an Elizabethan audience would probably have cheered.

All that shows how universal Shakespeare was in his perception of the world around him – how it was before his time, how it was in his time, and how it will be after his time. How will this play look in four hundred years from now? Audiences will most certainly find it relevant to their time as well.

Despite these influences, Shylock still evolved into his own character. In *The Merchant of Venice*, he became an opportunist who sought his chance to exact revenge upon Christians who had wronged him in the past. When Antonio, a Christian, asked for money, Shylock agreed to lend it to him on one condition: if the debt was not repaid by a certain date the debtor would forfeit a pound of flesh.

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In Act I, Scene III, Shylock revealed his pain, anger, and desire for revenge—and ultimately planned to get it—in a long soliloquy. He also revealed the differences between Christians and Jews and the distrust that existed between the two groups.

This was a revelation. Shylock started off as a stock, stereotype figure. But, this soliloquy revealed new dimensions to this character. He was not scheming for evil's sake. He did so because he had felt the pain of hate and discrimination, and now wanted revenge (this might have made some Elizabethans side with Shylock).

Did Shakespeare mean to create a sympathetic character or was he trying to create a despicable villain that his audience could jeer at? This question doesn't seem easy to answer. Most likely, he used a little of both to create Shylock.

He was more believable and human than most villains that were portrayed on the stage. However, he had the hallmarks of the times that defined a villain. Unfortunately, it marked a group of people as being evil, whether Shakespeare meant it or not.