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### Shakespearean Jewishness: The Unalterable Affliction

Throughout history, Judaism and Jewishness have been treated poorly solely due to their religion/race. From hatred in the church centuries ago to World War II's infamous holocaust and jewish genocide that took place, anti-semitism 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* by William Shakespeare, 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.

Characters in the play, on multiple occasions, poke fun at Shylock for his mannerisms, which are assumed to be a byproduct of his Jewishness. Shylock, being the one true Jewish character in the play, is the embodiment of Judaism in the play. With that in mind, to point out the flaws in Shylock, citing Judaism as the cause, translates to claiming 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 in Act 1 Scene 3, where Antonio and Shylock are discussing a possible loan being taken out. 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" (Shakespeare 1.3.142-147). Christians already look down on Jews for charging interest on their loans, and this

plot choice by Shakespeare amplifies this notion tenfold. Shakespeare 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 being named 'Jew' in original editions of the work further demonizes the race as a whole, leading to the reader believing Shylock's actions can be translated to the race as a whole.

In contrast to the unalterable characteristics the play believes Jewish people to 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 be different among people in a community, with conversion even being an option, it is actually a result of the ulterior motives of the Christians in the play. A reader may look to Jessica as a way to prove the text believes that Jewish people can change, but a closer look into Jessica's character reveals otherwise. Jessica is one of the least influential characters in the play, and she mainly exists to cause pain to Shylock through thievery and by being with Lorenzo. Other than Shylock, she is the only character to commit such an egregious act as to steal from her own father. Although it may be inferred that this action is motivated by 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, which makes Jessica have more in common with her father despite having the title of a Christian.

An important part of Christian culture was that they 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. At a first glance, requiring Shylock to convert to christianity seems like a surface level punishment at best, 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, Shylock effectively becomes incomeless and poor. He no longer has a way to make money or live a comfortable life. This was Antonio's intent when he decided to punish Shylock into christianity. 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 seems to have no effect on Shylock besides the fact that he is now subject to christian judgment if he decides to charge interest on future loans.

Along with the punishment dealt in the courtroom, the scene also illustrates how different Shylock is in comparison to the rest of the characters. Shylock made the deal with Antonio to take a pound of his flesh if Antonio is unable to pay back the right amount of money. Antonio was banking on his ships coming back successfully, which would have yielded him a lot of money, but none of his ventures were successful, so he could not fulfill the loan. The two men went to court and Shylock was hellbent on exacting revenge on Antonio for all of the racism he's experienced. The other characters present expect Shylock to back down, but, when he comes in and is sharpening his blade. Repeatedly throughout the play, characters can be seen telling Shylock that he 'grows kind' and that he is 'a gentle jew'. 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. Shylock is nothing but a stereotypical villain, and even when he has the floor, he is still ganged up on. The one difference he shares with the others is his race, which is the most likely reason Shylock is the villain, despite other characters making immoral and selfish decisions themselves. Shylock's mercilessness and demeanor in the court is presented to be unalterable and a staple of Jewish people during the time.

Similar to how Jews in the play are described to have 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. It is socially acceptable for the christian characters to be racist and discriminatory without being called ‘dogs’ or ‘devil’. These negative descriptors are reserved specifically for Jewish characters in the play, and the Christian characters that act inappropriately are never singled out. The same goes for the play’s depiction of Jewish people. Shylock is never called an ‘angel’ or ‘saint’ when he does something that is deemed kind. He is simply met with a pun that is barely, if at all, a compliment. In other words, Christians can act non-Christian with no backlash, but Jews can’t act in a non-Jewish way without being called out. These two similarities 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.

Shakespeare was famous for his plays that served as a window into the current time period, commenting, disagreeing with, or supporting common sentiments. *The Merchant of Venice* is no different. Its depiction of Jews is inherently anti-semitic, and portrays them as aliens to the 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, and that christianity is the only true and good path to be on in life.