

## THE ROLE OF PREJUDICE IN THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

This paper discusses the subject of prejudice in the William Shakespeare play, *The Merchant of Venice*.

### I. Introduction

William Shakespeare's satirical comedy, *The Merchant of Venice*, believed to have been written in 1596 was an examination of hatred and greed. The premise deals with the antagonistic relationship between Shylock, a Jewish money-lender and Antonio, the Christian merchant, who is as generous as Shylock is greedy, particularly with his friend, Bassanio. The two have cemented a history of personal insults, and Shylock's loathing of Antonio intensifies when Antonio refuses to collect interest on loans. Bassanio wishes to borrow 3,000 ducats from Antonio so that he may journey to Belmont and ask the beautiful and wealthy Portia to marry him. Antonio borrows the money from Shylock, and knowing he will soon have several ships in port, agrees to part with a pound of flesh if the loan is not repaid within three months. Shylock's abhorrence of Antonio is further fueled by his daughter Jessica's elopement with Lorenzo, another friend of Antonio's.

Meanwhile, at Belmont, Portia is being courted by Bassanio, and wedding plans continue when, in accordance with her father's will, Bassanio is asked to choose from three caskets -- one gold, one silver and one lead. Bassanio correctly selects the lead casket that contains Portia's picture. The couple's joy is short-lived, however, when Bassanio receives a letter from Antonio, informing him of the loss of his ships and of Shylock's determination to carry out the terms of the loan. Bassanio and Portia marry, as do his friend, Gratiano and Portia's maid, Nerissa.

The men return to Venice, but are unable to assist Antonio in court. In desperation, Portia disguises herself as a lawyer and arrives in Venice with her clerk (Nerissa) to argue the case. She reminds Shylock that he can only collect the flesh that the agreement calls for, and that if any blood is shed, his property will be confiscated. At this point, Shylock agrees to accept the money instead of the flesh, but the court punishes him for his greed by forcing him to become a Christian and turn over half of his property to his estranged daughter, Jessica.

### II. Body

Prejudice is a dominant theme in *The Merchant of Venice*, most notably taking the form of anti-semitism. Shylock is stereotypically described as "costumed in a recognizably Jewish way in a long gown of gabardine, probably black, with a red beard and/or wig like that of Judas, and a hooked putty nose or bottle nose" (Charney, p. 41). Shylock is a defensive character because society is constantly reminding him he is different in religion, looks, and motivation. He finds solace in the law because he, himself, is an outcast of society. Shylock is an outsider who is not privy to the rights accorded to the citizens of Venice. The Venetians regard Shylock as a capitalist motivated solely by greed, while they saw themselves as Christian paragons of piety. When Shylock considers taking Antonio's bond using his ships as collateral, his bitterness is evident when he quips, "But ships are but board, sailors but men. There be land rats and water rats, water thieves and land thieves -- I mean pirates -- and then there is the peril of waters, winds, and rocks" (I.iii.25). Shylock believes the Venetians are hypocrites because of their slave ownership. The Venetians justify their practice of slavery by saying simply, "The

slaves are ours" (IV.i.98-100). During the trial sequence, Shylock persuasively argues, "You have among you many a purchased slave, which (like your asses and your dogs and mules). You us in abject and in slavish parts, because you bought them, shall I say to you, let them be free, marry them to your heirs... you will answer, 'The slaves are ours,' -- so do I answer you: The pound of flesh (which I demand of him) is dearly bought, 'tis mine and I will have it" (IV.i.90-100).

Shakespeare's depiction of the Venetians is paradoxical. They are, too, a capitalist people and readily accept his money, however, shun him personally. Like American society, 16th century Venice sought to solidify their commercial reputation through integration, but at the same time, practiced social exclusion. Though they extended their hands to his Shylock's money, they turned their backs on him socially. When Venetian merchants needed usurer capital to finance their business ventures, Jews flocked to Venice in large numbers. By the early 1500s, the influx of Jews posed a serious threat to the native population, such that the Venetian government needed to confine the Jews to a specific district. This district was called *geto nuovo* (New Foundry) and was the ancestor of the modern-day ghetto. In this way, Venetians could still accept Jewish money, but control their influence upon their way of life.

Antonio, though a main character in *The Merchant of Venice* remains a rather ambiguous figure. Although he has many friends, he still remains a solitary and somewhat melancholy figure. He is generous to a fault with his friends, especially Bassanio, which lends itself to speculation as to his sexuality. His perceived homosexuality makes him somewhat of a pariah among his countrymen, much like Shylock. Shylock's loathing of Antonio, he explains simply, "How like a fawning publican he looks! I hate him for he is a Christian" (I.iii.38-39). Antonio holds Shylock in the same contempt, trading barbs with him and spitting at him. His contempt for Shylock is further demonstrated when he addresses Shylock in the third person, despite his presence. Antonio's prejudice is clearly evident when he asks, "Is he yet possessed? (I.iii.61). The word "possessed" is synonymous with the Devil in the Christian world. In his mind, his greed and his Judaism are one, and because Shylock lacks his (Antonio's) Christian sensibilities, he is therefore the reincarnation of the Devil and the embodiment of all that is evil. Images of a dog, which is coincidentally God spelled backwards, are abound. Society must restrain the Jew because he is an untamed animal. Shylock sees himself in society's eyes and muses, "Thou call'dst me a dog before thou hadst a cause. But since I am a dog, beware my fangs (III.iii.6-7)." When Antonio spits on Shylock in public, this is perfectly acceptable behavior in a society where Jews are considered on the same level as dogs. Antonio is presented as a "good" Christian who ultimately shows mercy on his adversary, the "evil" Jew, Shylock. By calling for Shylock's conversion to Christianity, Antonio is saving a sinner's soul, and by embracing Christianity, he will be forced to repent and mend his avarice ways.

Most of the women in *The Merchant of Venice*, true to the Elizabethan time period, are little more than an attractive presence. Despite their immortalization in art, Shakespeare, like his contemporaries, appears to perceive women as little more than indulged play things with little to offer society than physical beauty. Shylock is devastated when his daughter leaves him to marry a Christian, he regards her as little more than one of his possession, just as he regards jewels and ducats. Portia, though possessing both strength and intelligence, she, too, is inclined to prejudicial judgments. She takes a distainful view of the lowly class, and dismisses the 3,000 ducats as "a petty debt." Although she truly loves Bassanio in spite of his low social rank, Bassanio is initially portrayed as a crass materialist who

regards Portia as little more than a prize to be won. Only by marrying her can he achieve any kind of social nobility. Although Portia plays a powerful role in the play's climax, she must disguise herself as a man for her words to be taken seriously.

Racial prejudice is also hinted at in *The Merchant of Venice*. The Prince of Morocco, though elegant in both manner and dress, has a pomposity which perhaps stems from being a dark-skinned man not altogether accepted in the predominantly white Christian surroundings. The bias of the city-state ruler is evident when during the trial, the Duke of Venice tells Shylock, "We all expect a gentle answer, Jew" (IV.i.34). The implication is that Christians are the models of gentility and social grace, whereas Jews are coarse in both manner and words.

Is Shylock really the epitome of evil? Over the years, the "pound of flesh" phrase has been interpreted by both scholars and students alike. Author W.H. Auden draws a similarity between Shylock's demand for payment in a pound of flesh with the crucifixion of Christ. Auden wrote, "Christ may substitute himself for man, but the debt has to be paid by death on the cross. The devil is defeated, not because he has no right to demand a penalty, but because he does not know the penalty has been already suffered" (Auden, p. 227). Shylock regards Antonio as his number one nemesis because of the countless public humiliations he has subjected him to and because Antonio has purposely hindered his business by refusing to collect interest on loans. Would Shylock have demanded a pound of flesh from anyone else in the world but Antonio? Does this make him a bad person or just a human one? By herding the Jews like cattle into the confines of the New Foundry district, aren't the Venetians symbolically extracting their own pound of flesh from the Jewish people? Why is Shylock singled out for his behavior? Because he is Jewish and therefore incapable of humanity in the eyes of the Christian world?

### III. Conclusion

Was William Shakespeare a bigot? His perceived anti-semitism in *The Merchant of Venice* depicts the Elizabethan perception of Jews, a people who were truly foreign to them in both appearance and demeanor. Edward I banished Jews from his kingdom in the 11th century, however Jewish stereotypes abound in England throughout the Renaissance. Although the average Elizabethan had probably encountered only a few Jews in his lifetime, his church sermons condemned them with words like "blasphemous," "vain," and "deceitful." The Christians considered the lending of money to be sacrilegious, but the using of this money to finance their businesses was not. *The Merchant of Venice* is no more anti-semitic than Christopher Marlowe's earlier play, *The Jew of Malta*. The parallels between Marlowe's protagonist, Barabas, and Shylock are startling. Marlowe's play begins with a description of Barabas "in his counting-house, with heaps of gold before him," discussing with his comrades his world of "infinite riches" (I.i.37). Barabas' self-serving deception and superficiality are identical to Shylock's. Marlowe's character, Ferneze acts as a self-appointed spokesman for the Christian community when he dismisses Barabas and all Jews with the words, "No, Jew, like infidels. For through our sufferance of your hateful lives, who stand accursed in the sight of heaven" (I.ii.73-75). Couldn't Antonio have uttered the same words to Shylock? Both authors were products of the Elizabethan world in which they lived, and their writings were bound to be a reflection of their times. Was Shakespeare an anti-semitic personally, or was *The Merchant of Venice* a piece of timely social commentary? This will be the fodder for much discussion and argument for years to come. There must be a distinction between

Shakespeare the writer and Shakespeare the man, and while there may be similarities, they should be regarded as two separate entities. However, when one reads *The Merchant of Venice* and speeches illustrating the hypocrisy that was so prevalent in Christian society, one can almost sense Shakespeare is satirically winking at us. Though the world has moved away from the rigid Elizabethan social convention, have times or people really changed? The continued bloodshed in the Middle East, the ongoing struggle for racial equality in Africa, religious strife in Northern Ireland and the continued practice of genocide in the world suggest otherwise. What about American society? The recent criminal trial and subsequent not guilty verdict in the O.J. Simpson case show that racial lines are still carefully drawn. Isn't O.J. Simpson reminiscent of Shylock, an outcast in white, Beverly Hills social strata in much the same way as Shylock was in Venice? His upbringing in the slums of San Francisco made him as foreign to southern California socialites as Shylock was to the Venetian bourgeoisie. Despite being found not guilty by a jury of his peers, he has been ostracized by this society nevertheless, and in establishments where his money was once accepted, he, now is not. Pending the outcome of his civil trial, he may lose his money and property as did Shylock. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare articulates the frustrations of the oppressed masses for all time with the words of Shylock. "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? 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! The villainy you teach me I will execute" (II.i.55-69). Quite simply, society teaches by example.

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