

CELEBRATING OUR DIFFERENCES

In "The Merchant of Venice" Shakespeare makes more than a social point about judging others by their differences. More so than in any of his other plays, Shakespeare tackles this serious problem with personal flare. Racism is caught when Portia scoffs at her black suitor. Bigots are framed from both religious perspectives (Jew and Christian). During a time when Jews had been deported from England, all non-Christians had been banished from Spain, and France was evicting many of its Protestants, this was a sensitive play to write (Greenblatt, 1081). There are several differences brought to light in this play: "...being rich and being virtuous, marrying for money and marrying for love, following paternal orders and making one's own choice, enforcing the letter of the law and enforcing its spirit" (1088). Shakespeare writes in a deeper meaning about human nature and how stifling our differences causes strife, but he does not end the play with the solution. It is left to the audience to deduce that harmony can exist only with a celebration of differences.

The Merchant of Venice
Christianity and its Role in Venetian Society

Those in Venice hold Christian values and ideals to heart by choosing to scorn and disadvantage those who do not share the same ideals and morals as them. Through the character of Shylock, it is seen how those in Venetian society look down upon his greedy and selfish ways of being a money collector. Portia's hand is promised to any man who can choose the correct casket with her picture inside. The invisible hand of Portia's father works even after he is dead to insure that she marries a proper Christian husband. Her father is able to do this since he believes that any man who does not have Christian ideals will choose the incorrect casket. Christian morals and ideals are used to cast judgment and disadvantage those with different views and ideals as shown through the character Shylock by being Jewish, and Portia's hand being decided through the selecting of the right casket, which only a true Christian would guess in Shakespeare's play The Merchant of Venice. why?

Shylock is shown as a greedy, merciless man whose only happiness is found in money and objects which are stored behind lock and key. "...but despite his evident wealth he is obviously no gentleman. He locks up his possessions, regrets how much his servant eats, fumes over the money he spends searching for his missing daughter," (Greenblatt, 1084). Shylock is shown as a man who cares only for his money which he never uses. After his daughter has ran away he mourns over the loss of his money spent looking for her instead of the loss of his daughter "My daughter! O, my ducats! O, my daughter! Fled with a Christian! O, my Christian ducats! Justice! The law! My ducats and my daughter! A sealed bag, two sealed bags of ducats,"

(1111, 2.8, 15-18). His profession is looked down upon by those around him, however it doesn't stop Antonio going to Shylock to loan him some money.

Portia's hand in marriage is offered to the suitor who chooses the correct one out of three caskets. Placed in front of the suitor is a gold, silver and lead casket, with the lead one containing her picture allowing the man to take her hand in marriage. If, however, the man chooses the wrong casket, he will suffer whatever consequence lies inside the casket. These men pay a high price and gamble their supposed love on a one out of three chance. In the end Morocco, the man who chose the gold casket, was "never to speak of a lady afterward in way of marriage," (1101, 2.1, 41-42). The man who chose the silver casket, Aragon, had to obey the orders of "You must be gone from hence immediately," (1112, 2.9, 8). Bassanio chooses the lead casket and was allowed to "claim her with a loving kiss," (1120, 3.2, 138). Of course Bassanio chooses the correct casket because he is a true Christian who can see through everything to correctly determine the correct casket. Those who were not of the Venetian society, Morocco and Aragon, were unable to choose the correct casket since they are from a different culture which encompasses different ideals and beliefs. *Isa*

Throughout the play the Christians are being rewarded, while those who are not suffer consequences due to their different cultures and religions. Shylock is unable to collect his pound of flesh after Antonio fails to repay his debt, however he is reimbursed by Bassanio. The suitors who attempted to win Portia's hand in marriage through the choosing of the caskets were unable to gain her love because they were not Christian enough to see which casket was in fact the correct one. The role of Christianity in this society gives the advantage to those of the same faith, but they also cast judgment on those who have different beliefs and ways of life such as Shylock the Jew, Morocco and Aragon.

The Merchant of Venice: Shakespeare's Mockery of Racism

The character of Shylock is one which may be widely debated within Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*. He is portrayed as ruthless, unfeeling, and valuing money over all human life. But is this the way in which Shakespeare wanted us to view his characterization of "the Jew"? Another view of Shylock may be seen than the one which is perhaps more readily presented. Shylock seems more a representation of Antonio's ill-warranted hatred than a target of anti-Semitism.

Antonio is a much beloved character throughout the play, but no other character treats Shylock quite as ruthlessly as he. Antonio goes beyond merely insulting the man, he calls him worthless and treats him as though he is no longer a person. Many characters throughout the play argue that Shylock's demands of Antonio's payment of a pound of flesh is inhumane, but he merely wants revenge for how poorly he has been treated by Antonio for so long. He asks Antonio several times what he has done to warrant such hard feelings, and wonders why Antonio still comes to him for help. Shylock does show a significant amount of humanity towards his chief enemy, despite the fact that Antonio time and time again degrades Shylock; Shylock is still willing to lend him money, to give him the benefit of the doubt that he will pay him back. When Shylock is not paid back and is just told to accept his loss of money, he rightfully gets angry. Shylock is a representation that Antonio may not be the great guy that the rest of the characters claim he is, and that maybe it is not just ill-luck that has struck down all of Antonio's ships, but maybe just a little bit of Karma.

well put

A Wealthy Indiscretion

Throughout Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice," it becomes apparent that there is some sort of preoccupation with wealth and/or societal standing. There is a distinction not only between an upper class and lower (perhaps just less fortunate) class, but also between race and religion. When these two are combined, it provides a clear and thought-provoking theme to the play that is well executed. Main examples of this are evident within the characters and relationships of Shylock the Jew and his daughter Jessica, as well as between Portia and her deceased father. Shylock is evidently bitter about being mistreated by Christians, particularly Antonio, and obsessed with obtaining revenge by his contract of flesh with him. His relationship with his daughter appears to be strong until she rebels against him and flees his house with Lorenzo; he then appears to care less about her than about the money he is spending on a fruitless search to find her. Portia, on the other hand, respects her father's wishes, and strives to find a suitor who can choose correctly among three caskets and obtain her as a bride. Though she is an intelligent woman, she seems oblivious to the real world – as she lives in Belmont, a world where everyone is relatively the same and bases their lives around Christian ideals.

Shylock's obsession with money and his plot for revenge is completely transparent. When Antonio begrudgingly approaches Shylock in order to obtain a loan in order to help Bassanio who he loves, court Portia, Shylock brings up the fact that

Antonio has talked down on him because of his dislike for Jews. Nonetheless, Antonio agrees to a contract of a pound of his own flesh to repay the debt if he cannot pay it back in money, and Shylock revels in the possibility of taking out his frustrations by hurting Antonio. When he is told that one of Antonio's ships have been lost at sea, he takes extreme joy at the news, and thanks God in the hopes that he will be able to take much more than his money's worth from Antonio. In that same scene, we are presented with his apparent apathy toward the loss of his daughter; though it does bother him, he is clearly more upset about the money that he is spending in order to find her than about the fact that she is gone.

Portia, somewhat dismayed at the wishes of her father due to the fact that none of the suitors pursuing her are appealing to her, adheres to his wishes anyway. She reminisces with Nerissa, her lady-in-waiting, about Bassanio, and longs to marry him. This is ironic in that Bassanio does not have money, and although he borrows a large amount from Antonio (Shylock), much more than he actually needs, in order to make her think that he does, he tells her as soon as he gets to Belmont that he does not have money, and she loves him anyway. This just proves that Portia, unlike her opposite Shylock, has little to no preoccupation with money, and much more so with love.

Therefore, through the characters and relationships in this play (many more, actually, than I have mentioned here), it is evident that money, religion and class distinction play a large part in the play itself. The characters are diversified by it, sometimes defined by it, and overall, the play itself is built upon it.

Religious Persecution

I have a little trouble with the Merchant of Venice, knowing who the bad guys are and who the good guys are. The short little blurb written by Greenblatt right before the play indicates that the Christians aren't as selfless as they first appear, so when I started reading I had that in mind. But as the play progressed I had a hard time delving beneath the surface to find motive behind religious persecution and outright exclusionism. If we believe Shylock, he has good reason to resent and hate Antonio. Even though the moral of the play seems to be, "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you," the Christians seem to only apply this to other Christians! After all, if Antonio had treated Shylock with the basic dignities and courtesies he showed his Christian friends, instead of kicking and spitting on him, Shylock would have no reason to hate him. Yet at the end of the play, Shylock is twisted into a monster, and no one really pities him for losing his wealth and family. I think this play's message would have had more impact on the audience Shakespeare intended it for, rather than anyone who exists and profits from today's capitalist society. I think anyone who can side entirely with the Christians and look down on Shylock as a "money-grubbing Jew," is just a hypocrite.

In addition, putting this play in a contemporary setting, what makes this "a pound of flesh" situation any different than the debate over the death penalty in this country? Antonio essentially broke the law by refusing to pay Shylock back. Antonio and his Christian friends weigh the scales in their favor. The court judge sides with Antonio—it is implied that he is a Christian. Antonio and his friends mock and kick and shun Shylock until they need him. Portia's father put the fate of his daughter's marriage into the hands of whatever Christian would come along, since only a Christian could have solved the riddle. It's basically implying that if you're a Christian, you can get away with anything because you're in the majority and your friends & God will help you out. Parallel: The persecution of protestants and Catholics during the reign of Mary, Elizabeth, etc. — the mix of religion and politics is never clean. There's always bloodshed.

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Prof. Flores
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Ring Revenge

At first glance Portia's insistence on the ring as payment seems unfair. "Balthasar" has just saved Antonio's life, and to deny his wish seems cruel. At the same time, "Balthasar's" originally reasonable request turns unreasonable when insisted upon. Bassanio should have stayed firm in his original decision to keep the ring safe, and sent money after "Balthasar" rather than the ring. I think that Portia's insistence and request grows out of Bassanio's declaration at 4.1.277-285, that he'd sacrifice his own life, his wife, and all the world to save Antonio. I believe that she used the ring to test whether Bassanio did indeed ²prize Antonio over her, and found him wanting in this regard. What at first glance may seem cruel or unreasonable of Portia, to demand the ring and then condemn its loss, seems like a logical test. In all honesty, had it been me, I would not have let it resolve so easily. I would have confronted my husband with his disregard not only for a ring and a promise, but for my very life.

10/23/07

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Comedy in a Tragic Life

Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice contains all of the elements required of a Shakespearean comedy, but is often so overshadowed by the many "tragic" events that take place in the play. The character of Shylock, for example, with his quest for a pound of flesh, particularly makes it simple to categorize this play as a tragedy rather than a comedy. However, there are many indications of a comedy. A quick-witted servant makes pun after pun at the expense of others. Lovers sulk and yearn for one another and are eventually together. And of course, women dress up and pretend to be men. All of these events are defining characteristics of a Shakespearean comedy. Yet, there are contrasting signs that say this play is indeed a tragedy. Shakespeare presents Shylock to the audience, who does not seem to be a typical man of comedy. He is a corrupted old man who loses his daughter and is consumed with a terrible greed. For entire scenes, we lose the light language of comedy that is replaced with dark and depressing language. And Antonio's fate is much more suspenseful rather than funny. The fact that he may pay Bassanio's debt with his life clouds over the rest of the play in such a way that I fail to even imagine this play as a comedy. And still, the final act seems to save the play as humor is flung about and covering the show. It's a play that is almost impossible to define and to understand Shakespeare's line of thinking. But it seems to be likely that Shakespeare made the play this exact way on purpose. For, in my opinion, we all lead tragic lives, and yet we manage to hold onto some humor in the process.

yes

Nicely
agreed