



## Delineation of Anti-Semitism in *The Merchant of Venice*

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Anti-Semitism can be defined as hatred towards Jews. Hatred of Jews has existed for thousands of years. Anti-Semitism frequently charges Jews with conspiring to harm humanity. The phrase "anti-Semitism" once seemed to refer to prejudice or discrimination against all Semitic Peoples, including Arabs, Assyrians, Samaritans, Jews, and Ethiopians. Today it refers to prejudice or discrimination only against Jews. The term referred to Jew-hatred rather than hatred of other Semite peoples. The worst case of anti-Semitism in history is the Holocaust, which involved the extermination of European Jews by Nazi Germany and its allies between 1933 and 1945. In 1860 Austrian Jewish scholar Moritz Steinschneider, introduced the term *antisemitische vorurteile* (anti-Semitic prejudices). The term is made common by German journalist Wilhelm Marr in his pamphlet *The Way to Victory of Germanism over Judaism* published in 1879.

In English literature Jewish characters are often portrayed as bad ones. Charles Dickens, a British novelist in his novel *Oliver Twist*, has referred to Fagin two hundred and fifty seven times as "The Jew" while neglecting any of the other characters' religion or ethnicity. In Marlowe's play *Jew of Malta*, Barabas is characterized as greedy and unsatisfied. In Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* the character of Shylock, who is Jew, is portrayed as villainous figure. Besides anti-Semitic elements, the other themes like the revenge and money-lending are employed in relation to Shylock's character.

The play *The Merchant of Venice* is categorized as a comedy in the First Folio, and is believed to have been written between 1596 and 1598. It tells the story of a merchant named Antonio who borrows money from a Jewish money-lender named Shylock to help his friend Bassanio to win the heart of a wealthy woman named Portia. Antonio is unable to repay the loan, and Shylock demands a pound of Antonio's flesh as a penalty. The case is brought to trial, and Portia disguises herself as a male lawyer to argue on Antonio's behalf, ultimately securing his release. In the end, Shylock is forced to convert to Christianity and surrender his wealth, while Bassanio and Portia are married. The play revolves around the character of Shylock. The Jewish money-lender is the enigmatic center of *The Merchant of Venice*.



The play comprises of chain of events which introduce anti-Semitic figures through the special character Shylock. Since the play starts with a direct prejudice and stereotype that the personal qualities stay in a secondary place, Shylock's mention that he is "a Jew" limits readers from imagining him in their own minds. Shylock, in general, is the villain of the play who was alienated from the community. In the society of Shakespearean time, Jews were not allowed to have proper occupation in the Christian society and they were minority group and that was why the Jews mostly preferred to be a moneylender. The stereotypes were common in Shakespearean society; people had a stereotyped picture of Jew in their mind and because of this they hated Jews since they were lending money. To lend money was thought as a big sin and people hated Jews because they were sinners. Jews were not allowed to do any other profession to earn money to keep them alive, for example, to do farming, to have a store. People did not want them to take part in any of the profession and what was left to them was lending money. This profession has made the Jewish character automatically villain and, at the end of the play implicitly the villain became a loser.

In the play, it is easy to note that Shylock is actually at the right side; it means that he gives money to a Christian character, Antonio and wants it back with interest as they have already agreed, though surprisingly the situation changes differently. Antonio cannot pay back and in addition to this Shylock is supposed to give his esteem to Christians and convert into a Christian otherwise he would not be forgiven. The reason why he is in a "forgiven" position is quite interesting story. Antonio is given some money with the condition that he would pay back otherwise he has to give a pound of flesh from his body to Antonio. We expect Antonio to be in a "forgiven" position, but Shylock ends up being the one in the wrong. Antonio puts a condition that he would forgive Shylock only when he becomes a Christian.

It is clear that Shakespeare intends to create a Jew character as Jew- stereotypes. In the prologues of the play Shylock is mentioned directly as "a Jew." But it is not embarrassing because during Shakespeare's time, Shylock, and Jews in general, were portrayed on the stage as comical, yet villainous figures. Their costume included an orange wig, a bulbous nose, and a large and sinister cape. Jews were types, not people ( Balser 10). It is true that Shylock is not cruel by nature. He is human in inner-self as the Christians are. He has been humiliated, abused, and harmed the most by Christians. He is continually insulted, degraded by the other characters and described in bestial terms as a dog and a wolf. At other points in the play, Shylock is equated with the devil and he is spat upon by Antonio:

SHYLOCK

You call me misbeliever, cutthroat dog,



And spet upon my Jewish gaberdine,

[...]

'Fair sir, you spet on me on Wednesday last,

You spurned me such a day; another time

You called me dog; and for these courtesies

I'll lend you thus much moneys'?

ANTONIO

I am as like to call thee so again,

To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too. (Shakespeare 1.3.121-122; 135-141)

The humiliation of Jews makes us think the fight of Shylock ultimately right as no one in the play is fair; Shylock creates his own court of justice and wants Antonio's flesh. At first, it might be seen as a hatred of Christian but in fact it is hatred that Shylock is threatened like an animal. It is not even an implication so Shylock wants this for revenge of his past angers. In the play, the most striking speech of Shylock has the quality of being a summary of the unfair chains of events experienced by Jews:

“To bait fish withal. If it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge. 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? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrongs

a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrongs a Jew, what should his sufferance be by

Christian example? Why, revenge. The villainy you teach me I will execute—and it shall go hard but will better

the instruction.” (Shakespeare 3.1. 56-58)



This is the place where Shakespeare leaves his mark on the play and people who read or watches the play to feel great mercy for Shylock who was humiliated and blamed for being a Jew. With this speech Shylock wants to arouse the intention that both Jews and Christian are the equal parts of this planet so they should be under the same conditions. Shylock's passion for a fair play and vengeance turns him a persistent character moreover it seems in the play that Shylock seriously wants to slaughter Antonio while trying to take his flesh. He actually does but the real aim is to establish justice that is his warranty. Eventually the Christian-predominant court decides to the detriment of Shylock just because he is not one of those Christians but a Jew.

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