



SHYLOCK: A SENSITIVE VILLAIN

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The anti-Semitic sentiment set in motion by Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* and the near-Satanic equation of Barabas had buttressed the plan of a play Shakespeare conceived in the commercial town of Venice with its life-loving gentry. The gentlemen of Venice who paraded themselves in gondolas in the romantic canals and waterways were instantly cut out for popular sympathy and affection, as the very opening seems to suggest. The dolour of Antonio and the volley of indulgent comments and cajoling coming in response prove it beyond doubt. To add to it are the fancies of the wastrel Bassanio getting a fillip from the coterie of friends, with the garrulous Gratiano ever ready to amuse with his verbal pranks. Into this picture of complacent Venetian youthfulness comes the bugbear of an old man in the form of the Jew Shylock. And, to provide a hearty laugh at him, notwithstanding these cheerful bachelors, there is his clown of a servant Launcelot Gobbo with his ever increasing malapropisms. The anagnorsis of Shylock is his tragic proclamation though early in the play, "Suffering is the badge of my tribe" (Act II, Sc.1).

Shylock, like Barabas, is faulted for defending his community. His chief flaw which is hailed a crime is his profit motive. Both Shylock and Barabas are driven by hate for all those who gloated over their misfortunes in civil society and always tried to have a dig at them and rob their treasures. Both swear by their industry and hard virtue and are adoring parents. Shylock is the archenemy of all the Christian men in Venice. They plot against him in devious ways to deprive him of his ducats and his daughter. Just as Abigail in Marlowe's play embraces Christianity and derides her father, Jessica elopes with Lorenzo to shame Shylock, breaking his heart torn by the death of his wife Leah. Not content with outwitting him by the agency of Portia who assists her newly wedded husband Bassanio who traps him in with his own cleverness, he is forced to yield all his wealth to his disrespectful daughter and her Christian husband and is himself made to convert to Christianity on fear of death. And other property too is confiscated as a fine accruing to the state for seeking a Venetian's life. What is played out here on an aggrieved soul hated for no fault of his is patrician terrorism.

Shylock had a stern system of values which he observed rigidly. He was against countering the Jewish canon and was a staunch practitioner of its morals. He never ate pork and was dead against dining with Christians who were libertines and irreligious by his definition. He suffered slander and humiliation many a time, and as he tells Antonio who went a-begging to him for money, he was called a cur and his gabardine was spat on. With great pathos he recounts the insult and injury he suffered and makes no secret of the fact that he was biding his time for revenge. He says quite innocuously indeed that it is human to revenge—"If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?" (Act III, Sc. 1. 59-61). There is complete human appeal in this catechism of Shylock. The champions of virtue and moral conduct jeer at him but they are themselves thirsting for revenge on him, the germ of the motive lying in choosing him as their creditor. They somehow wish to do him in and they know well indeed that the law is on their side and they would escape any penalty. Only when they learn that Shylock, desperate and disoriented by his daughter's desertion, is keen on having his revenge, do they think of saving themselves. The utter recklessness with which one wound after other is inflicted on an old man and the ease with which his transgressors escape blame and masquerade as paragons of virtue is indeed alarming. Shylock had the reason of generations of his fellowmen to act to avenge his faith on those who made light of it and vilified it. He would be less of a human if he did not do so.

In the trial scene where Antonio, who is at the mercy of Shylock, is keen to shape himself as a tragic hero, Shylock is unrepentant. He is cursed by every courtier and citizen as by the jury. Even there he is not spared the usual barrage of abuse. It is as though he were the devil incarnate, irrespective of his agonised lot in life. He is little more than a bloodhound with dripping fangs to this assembly of religious and legal depravity. Again, Venetian law is so partial that a debtor who was signatory to an unnatural and dubious bond is exonerated while the other party who set up the bond is alone held guilty. Shylock has every right to question the law. He cannot readily accept the logic of the clever young lawyer and pleads for himself on human grounds, but he gets no hearing. The tyranny of democracy is experienced. And being forced to undergo conversion when he finally pleads illness and asks to go home, the court allows him the Christian charity of letting him sign at soonest leisure. Christians go against the dictates of God embodied in merciful Christ but a Jew here seems to be more typical of his faith. According to the Bible the original true faith is the Jewish one, and Shylock, the follower of Jehovah, demonstrates exceptional tolerance in the face of onslaught of name and fame. He is a man in utterly reduced circumstances without the comfort of wife, child, home, and hoardings. He becomes the very nomad going in search of the Promised Land. The fall of Shylock is, in a sense, the shattering of rectitude of minority religion. To dwell on Shakespeare's critique of biblical religion a perusal of Naseeb Shaheen's web book *Biblical References in Shakespeare's Plays* (2011) would help.



Shakespeare certainly does not seem to be an all out subscriber to the temporal interpretations of the Holy Writ. Coming back to Barabas, we find him to be an isomorph of the other Marlowean creation, Faustus. Both are reckless and extremely self-willed. Both are off at a tangent at the slightest desire and provocation. But in Shylock can be found a man of tremendous restraint and great patience who suffers long. It was at the height of misfortune which perhaps demented him that he became bloodthirsty. Reflex actions cannot be used to state lasting character, and it is obvious that what the young men made out Shylock to be was their defensive creation, a pretext for ousting him. Shylock, as it reads, seems to have made enemies with the entire Christendom of Venice. But it is not to be pursued on a judgemental level. The Christians were too short-sighted to know that one who professes a different culture and wears a different habit and eats different food is not a potential culprit or criminal. It is this stereotype that is at the root of all assumptions that framed the tragedy and floated the comedy that came when it fizzled out.

The worst calamity of Shylock is in being father to an insensitive daughter who played traitor just because her father opposed her coquettishness. For a man bred in tradition it is not easy to condone marriages that are not endogamous. On the other hand, the kind of suitors Portia got hints at the liberal conjugal policies of the larger Venetian society. The price Shylock has to pay for being true to his faith is too great. A society that is professedly expansive cannot accommodate an aged man pointing towards his grave. This highlights the utter callousness of society wherever numbers rule the ethos. The very speech of Portia demanding dropping his plea for justice is highly ironical.

...Therefore, Jew, Though justice be thy plea, ... consider this: That in the course of justice none of us Should see salvation. (Act IV, 1. 192-195).

The statement of the young lawyer is strangely self-reflexive, for by the very edicts of religion the jury and the party of Antonio have lost their salvation. What was meant to be a trial of Antonio turned out to be a trial of Shylock, and he was lured there to this end. Shakespeare has not missed to paint the humane picture of Shylock but it is an enigma why he gave moral victory to his opponents despite the wicked game played by them. He could have been pandering to the Elizabethan taste that revelled in seeing the Jew as a social monster. But it is uncertain if he believed in the way he ended his plot. Was it a victory for Christianity over paganism? It is very unlikely that Shakespeare, given the depth of vision and gigantic survey of life he demonstrated in *Hamlet*, could have done so. In the consenting words of Harold Bloom in *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (1998), "The transformation of Shylock from a comic villain to a heroic villain...shows Shakespeare working without precedents, and for dramatic motives very difficult to surmise" (Bloom 186). Another concordant note is sounded by John Dover Wilson who says in his Cambridge New Shakespeare Series (1969) annotated edition of the play, "The Jew is allowed no defendant in the court to plead for him as a fellow human being and a defenceless alien. In the light of the parallels from *The Book of Sir Thomas More* I have no doubt at all that Shylock was intended by Shakespeare to be a comment upon the treatment of Jewry throughout the Christian dispensation" (Wilson 393). Dover Wilson pinpoints the absurdity of Gratiano's jibe as he makes up the metaphor of Shylock as a wolf hanged for human slaughter as something totally non-existent at the time, and hence, a hyperbolic insult.

The co-editor with Dover Wilson in the New Shakespeare, Arthur Quiller-Couch, in *Shakespeare Review* (1927) edited by E. K. Chambers pertaining to *The Modern Language Review* published by the Modern Humanities Association, stated the utter irresponsibility and self-centredness of Jessica in terms of high condemnation (Quiller-Couch 220-224). This triggered a defence of Jessica by Camille Slights in the *Shakespeare Quarterly* (Autumn 1980) published by the Folger Shakespeare Library in association with George Washington University. Slights adds that the original critical sympathy for Shylock has somewhat declined over the years but the character of Jessica "has not received a compensatory rehabilitation" (Slights 357). This is testimony to the lingering espousal of the rectitude of Shylock despite an age of unfettered individualism and championing of feminist self-actualization. The character of Shylock looms large in Renaissance literature as a devil who never got his due.

Works Cited

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