

Trevor Swan

Dr. Higgins

AIQS 100

29 September, 2023

The Unalterable Affliction of Shakespearean Jewishness

Throughout history, Jewishness and Judaism as a whole have been treated poorly solely due to misconceptions about religion and race. From hatred in the church centuries ago to World War II's infamous holocaust, antisemitism can be found almost anywhere in the past millennium.

Shakespeare's plays included many relevant topics for his time, making commentaries on or supporting common beliefs. One of his more common plays, *The Merchant of Venice*, displays Jewishness in an arguably controversial manner. Despite the repeated instances of Christian characters encouraging Jewish characters to convert to Christianity, *The Merchant of Venice* depicts Jewishness as a given, unalterable characteristic that is shared by all members of the Jewish community.

The main way Shakespeare conveys Jewishness is through the character Shylock. He is depicted as a villain through his comically exaggerated mannerisms and actions in the play. Being the one true Jewish character, Shylock is the embodiment of Judaism, and to point out the flaws in Shylock citing Judaism as the cause is like claiming that all Jewish people act one exact way due to their religion or race. Repeatedly, Shakespeare uses his main Christian characters to depict Shylock as an evil, merciless man due to Judaism. This can be clearly seen when Antonio and Shylock are discussing a possible loan being taken out, where Shylock says, "If you repay me not on such a day, / ... / Be nominated for an equal pound / Of your fair flesh, to be cut off and taken / In what part of your body pleaseth me" (1.3.142-147). Christians already look down

Your intro is really broad. try to identify a problem or question in the play. On future papers,

Solid, arguable thesis. precise. Good start.

The terms here are also quite clear and

Good, but elaborate on how the image works.

Swan 2

The "pound of flesh" is a gruesome caricature of on Jews for charging interest on their loans, and this plot choice by Shakespeare amplifies this interest.

notion tenfold. Shakespeare later makes it glaringly obvious that this brutality is something that

is characteristic of Jews in the court scene where Shylock is determined to take Antonio's flesh.

Also, to further prove Shakespeare's generalization, Shylock is named 'Jew' in original editions

of the work whenever he is speaking. This fact further dehumanizes and demonizes him and

Jewish people, leading to the reader believing Shylock's actions can be translated to the race as a

whole. It is important to remember that Shylock is the main Jewish character in the play, and

appropriate audiences in the time period would interpret Shylock's actions to translate to the

entire Jewish race.

In contrast to the unalterable characteristics the play believes Jewish people exhibit, both

Shylock and Jessica are told to convert to Christianity to save them in some way. While this may

seem to show that the play believes Judaism to vary among people in a community, with

conversion even being an option, it actually exists to emphasize the exact opposite idea. For

example, a reader may look to Jessica as a way to prove the text believes that Jewish people can

change, but a closer look into her character reveals otherwise. Jessica is one of the least

influential central characters in the play, existing mainly to cause pain to Shylock through her

actions, such as stealing and being with Lorenzo. She is the only character to commit such an

egregious act as to steal money and a valuable ring from her own father (3.1.107-111). Although

it may be inferred that this action is motivated by a combination of Lorenzo and her unhappy

relationship with her father, it is truly driven by Shakespeare's depiction of Jewish people. Her

thievery does not align with typical Christian values, revealing that Jessica has more in common

with her father than one might think. Despite having the title of a Christian, abandoning her

Nice
counter
argument.

✓
Solid
argument

Again, can you provide more evidence to support this part of the claim?

Jewish identity, and claiming she is not a daughter to his manners (2.3.19), she does not act like the other Christians in the play, revealing that Jews are not able to escape their roots.

As mentioned previously, an important part of Christianity was that Christians were not allowed to charge interest on loans they gave out, while Jews could charge as much as they saw fit. Shylock, being a money lender, makes the majority of his money from the interest he gets from people borrowing money. When Shylock is charged with the attempted murder of a Christian, Antonio offers a pardon. At a first glance, requiring Shylock to convert to Christianity to save his life seems like a surface-level punishment or even a blessing, but a deeper look into this reveals otherwise. With Shylock having to give up half of his estate to the court, Jessica stealing a percentage of his riches, and the conversion to Christianity, he effectively becomes incomeless and poor. He no longer has a way to make money or live a comfortable life, saying,

"You take my house when you do take the prop / That doth sustain my house. You take my life / When you do take the means whereby I live" (4.1.371-373). Shylock senses there is an ulterior

motive behind Antonio's mercy and feels he would rather be hanged than lose his money. This was Antonio's intent when he decided to pardon Shylock by having him convert, trapping him in a Christian 'hell on earth'. It was not an attempt to say that Jews can convert freely, as Antonio never expressed a belief that Shylock could change his 'Jewish' personality. This decision by Antonio has no effect on Shylock's actions towards others, serving only to punish Shylock if he tries to make a living.

Along with the punishment dealt in the courtroom, the scene illustrates how different Shylock is in comparison to the rest of the characters. Shylock made a deal with Antonio to take a pound of his flesh if Antonio was unable to pay back the right amount of money. With none of Antonio's ventures returning in time, he could not fulfill his end of the bargain. The two men

Awk.
transition
would
it be
better to
change
the order
of the
paragraphs?

Ah...
it is
still
related
to conversion.
Just fix the
wording.
then.

✓
Very
good?

went to court, and Shylock was hellbent on exacting revenge on Antonio for all of the racism he'd experienced. Although the other characters expect a merciful Shylock, he comes in with no intent of backing down or coming to a compromise. Repeatedly throughout the play, characters can be seen telling Shylock that he "grows kind" (1.1.174-75) and that he should be a gentle Jew (4.1.29). These phrases are usually thrown out when Shylock does something that others find favorable, but it is obvious that they have no real meaning once the court scene kicks off. When Shylock enters the courtroom, he says, "I have possessed your grace of what I purpose, / And by our holy Sabbath I have sworn / To have the due and forfeit of my bond / If you deny it, let the danger light / Upon your charter and your city's freedom" (4.1.34-38). Shylock attempts to humanize himself and garner sympathy by pointing out that a failure to respect the bond correlates to a failure to respect the Jewish community. Citing the holy sabbath as a reason to fulfill the bond further advocates for the notion that Jews are cruel and merciless because that is how they are told to act by their religion. Sympathy for Shylock is further counteracted by his response when asked why he desires to take Antonio's flesh, simply saying that it is his humor (4.1.42). Generally, saying murder is one's humor only paints them in a villainous manner. Shylock is the obvious villain in this scene, and with the other characters showing mercy, he is represented as a cruel, dangerous man. Painting Shylock as such a characteristic villain in this scene highlights how Shakespeare views Jewish people, as he never changed throughout his entire arc. His mercilessness in the court is presented as unalterable and, consequently, a staple of Jewish people during the time.

Similarly to how Jews in the play are described as having lingering negative characteristics, Christians are depicted as the all good force in society. Christians run every aspect of life, being at the top of the food chain socially and professionally. For example, it is

socially acceptable for the Christian characters to be racist and discriminatory without being called 'devil'. When accused of being racist toward Shylock, Antonio responds, "I am as like to call thee so again" (1.3.125). These negative descriptors are reserved specifically for Jewish characters in the play, and the Christian characters that act 'inappropriately' are never singled out. Racism has become so normalized in their society because people believe that all Jewish people act the same, leading to the thought that they can all be treated the same. Shylock's constant mistreatment may lead a reader today to feel sympathetic towards him, but he was truly intended to be a stereotypical villain that contrasted with the 'all good' Christian protagonists. The Christian characters are presented as holding the morally correct view, while Shylock is displayed as an evil and revengeful man. This similarity between what the play believes to be unalterable or predetermined supports the idea that, in the eyes of Shakespeare, Jewish people have no way to change their demeanor and that it is something assigned at birth due to race or religion.

Can you
provide
more
evidence
to
support
this
point too?

Shakespeare was famous for his plays that served as a window into the current time period, commenting on, disagreeing with, or supporting common sentiments. *The Merchant of Venice* is no different. Its depiction of Jews is inherently antisemitic and portrays them as aliens to Christians, fundamentally unable to change who they are. Interactions between characters, both casual and professional, reveal the idea that Jewishness is an indisputably bad thing that cannot be shaken off, and that Christianity is the only true and good path to be on in life.