

Justice and Mercy:

History and Religious Ambiguity in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*

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Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (written between 1596 and 1599), has been contentiously debated by scholars. Some claim that it is incredibly anti-Semitic, while others assert that Shakespeare was ahead of his time, arguing against the Jewish stereotypes prevalent in his day. As one commentator aptly states, "The temptation has always been to solve rather than realize the problem of Shylock, to present him as either the unequivocal villain or the wronged victim" (Lyon xv). As such, what follows is not a proposed solution, but instead an exploration of facts, historical, contextual, and rhetorical, relating to the portrayal of Jews in *The Merchant of Venice*.

In analyzing Shakespeare's work, his source material reveals a lot about his arguments. His primary source for the bond plot of Shylock and Antonio is almost certainly *Il Pecorone*, an Italian novella written between 1378 and 1385 by Giovanni Fiorentino (Spencer 21, Gross 5). When analyzing the historic context of this work, the position of Jews in society was shifting. In the 14th century, Italian society became increasingly religious. As this happened, Jews were slowly excluded from more and more professions, eventually leaving moneylending as the only real option (Roth 12). At the same time, the church began putting up stricter prohibitions against moneylending with interest (Roth 13). The biblical strictures used as the basis for these laws hold in Judaism and Christianity, coming from Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy, in which people are prohibited from moneylending at interest to a 'brother,' which was interpreted by both groups to mean anyone of the same religion. This meant that Jews could lend money at interest to Christians without violating the rules (Davis 8). Even so, Jews were not admitted into Venice

until 1336; previously they had remained sequestered in neighboring town of Mestre. After 1336, laws were established allowing Jews to live in Venice and carry out moneylending. These laws were renewed in 1373, 1378, and 1385 (Roth 16-17). This shows that moneylending was the primary trade of Jews in Venice when *Il Pecorone* was written, but it would have been fairly new, and contentious, which explains the harsh treatment of the Jewish antagonist in *Il Pecorone*.

When looking at the history of Jews in England in the late 16th century, when Shakespeare was writing, their place in society was likewise in turmoil. Though the Jews had been formally expelled in England in 1290 by King Edward I (Efron Et Al 184, Nahshon 7), there is some scholarly disagreement as to the presence of Jews in England in the late 16th century. It is well documented that there were people of Jewish heritage in England (Gross 20, Spencer 55). Some say that these Jews were hiding their religious practice, as has been debated of the ‘conversos’ and ‘Marranos’ of Iberian culture (Spencer 55), and others say that their practice could have been little more than an open secret (Adelman 6, Glassman 47, Katz 3). According to historian David Katz, 1531 became known as the year of the renewal or Jewish residence in England, as a Jew who had converted to Christianity, named Marco Raphael, came to England to help Henry VIII with his divorce; many musicians who played for the king were Italian Jews, and “New Christians” may have been coming from Portugal as well (Katz 3-4, Gross 23). However, by the 1540s the inquisition disrupted the Jewish community, leading many Jews to flee England (Katz 6-10). Despite this disruption, it is documented that there were at least some Marranos in London and Bristol through the latter half of the 16th Century, though they were incredibly discreet (Katz 10-14). There were, however, exceptions to this. One Converso who became public and controversial was Rodrigo Lopez, who was Queen Elizabeth’s

personal physician, later tried and executed for treason for allegedly plotting to poison the Queen in 1594 (Katz 49, Glassman 56-8, Gross 21, Shakespeare 395-9, Spencer 55).

Possibly due to this precarious cultural situation, there was an influx in English plays written about Jewish people in the mid-16th Century, the most famous being Marlowe's *Jew of Malta* (Gross 9, Spencer 28-30). Shakespeare's approach to Judaism seems to be different than that of any of his contemporaries or his source material. Whereas Jews in other works had been shown as simply devilish and grotesquely mean (Glassman 19, Shakespeare 304), Shakespeare's Jews are thoroughly human (Lyon 16, Shakespeare 306, Spencer 30, Yaffe 82). Shylock lacks some of the more harsh conventions of Jewish usurers on the stage; he is not physically repellent, not does he have dropsy or gout (Gross 38). In addition, when compared to the relation between Christians and Jews in his source material, *Il Pecorone*, Shakespeare adds believability to the hatred between Antonio and Shylock (Gross 6). He exposes previous spats which the two have had, thus bringing Shylock's actions within the realm of possibility (Shakespeare 304-305). Additionally, he adds a discussion of Antonio's interference with Shylock's business (Adelman 14-15). Shakespeare calls attention to the Biblical Laws prohibiting Jews and Christians from lending money at interest to their religious 'brothers' (Davis 8), and adds humanity to the character of Shylock, as his competitors in usury are lending money without interest, and thus hurting his business. In this way, Shakespeare shows the hatred between the two men to be based on more than simply religion.

Shakespeare uses business to create a unique situation where both Shylock and Antonio have very human faults, and yet neither views the other as a full human. Thus, when Shylock is given the rare opportunity to have power over a Christian (not only that, but one who has slighted him in the past), Shylock's choice to take advantage of Antonio's vulnerability is

understandable (Lyon 49). Shylock's character, as one commentator writes, "reduces humanity to its lowest common denominator and perversely finds at that level the touches of nature that make the whole world kin" (Danson 106).

When examining the business of *Merchant of Venice*, an inspection of usury in English history is in order. While in Venice, when *Il Pecorone* was written, usury was controversial as a business venture only for Jews, in England, from which Jews had been expelled, the social situation was quite different. After 1571, usury (in this case meaning the charging of excessively high interest) became a crime which Shakespeare's father was actually accused of (Gross 36, 47; Nirenberg 275). The English public did not consider Christian moneylending at low interest rates cruel like that done by the Jews, but much literature from the time represents Christian (and especially Puritan) moneylenders who charged high rates as 'Jewish' (Nirenberg 275), showing the word was used as a derogatory slight against hard-hearted Christian moneylenders (Spencer 78). The perspectives from the continent about Jewish moneylenders also came to England, for instance, the canard that usurers were created by the devil, and identifying Satan as the Jew's financial partner (Glassman 33). It is reasonable to suppose that the political debate around usury in England and the continent had an influence on Shakespeare's writing, and his choice of antagonist as a moneylending Jew literalized the stereotypes against that profession. Some commentators point out that in Shakespeare's England, "the moneylender" was a much more real enemy than "the Jew", and thus Shylock was a significant character more as a usurer than as a Jew (Spencer 78). Though Shakespeare's Shylock certainly has much to say about Judaism and the English perception of it, *The Merchant of Venice* also dramatizes political debates regarding contracts (Nirenberg 284), which is another way in which Shakespeare's Shylock is much more human and less one dimensional than other Jewish characters in previous and contemporary

dramatic treatments. Instead of simply being a stereotypical Jew pointing out the supposed moral superiority of Christians, Shylock put very real political and social problems on stage in tandem with the problems seen of Judaism.

One interesting aspect of Shakespeare's development of the relation between Christianity and Judaism is that Shakespeare does not depict either side in strict accordance with its own laws. By showing the inherent humanism and hypocrisy in both religions, he in some ways equalizes the characters who are a part of each. For Shylock's part, he is in accordance (as far as is shown) with the previously discussed biblical laws governing the practice of usury by only loaning money to Christians. However, when probing deeper, some scholars have found that the influential Jewish Jurist, Maimonides, in order to prevent Jews from associating with Gentiles and thus being tempted into idolatry, wrote that a Jew could borrow from a Gentile, but should not loan money to one. This because debtors generally want to avoid their creditors, but creditors must seek out their debtors (Wheeler 66). Shylock is in violation of this harsher interpretation of the law. Though it is hard to say what specific Jewish laws Shakespeare would have known, many scholars look at this and other laws to criticize Shylock for not being a 'good Jew'. For example, when negotiating the loan with Antonio, Shylock uses a loose interpretation of a Biblical story of sheep breeding to argue his point (Gross 31, Yaffe 63). Some critics question if this interpretation of this story is in line with Jewish teaching. Not only that, but it is a Biblical story common to Christianity and Judaism, instead of any of the similar, more relevant passages in the Hebrew Bible (Wheeler 232). Many scholars question why this is: Shakespeare clearly had access to passages that were more exclusive to Jews, and yet he chose one which only loosely applies to this situation and is common to Christianity and Judaism (Gross 33). Some have wondered if it leads to deeper arguments he is making about religion as a whole.

Shylock also has a non-Jewish servant, leaves his daughter home alone with said servant, swears by Jacob's staff and the Sabbath, all of which go against different Jewish laws (Spencer 82). This does not even go into his insistence on cutting off a pound of Antonio's flesh, which goes against the Jewish laws that forbid the cutting off of any portion of a living animal, neither does it address his lack of mercy. Some attribute these faults to the fact that Shakespeare would have had little (at best) interaction with any living Jews, and as such, his characterization must have been based on theology and Christian normative history instead of practical example (Sinsheimer 127-131, Spencer 82). However, some counter this interpretation by claiming that the discrepancies between Shylock's character and the culture of real Jews are intentional in Shakespeare's writing. Though Shylock is the epitome of the Christian stereotypes of Jews' strict obedience to their laws (Gross 29), he actually disobeys many Jewish laws, from dietary laws, to the teachings of mercy that Judaism shares with Christianity. He also is attempting to shed the blood of another, which is most certainly against Torah teachings (Yaffe 164). If Shylock were to have obeyed these laws, he would have avoided his fate of failure and forced conversion. In comparison with the also imperfect Christian characters, by portraying Shylock as strict to a fault, imperfect in his attempted orthodoxy, Shakespeare further humanizes and equalizes all his characters. In a world where Shylock has been constantly oppressed and ridiculed, it is fully plausible that he takes advantage of the opportunity to take revenge on a Christian. The previous failings in his Jewish practice are one more way Shakespeare primes his audience to believe that Shylock is capable of this revenge.

Interestingly, some also use the argument of ambiguous religion around Shylock's dramatic foil, Antonio. From the beginning of the play, Antonio is characterized as melancholy without specific cause, which, according to one scholar, Shakespeare's audience would have

understood to be a stereotype of Jews (Nirenberg 269-271). This is another example of how Shakespeare may be intentionally upsetting stereotypes to show nuance and dynamics in his characters. A similar tone of melancholy is seen in Jessica's speech on music in act 5 (Nirenberg 298) which may be a cue for the audience to doubt the depth of her conversion.

Another way Shakespeare humanizes Shylock is to show his home life. Though Shakespeare's source material, *Il Pecorone* did not show a family or any other aspect of life of the Jew, Shakespeare chose to do so (Nahshon 8). Within England at this time, most debates concerning Judaism were about what was allegedly happening in private. When a supposed Converso would go to church and behave like all the Christians, they were left to wonder if in private a different religion was being practiced (Katz 65). By bringing his audience into the home of his Jewish antagonist, and showing both his daughter Jessica, and servant Launcelot, Shakespeare could rhetorically answer these suspicions of his audience (Adelman 7). Though Shylock was not a 'New Christian' or Converso like the Jews in Shakespeare's England, the iteration of a Jew in any form on stage would bring the debates of his day to the mind of his audience members. Showing a side of Jewish characters which they did not get to see of the Jews around them added nuance and humanity to Shylock, Jessica, and the play as a whole.

One important addition to Shakespeare's story which stemmed from the inclusion of a "Jewish" home is the character of Shylock's daughter, Jessica, who converts and marries a Christian, Lorenzo (Gross 6). Most scholars believe her plotline comes from the fourteenth tale written by Massuccio di Salerno, of a similarly strict father whose daughter eloped. However, Salerno's story depicted a Christian family (Shakespeare 319). The Italian story, like many of Shakespeare's sources, was likely primarily transmitted throughout English society orally (Spencer 12), and the tale of a Jewish girl leaving her father was almost certainly not

Shakespeare's invention (Spencer 30); but the inclusion of this story in *The Merchant* along with the bond plot involving Antonio and Shylock provides another angle to Shylock's character. The character's name, Jessica, is almost certainly a biblical reference to Genesis, where 'Jisrah' (*Yiskah*) signifies a spy, observer, or seer. This may also be referenced in Shylock's warning to Jessica not to "thrust her head into the public street to gaze on Christian fools" (Shakespeare xi). In this way, from the moment her name is mentioned, Jessica is characterized as unchangeably Jewish. According to one commentator, Jessica's story also points to the Judaism inherent in her gender, where, according to the principles of Jewish faith, her Jewish blood will be passed on to her children (Adelman 70). Whether or not Shakespeare knew this specific part of Jewish Canon, it is clear that he makes it difficult for her to assimilate with the Christian characters, even after her conversion. Though she is characterized as beautiful and 'gentle,' (which most scholars interpret as a play on the word 'gentile') Jessica is never truly accepted by Gratiano and Portia in Belmonte. Perhaps this points to the deeper societal suspicions the English had of converted 'New Christians'. Even after marrying a Christian, and professing to convert, the Christians in the play do not look on Jessica as an equal, instead only talking to her when politeness demands it (Adelman 73, Gross 60).

Another Jewish stereotype which Shakespeare employs are images of blood libels (Nahshon 57). These are stories told by Christians of Jewish people supposedly attacking a Christian or something Christian, such as a consecrated communion wafer or a young boy (Glassman 17). Though most things that Jews were purported to do in these libels were in direct opposition to Jewish laws against consuming blood, child sacrifice, and others, these vicious rumors persisted. The supposed motives of the Jews are many in these stories, but several involve their alleged desire to collect blood as a sacrifice, or an attempt to reenact the crucifixion

(Glassman 69-70, Gross 18). Many English plays from Shakespeare's time show blood libels and violations of the host (Glassman 24), so an English audience would certainly have understood Shakespeare's references to such libels (Gross 17). Given that many of these supposed crimes center around blood, it is of little surprise that Shylock's downfall is similarly a drop of blood. Some commentators take this connection even further, claiming that Shylock, in his aim to cut the body of his enemy acts as ritual circumciser of Antonio, and replays the crucifixion. By alluding to both of these wounds in Shylock's speeches, Shakespeare is referencing ritual murders which sometimes combined both as well (Adelman 106-111, Gross 278). This focus on bodily wounds appeals to the stories of Jews which Shakespeare's audience would have heard. However, by showing Shylock as having been oppressed by Antonio, Shakespeare shows that this bloodlust has a rational and emotional basis, and is not a necessary product of some essential Jewish evil. Additionally, his lack of adherence to the letter of Jewish law suggests that this bloodlust may not be a necessary product of Shylock's Jewishness, but instead of his personal experience.

The contrast between the Christian and Jewish world is one of the most talked about juxtapositions in the play (Nahshon 10). Certainly, the play was inspired by the dynamics between the Old and New Testament (Danson 60). Shakespeare, instead of trying to solve the problems of the relations between Judaism and Christianity was using the contrast of the two religions to examine themes of justice (which Christians would associate with the Old Testament) and Christian mercy (Glassman 68). Shakespeare's language strongly associates Shylock with the Old Testament and its "strict" laws (Nahshon 9). He lives by the law as much as possible, without asking for forgiveness (Wheeler 175). For example, he refuses to provide a surgeon to stop Antonio's bleeding, as there was no stipulation regarding one in their agreement

(Glassman 68). This narrow-minded characterization is consistent with normative Christian biblical scholarship of the time (Julius 181). As a legalist, Shylock expects he will get his rights and justice will be served. He defends his actions by claiming that any Christian, thus oppressed, would do the same. This argument seems to support a natural equality of Christians and Jews, in that they both have bodies, and emotions (Yaffe 121).

Shylock's legal opponent is Portia, who most scholars cite for her speech on mercy. Certainly the climactic courtroom scene that occurs near the end of the play points to strong biblical messages, with a Christian man sacrificing his own life for his friend in a manner which cannot help but call to mind images of the crucifixion (Wheeler 85). However, this scene is anything but a perfect story of Christian victory. In fact, many have noted that the arguments coming from the Christians in the play are more religiously ambiguous, like the 'less Jewish' traits of Shylock analyzed earlier and the 'Jewish' traits of the Christian Antonio (Yaffe 75). For example, Portia must use legalism to win the case (Nirenberg 289). However, even more so, she does not use the morality of Italian law to further her argument. Instead, she uses an originally Jewish prayer about mercy having precedence over strict judgement (Yaffe 85). This harkens back to the legalistic representations of Shylock from the beginning of the play to the first half of the trial, and linguistically 'converts' Portia in the opposite direction. It also furthers Shakespeare's portrayal of Shylock as an imperfect Jew, by contrasting his actions with a teaching of mercy from the Jewish Canon. By illustrating that mercy is a teaching which both religions share, Shakespeare further equalizes these characters. Additionally, Gratiano repeats Shylock's diction, Biblical allusions, and merciless interpretation of the law (Nirenberg 290), reveling in the revenge they are able to take on behalf of their friend, just as Shylock was hoping to exact revenge only lines earlier.

In only the next scene, Portia and her maid Nerissa hatch a plot concerning wedding rings, hypocritical in a sense, since the rings are also viewed as a bond of flesh (through marriage) and is expected to be treated seriously (Nirenberg 294). Meanwhile, the strict legalism of Judaism shown in Shylock and his Christian adversaries in the court scene is rhetorically opposed with abundant mercy in Antonio, who likewise is portrayed as less than perfect. His overabundance of love and grace for his friend started this whole cycle, and he also ends up overstepping his place in friend's marriage during the aforementioned ring plot (Yaffe 164).

The court scene ends with a supposed show of Christian mercy, as Shylock is not forced to give up all his fortune, instead giving it to his daughter and son-in-law, and is forced to convert to Christianity. Some say that given that all "Jews" in England in Shakespeare's day were at least nominally Christians, the conversion of Shylock would not be as controversial as it is today (Spencer 84). There were calls in many sermons of the time to convert Jews, and many clerics were convinced that Jews were exposed to the truth of Christianity, they would accept it (Glassman 29). Similarly, the loss of Shylock's fortune would be less than surprising to an English audience, since from the 13th century into the 17th century, there was a custom for converts to Christianity to give their goods to the crown as they had been acquired through the 'sinful means' of usury (Danson 164). Additionally, as a converted Christian, Shylock would no longer be able to charge interest to other Christians, and would no longer be able to disinherit his daughter for marrying a Christian (Yaffe 78-79).

However, many critics claim that Shylock's conversion was more than a neat comedic ending. One scholar put it this way: "While Shylock sought to destroy Antonio physically, these Christians are here bent on destroying Shylock's spirit" (Lyon 108). Many push this further into the ironies of the court scene, claiming that the Christians are imposing redemptive mercy on

Shylock while actually denying the reality of it to him (Wheeler 85). This irony is further evident in that, in his court arguments, Shylock compares himself to his Christian counterparts, saying, “The villainy you teach me I will execute,” but now Shylock is not only emulating the Christians as he had been earlier in the play, but instead is forced to become one (Lyon 108). Many literary critics also claim that this conversion is by no means a true one. One commentator asserts, “The choice is not between, on the one hand, a straightforward opposition between Jewish legalism and Christian love There is irony, but that irony has its limits, and the Jewish shape those limits take preserves the plausibility of Christian claims to love. The Christian may be confused with ‘Judaism’ on Shakespeare’s stage, and the Jew may appear Christian, but the one cannot become the other.” (Nirenberg 298). Another argues this philologically, looking at Antonio’s line, “Hie thee, gentle Jew. / The Hebrew will turn Christian, he grows kind” (1.3.173-74). The word ‘gentle’ is often used in the play as a pun on the word ‘gentile’ (Gross 83). However, as soon as Antonio mentions the possibility of a ‘Gentile’ Jew, Antonio shifts from the word ‘Jew,’ which can be used to discuss race, culture, and religion, to ‘Hebrew’ which is used much more specifically to denote genealogical lineage. In this way, Antonio is arguing that though a Jew can turn Christian, a Hebrew cannot turn Gentile, and whether or not he is forced to convert, Shylock will never turn ‘kind,’ and even at the end of the play is referred to as “the rich Jew” (5.1.291) (Adelman 78).

Regardless of the opinions on antisemitism in the play, it is clear that Shakespeare used religion to create nuanced characters and plot. By accepting the questions and not just blindly groping for solutions, we can better understand and appreciate the world that Shakespeare was creating, as well as the one he was living in. In an England where both Judaism and usury were contentious issues, Shakespeare staged questions, not answers, allowing his audience to see the

world through the eyes of different characters, and how each is right in some ways, and hypocritical in others.

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