Shakespeare’s Attacks on Religious Hypocrisy in *The Merchant of Venice*

Michael Woolley

Bro. William Brugger

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Shakespeare is arguably the best, and most famous, play writer of the English language. Many of his writings have been studied, analyzed, and critiqued. Much of his writing also provides great teachings of moral principles which can be utilized into everyday life to improve the individual. In his work, *Shakespeare's Religious and Moral Thinking: Skepticism or Suspicion?* John D. Cox states that there has always been, “A long and distinguished tradition, beginning perhaps with Wordsworth and still very much alive, insists that Shakespeare was not a religious thinker, but a secular one” (39). It is evident that Shakespeare was very knowledgeable in matters of religion and at least in what is morally right and wrong. The examples range from the forgiveness of King Lear towards his daughter to the humility of King Henry V after the battle of Agincourt; or the lessons learned of the dangers of hateful revenge in Hamlet. *The Merchant of Venice* is one of Shakespeare’s more famous plays. It is also one of the most unique plays in that it can have multiple interpretations as to whether it is a comedy, tragedy, or just a drama. It certainly is rich in moral dealings with its telling of a heated battle between a Jew and a Christian.

One may ask the question, “why is it rich in moral dealings?” The answer to the question is simple. When we look at the play there are many references to the differences between Christianity and Judaism. In fact, it is the central theme and the main conflict of the story. A well-known Christian attribute is that of forgiveness. This is addressed many times in the *Merchant of Venice* when Antonio pleads for mercy from Shylock. Also, in the court, all the nobles try to persuade Shylock to show mercy towards Antonio.
But Shylock, driven by revenge and a non-Christian upbringing of justice demands thus. This absence of forgiveness is striking since “forgiveness has been identified by many modern scholars as a central theme in much of Shakespeare’s literary canon” (Forgiveness 1). Often Shakespeare will use forgiveness as a means of resolving conflicts. However, Merchant of Venice is different because it uses justice to solve the conflict in the play. By knowing this concept of using justice, rather than mercy, in the play, The Merchant of Venice becomes a valuable piece of literature to read and study since it shows us what not to do towards our fellow man.

The uniqueness of the play is the pivotal bond that Shylock claims. The pound of flesh from Antonio, with full intentions of it being his heart, is a strange penalty for the agreement. Shakespeare is able to use this unique setting, not to promote or aggrandize one religion, or race, over another, but to be critical of the hypocrisy in religion of his day. Because of the hypocrisy of the characters in The Merchant of Venice we can see that Shakespeare is attacking the morality and virtue of both Christianity and Judaism, although some may say that Shakespeare is glorifying Christianity.

In dealing with the two main characters, it often becomes a matter of mere opinion when defining who the hero is and who the villain is. It is easier to side with the Christian point of view and have Antonio be the hero of the play. In Deconstructing the Christian Merchant: Antonio and The Merchant of Venice by Gary Rosenshield, he explains that Antonio is certainly the hero since he, as a Christian, exemplifies the Christian ideals of charity and high standards (37). However, when we look closer at Antonio’s character we can see that he only directs his Christian actions towards fellow Christians. This is hypocritical in regards to the teachings of Christianity when it is
taught to, “Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you” (Matt. 5:44).

Shylock is seen as one who has an opportunity for revenge and quickly takes advantage of it. Until Portia, disguised as a judge, appears and is able to thwart him, it seems that there is no hope for Antonio in becoming a victim of Shylock's rage. But what is the reasoning behind this hostile act towards Antonio? Shylock explains his reason for revenge is because of the persecution which he had received from Antonio:

“He hath disgraced me and hindered me of half a million; laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies! And what’s his reason? I am a Jew!” (Act III, scene I)

If we are to believe that Antonio is the hero and the Christian ideal then the message that is being sent is that we are only to be good to our enemies and love all men, only if they are Christian. If an individual be of some other race, creed, or religion, then we are justified by persecuting them. Antonio exemplifies this when he states, “I am as like to call thee so again, to spit on thee again, to spurn thee too” (Act I, scene III). In his mind he is right by doing such actions. “In Christian eyes a Jew is an “infidel”. As such, he or she might be considered in league with the devil, and therefore in fact “a kind of devil”, doomed in this state to damnation” (Klause 69). Thus we see that even if the debt is paid, Antonio will not change his behavior towards Shylock, but continue to publicly ridicule and humiliate him.

Antonio further humiliates Shylock after he is saved by Portia. According to the law Shylock must give one half of all he has to Antonio. However, Antonio adds another
dagger to Shylock's heart when (1) he declares that the funds must go to Shylock's daughter and her Christian husband, and (2) he demands that Shylock become a Christian. The merciful thing that Antonio should have done would to have let the law take its course and simply take what was his. But he chose to humiliate Shylock again by making these propositions which the court eagerly upholds.

Rosenshield also points out a flaw in Antonio’s character because of his ties to his merchandise. Antonio begins the play confident in his business and in his ships, which are to bring in his profits. When he learns that his ships have been destroyed he has the perfect opportunity to show his Christian character. “The only way Antonio can become a true Christian is for his ships not to come in—in fact, never to come” (Rosenshield 50-51). This would allow him to practice the Christian ideal taught in Matthew 6:19-21, of not placing your hearts upon your riches or your treasures. But Antonio’s character flaw is quickly revealed when he rejoices, not so much in his victory over Shylock, but when he receives word from Portia that his ships have not, in fact, been destroyed, but are now safe in harbor. “Sweet lady, you have given me life and living” (Act V, scene I). Didn’t he have his life renewed when it was saved at the trial? It goes to show that he has placed his value upon his profits and gains.

When we examine Shylock’s character it is, again, easy for us to view him as a villain. Certainly his actions are not those to be modeled after. From the beginning of the play it is apparent that up to that point Shylock has allowed the hate which he feels towards Antonio to boil inside of him that. This is apparent when he has a unique opportunity for revenge and he eagerly takes it. This hatred and thirst for revenge makes him appear more villainous. Ironically, Shylock is the only character whose actions are justified through his religion. In the
Christian realm revenge is to be handled by the Lord (Romans 12:19). But Shylock proclaims that as a Christian, Antonio has exacted revenge against him multiple times. He criticizes the Christians for being hypocrites to their doctrine and states, “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 villany you teach me I will execute” (Act III, scene I). But, by seeking this revenge, which in his mind is justifiable, since he grew up being taught an “eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot,” (Exodus 21:24) is right. Because of this action it is clear to see why Christians believe that, “Shylock has been the model for wickedness, precisely because he is a Jew” (Heschel 408). It is no wonder, then, that Merchant of Venice has been a favorite among anti-Semitic people. Susannah Heschel even explains in her paper, From Jesus to Shylock: Christian Supersessionism and "The Merchant of Venice", that The Merchant of Venicesuch a large victory over Judaism that it was a popular production during the reign of the Third Reich (407-408).

In Love and Money in The Merchant of Venice, Richard Harp explains that in regards to whether it is better to marry for money or for love, Shakespeare “finds nothing wrong with marrying for both. There is in him no . . . ghostly idealism that finds something amiss with combining the noblest spiritual ideal—love—with the most fundamental material reality—money (37). Two major characters of the play approach this issue from both spectrums. And in each case, Shakespeare is able to expose the hypocrisy of the two.

Bassanio is the first character to examine. There is no doubt that in a common pattern of plots he is the young lover seeking to find for himself a wife and companion. However, if we look further into his character we can see that he does not really care for
the love of his fair wife Portia, but that he only wants to be rid of his debts which he has incurred from frivolous living, and also to make a profit. He is out to marry for money, and love will simply be a by-product in his endeavor.

It is true that money is an important factor in everyone’s life (it ranks up there with oxygen), and also since it was common to weigh the financial circumstances of a potential spouse in that time, “an Elizabethan audience would expect any young nobleman to give some thought to the fortune of a potential bride, particularly after he has “disabled” his own estate” (Pettigrew, 212). But if one pays close attention to when Bassanio purposes his intention of marrying Portia, it is not for love, although he lavishes her with praises for her beauty and virtue, his primary objective is simply a large financial gain so as to, “get clear of all the debts [he] owe[s]” (Act I, scene I). Todd H. J. Pettigrew argues that since this was a commonality among the young bachelors of the time that it is justifiable. Also, Pettigrew states that Bassanio’s description and fancy of Portia show’s that his love outweighs the financial gain he would achieve by marrying her; “but once Antonio asks for details about the woman who has necessitated the loan, Bassanio cannot help but infuse enthusiastic praise for his would-be mistress into a speech meant for a more utilitarian purpose” (Pettigrew 214). However, Bassanio’s true feelings for his wife are shown in the trial scene when he states, “but life itself, my wife, and all the world are not with me esteem’d above thy life; I would lose all, ay, sacrifice them all here to this devil, to deliver you” (Act IV, scene I). Another critical point is seen in the story which will reveal Bassanio’s true devotion, and expose his hypocrisy which will be discussed later on.
The second character in the marriage scheme is Jessica. It is obvious that her approach to marriage is for love, but in her case, money is now the by-product. Not only does she steal his honor by denouncing him, but she steals his wealth. She recognizes that what she is doing will bring shame to her father, but disregards it, placing her desires over her father’s. Probably one of the strongest ways in which Shakespeare makes a mockery of Judaism is to show the lack of conviction, respect, and honor Jessica shows towards Shylock. She states this by saying, “what heinous sin is in me to be ashamed to be my father’s child” (Act II, scene III). Some may praise her for her actions of abandoning her father’s lifestyle and converting to Christianity. But had it been their own child, what would they have done? Being so dishonored, it is understandable when Shylock proclaims, “I would my daughter were dead” (Act III, scene I). The worst act, however, was when she took her father’s ring and sold it for a monkey (Act III, scene I).

There is great significance behind the usage of the rings in the play. A ring is a symbol of oaths and covenants. It symbolizes the bond between a man and a woman and their marriage, a symbol of love that is to last forever. When Jessica took her father’s ring and sold it for a monkey, it was an action most heinous against her father. Since rings are a symbol for marriage, it could be said that her selling her father’s ring—a symbol of his love and marriage to his wife—was a symbolic killing or disowning her Jewish parents.

Shakespeare would have been perfectly fine to end the play after Act IV, but adds another dagger to hypocrisy of the characters. Act V focuses specifically on the subject of rings. The easiness in which Bassanio gives up his ring after the trial scene clearly expresses the fact that “The Merchant of Venice celebrates not characters’ warm embrace of mutual identity, as in
marriage, but their cold preservation or augmentation of what they legally own” (Tiffany 385). By marrying Portia, Bassanio is now cleared of his debts and heir to a large inheritance. To him a ring is a trivial thing. Only after he is humiliated by Portia and learns that she was the judge does he realize the seriousness of his relationship with her. He knows that she loves him, and that he must return that love or else his life will not be pleasant.

Thus we can see how Shakespeare has exposed the hypocrisy of mainstream Christianity. Some may argue that the characters are only human and make mistakes; this being true, however, requires that they should acknowledge their imperfections. In this play, whether driven by false beliefs, pride, or anger, each character thinks that what he or she does is rightfully justified. The message which is being said when we praise these characters is that we are right in pursuing self-centered desires. This is the basest of human characteristics. And it is clear that Shakespeare saw this in his day and was able to write a clever play to expose and attack the hypocrisy.
Works Cited


