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Shylock the Jew

The 16th century was no doubt a difficult time for the European Jews. There was an increasingly intense level of persecution toward them; they were publicly humiliated, segregated from the rest of the population in ghettos, refused property rights, the list goes on. Christians of the time period, who largely believed Jews to be inferior to them, instituted many of these laws. Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* explores the struggle between the Jews and the Christians in Venice through the character Shylock the Jew and his ultimate demise. Shylock's eventual search for revenge on his enemies is fed by the ongoing persecution of his people as well as his upbringing as a traditional Jew.

The prejudice and laws against the Jews during the 16th century in certain European countries were an impeccable example of extreme racism. In Venice especially there was harsh control placed on the Jewish people. In fact, "The word ghetto [was] first used in Venice, where from 1516 the Jews [were] forced to live in a particular area of the city..." (Gascoigne). Other laws enforced on the Jews in Venice made it difficult for them to live freely. Jews could not in any way physically harm Christians, even in self-defense, and would be severely punished, oftentimes

by death, if anything of this nature were to occur. The persecution of Shylock's people must have planted a deep-rooted seed of bitterness toward the Christians of Venice within him. When he finds himself the holder of a bond against one of them, Shylock realizes that here now is his chance to obtain his revenge on him and make him and his loved ones suffer as they have made his people suffer, all under the justification of the law. This was not just any Christian Shylock was attacking, however; this was Antonio.

Antonio and Shylock's relationship is established early on in the play as full of resentment and hatred toward each other. Shylock especially has a vendetta against Antonio from the start, reminding him in Act I Scene III that he has "call[ed] [Shylock] misbeliever, cutthroat dog, / And spet upon [his] Jewish gabardine" many times and in full view of the public (Shakespeare 85). Now here was his enemy asking to be placed in an enforced contract, which would allow Shylock bondage over him by the law. Shylock sees this as a possible opportunity to take his revenge on Antonio specifically, as a personal enemy. He is finally able to take a chance at ruining Antonio as if they were finally equals.

Racism and racial prejudice generally stems from one race believing another race is inferior to itself; there is a lack of equality in the way the races are perceived. Shylock feels this deeply and is enraged by its senseless unfairness. His monologue in Act III Scene I is particularly moving as he expresses the injustice of the way his

people are treated. Shylock reasons that Jews should be able to behave as maliciously as the Christians do toward his people. He states:

...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—and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction (Shakespeare 95).

No other place in this play does the audience see so much of Shylock's emotional pain, for the inequality of his people and for the grief of his own circumstances.

Shakespeare shows this to us in the form of Shylock's rage, but there is an acute sense that this wrath comes from a deep-set wound from the many years of being beaten down by his enemies one time right after another without ever being able to fight back. Shylock feels the injustice of it and is brought to the tipping point by the thievery of his daughter and her betrayal of him by becoming a Christian. In this way, the Christians seem to have taken all he has, yet now he has the perfect opportunity for his revenge and to feel, just for a moment, that he is equal to them.

It is not only the racial inequality that brings Shylock to the brink, however. Shylock's religion plays a part in his desire for justice as well. Traditional Judaism instructs in the teachings of the Torah, which is essentially the Old Testament of the Christian Bible. It teaches of the Law of Moses before Christ came to save with grace

and mercy. Shylock's revenge is not just a personal crusade but also a sense of duty, not just to his people but also to his God. Furthermore, "Jewish law assumes...that God communicated to the Jewish people specific and general moral rules (Torah precepts)...these Torah precepts are morally binding" (Resnicoff 510). There is no forgiveness of sins in Judaism unless there has been atonement for these sins. The teaching of mercy and grace upon one's enemies is not taught much, if at all. It is quite possible Shylock uses some of the teachings of the Torah to justify his insatiable desire to make Antonio and the Christians pay for their cruelty.

Ironically enough, Shylock's eventual demise leads him to beg for the mercy of the Christians. Although Shylock's life is spared, the rest of his punishment is hardly more merciful than death. It is possible to see Antonio's sentence of Shylock to Christianity as his way of trying to bring Shylock into the light by teaching him Jesus's teachings of forgiveness, mercy, and grace. After all, Shylock is likely acting on the teachings he had been taught since birth about justice and the upholding of the law. Would it not be the duty of a Christian to demonstrate the lessons he has learned from boyhood of his own religion?

In the end, it is much more likely that Antonio's "mercy" to Shylock in forcing him into Christianity is his own revenge upon him. In the time of the play, cultural foundation was absolutely vital to the identity of an individual. By taking this away from Shylock, Antonio acquires his own revenge for Shylock's attempt at killing him. Here is the perfect opportunity for a Christian to show Shylock he can be bigger than

seeking revenge on an enemy and yet the Christian does exactly what Shylock attempted to do to him the minute he has the upper hand. It is no wonder Shylock exclaims that Jews only learn how to deal with their enemies from the Christians themselves. In this way, Shylock's misery and the misery of his people come right back around again by both being shoved down into despondency once more. In the end, Antonio's display of "mercy" is just as sinful as Shylock's desperate attempt at revenge.

Shylock the Jew is a character full of bitterness and resentment toward his enemies, the Christians. The constant persecution of his people leads him to take an opportunity at revenge he may have never had before. Antonio specifically has proven to be an enemy of Shylock's before even the time of the play, making it even more personal for Shylock to seek vengeance. Shylock also craves the desire to be equal with the Christians in some way, even if only for a moment, in order to attain his justice. Even more than this, Shylock has been taught by his faith that justice must be dealt to those who wrong another and sufficiently tries to enact this by striving to have the bond fulfilled. When his plan fails and he is suddenly at the mercy of the Christians, it is not mercy which he receives at all, proving that the circle of suppression will only continue to turn as Jews are beaten down by the Christians once more. When the factors of Shylock's wrath are seen with the full picture, it is easy to ask oneself, "Who is the real villain of *The Merchant of Venice*?"

Works Cited

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