**The Tragic Merchant of Venice**  
    
Many modern readers, have interpreted the play differently. As early as 1709, Nicholas Rowe wrote of The Jew of Venice, “Though we have seen that play received and acted as a comedy… I cannot but think it was designed tragically by the author. There appears in it such a deadly spirit of revenge, such a savage fierceness and fellness… as cannot agree with either style or characters of comedy” (Loomba). More tragic presentations of The Merchant of Venice followed.

In the nineteenth century, Sir Henry Irving portrayed Shylock as a sympathetic figure, persecuted and distraught over the loss of his daughter (Swale). Although this interpretation was met with criticism from such prominent figures as Henry James and George Bernard Shaw, who resented the depiction of Shylock as “a martyred saint,” similar portrayals of Shylock followed, including those of such famous actors as Laurence Olivier and Peter O’Toole (Swale).

In his Madchen und Frauen, German writer Heinrich Heine writes of a woman who wept at seeing the verdict turned against Shylock in the fourth act of the play. “And when I think about those tears,” writes Heine, “I have to count The Merchant of Venice among the tragedies, although the framework of the play is decorated with the liveliest masques, images of satyrs and cupids, and although the poet actually wanted to give us a comedy” (Lerner).

It is debatable, of course, how Shakespeare “wanted” us to interpret The Merchant of Venice. The time in which Shakespeare wrote was extremely hostile to Jewry, and thus the performance of an openly pro-Jewish play in England would not have been possible. However, The Merchant of Venice may easily be interpreted by modern or simply more sympathetic audiences, as Heine suggests, as the tragedy of Shylock, rather than the comedy of Antonio. Assuming that Shakespeare, with his legendary insight into the human condition, had intended to defend rather than refute the humanity of Jews, framing a pro-Jewish tragedy within a pro-Christian comedy would have been an ingenious method of doing so. Even if Shakespeare did not intend this, such a tragic interpretation is still an eminently defensible conclusion to draw from the text.

Although Shylock, as a detested minority, does not begin the play as a more conventional tragic hero might, at the height of society, with a great distance to fall, he does have wealth, financial power, and a deep connection to his faith. He loses all of these by the end of act four, forfeiting control over his wealth, the profession that granted him financial influence, and his identity as a Jew, all due to his tragic flaw of wrath. Although he does not die, he leaves the stage a broken man, presumably having learned not the value of mercy, as his Christian enemies are poor teachers, but the cruel lesson that it is futile to fight against the merciless Christian mainstream.

Truly, the Christians, for all their pretensions of mercy, and even Christianity itself, are neither merciful nor truly Christian. Portia criticizes Shylock with a lofty lecture on the value of mercy, arguing from an obviously Christian viewpoint:

And earthly power doth then show likest God’s  
When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew,  
Though justice be thy plea, consider this:  
That in the course of justice none of us  
Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy,  
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render   
The deeds of mercy.

However, afterwards, when she has successfully turned the law against him, she proceeds not only to deny him the money that he had previously refused in favor of his bond, but also his life and property, hypocritically favoring “justice” over mercy, just as she accused Shylock of doing moments before. Although Shylock retains his life in the end, through Christian mercy, which is both slight and self-vaunting, he loses everything else: his dignity, his identity, and his profession. Indeed, it might be better stated that although Shylock survives to see the end of the play, he does not truly “retain his life.”

Although early interpretations of Shylock portray him as an evil Jewish caricature dressed in “the kind of red wig worn by Judas in the medieval miracle plays,” Shakespeare’s text defines him as a complex and occasionally sympathetic character, even if he is interpreted as a villain (Smith). Twisted by Christian cruelty, Shylock is a product of his environment, and might have been a better man, had society allowed him to be. Shylock mentions more than once that Antonio and the other Christians have spat upon him repeatedly in public and berated him, for no other reason beyond his religion and profession. “Thou call’dst me dog before thou hadst a cause,” Shylock tells Antonio, “But, since I am a dog, beware my fangs.” In Shylock we see, from the very beginning, a wronged man, and if he is evil, it is by example. In his famous speech “Hath not a Jew eyes?” Shylock holds up a mirror to a hypocritical Christian society, explaining:

“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.”

In villainy, Shylock does not lack for teachers. Although the eponymous character, Antonio, may be interpreted by anti-Semitic audiences as a Christlike figure, generous to his friends and unflinchingly self-sacrificing, he is cruel to Shylock “before thou hadst a cause,” and has thus brought his predicament upon himself. His friends are no better. Gratiano in particular mocks Shylock even after Portia has passed the sentence of death and forfeiture of property on him, gloating:

Beg that thou mayst have leave to hang thyself:  
And yet, thy wealth being forfeit to the state,   
Thou hast not yet the value of a cord.

Finally, Portia, although frequently upheld by critics as an exemplary Shakespearean woman, is both cruel and hypocritical. Apart from preaching the virtues of mercy to Shylock and subsequently crushing him, she is hypocritical towards the Moroccan prince, who from the start shows her nothing but the most gracious flattery. When, choosing the golden casket, he is refused, informed that, “All that glisters is not gold,” Portia gives him a rude farewell, saying, “A gentle riddance.—Draw the curtains, go.—Let all of his complexion choose me so.” Clearly, Portia herself pays no heed to the lesson of the golden casket, and instead judges the seemingly kindly and gallant prince entirely by the color of his skin. Indeed, Portia cruelly and selfishly berates all of her suitors, with the one exception of Bassanio, with no apparent justification at all, hardly the actions of a truly Christian spirit.

The critic A.D. Moody might have been most correct in stating that The Merchant of Venice may be interpreted in two entirely different and equally valid ways: first, at face value, as a comedy recommending New Testament mercy over Old Testament justice, and second, as a tragedy drawing attention to the faults of Christians who do not live up to the standards of their own religion (Swale). In Shylock, Shakespeare created a character both twisted with malice and downtrodden with prejudice. Whether that results in a tragedy of injustice or a comedy of justice is, as it should be, a decision left to the interpretation of the audience.

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