When the Merchant of Venice was written in the 1500s, Jews faced discrimination all over Europe. The man who wrote it, Shakespeare, lived in England where anti-semitism was prominent, and there were anti-semitic plays. One of the characters, Shylock, is a Jew living in Venice and is considered the antagonist of the play. In many books and films, the antagonist is portrayed as someone who is completely bad and deserves the justice that is given to them at the end. Through different eras, Shylock has been played very differently, sometimes as a villain and sometimes as a sympathetic character. Even though Shylock is the antagonist of the play, he is complex and one feels pity for him. Shakespeare uses Shylock to convey a message that Jews are human too to his audience. Because Shakespeare shows that Shylock is like everyone else and has struggles, Shakespeare’s play is not anti-semitic like his contemporaries.

By humanizing Shylock, Shakespeare sends the message to his anti-semitic audience that Jews are like everyone else. Shylock loans the protagonist, Antonio, some money and agrees that if he can not pay the bond, Shylock could take a pound of Antonio’s flesh, killing him. Antonio ends up not being able to pay the bond and when asked why he would want a pound of Antonio’s flesh, Shylock replies,

“I am a Jew. Hath not / a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions...If you prick us, do we not bleed?..And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?” 3.1.57-66

Shakespeare sends a powerful message by having Shylock say that he is human like everyone else. At that time, the viewers of the play had never met or even seen a Jew because Jews were removed from England about 200 years before the play was written. When someone has never met a person of another group, it is easy to dehumanize them. Knowing another culture’s experiences and struggles by knowing someone is the only way to understand another group. This play is powerful because the audiences sees the experience and struggles of a foreign group, and contrasting with the anti-semitic plays which supported negative stereotypes. Shylock’s daughter, Jessica, falls in love with a Christian, so she ran away with Shylock’s money and converted to Christianity.

“I never heard a passion so confused / So strange, outrageous, and so variable / As The dog Jew did utter in the streets / “My daughter, O my ducats, O my daughter! Fled with a Christian!” 2.8.12-16

Shylock is immensely sad that the two things in life he loves have been taken from him: his daughter and his money. When he discovers that those two things are gone, Shylock is distraught. Shakespeare is showing his English audience that Jews have emotion. If Shakespeare was to make Shylock a negatively stereotypical character, he would not have given Shylock such deep passion and emotion.

Shakespeare helped his audience understand the struggles of the Jewish people by showing the struggles of Shylock. When it was discovered that it was illegal for Shylock to harm Antonio, the protagonists take all of Shylock’s money. One of Antonio’s friends, Gratiano, exclaims,

Beg that thou mayst have leave to hang thyself!

And yet, thy wealth being forfeit to the state,

Thou hast not left the value of a cord;

Therefore thou must be hanged at the state’s

Charge. 4.1.379-383

Gratiano sees Shylock as worth not even the rope to hang himself. Venetian Christians saw Jews as worthless. Shakespeare shows the audience what it is like to be oppressed through the treatment of Jews from Christians. Through the course of the book, the reader feels pity for Shylock because of his misfortunes. In Venice, Jews were often mistreated. Antonio frequently looks down on Shylock. Shylock reflects on it later, “You call me misbeliever, cutthroat dog, / And spet upon my Jewish gaberdine.” 1.3.121-122 Shylock constantly faces prejudice in Venice. Antonio saw Shylock so low, that he spat on him and called him a dog. Antonio treated him less than human. By showing what Jews had to go through everyday in Venice because of oppression, Shakespeare showed his English audience what it was like to be mistreated. By showing how Jews struggle, Shakespeare can show the counter narrative of a Jewish person. That opens up the eyes of his audience to understanding the other group.

Because Shakespeare’s audience did not personally know any Jews, it made Jews easily villainized. Shakespeare makes Shylock, who represents Jews, human enough for people to connect to him and feel his struggle. In modern day, xenophobia is again widespread. Like in Shakespeare’s day, people do not stop to consider that outsiders are people too. That is why counter narratives, such as those in the Merchant of Venice, are important to share the experiences of an oppressed minority group. Literature, plays, and movies can help us understand each other. When we understand one another, we realize we are all humans.