

The Merchant of Venice

William Shakespeare

Character Analysis Shylock

Shylock is the most vivid and memorable character in *The Merchant of Venice*, and he is one of Shakespeare's greatest dramatic creations. On stage, it is Shylock who makes the play, and almost all of the great actors of the English and Continental stage have attempted the role. But the character of Shylock has also been the subject of much critical debate: How are we meant to evaluate the attitude of the Venetians in the play toward him? Or his attitude toward them? Is he a bloodthirsty villain? Or is he a man "more sinned against than sinning"? One of the reasons that such questions arise is that there are really two stage Shylocks in the play: first, there is the stage "villain" who is required for the plot; second, there is the human being who suffers the loss of his daughter, his property, and, very importantly for him, his religion.

Shylock's function in this play is to be the obstacle, the man who stands in the way of the love stories; such a man is a traditional figure in romantic comedies. Something or someone must impede young, romantic love; here, it is Shylock and the many and various ways that he is linked to the three sets of lovers. The fact that he is a Jew is, in a sense, accidental. Shakespeare wanted to contrast liberality against selfishness — in terms of money and in terms of love. There was such a figure available from the literature of the time, one man who could fulfill both functions: this man would be a usurer, or moneylender, with a beautiful daughter that he held onto as tightly as he did his ducats. Usury was forbidden to Christians by the church of the Middle Ages, and as a consequence, money lending was controlled by the Jews; as a rule, it was usually the only occupation which the law allowed to them. As a result, a great deal of medieval literature produced the conventional figure of the Jewish moneylender, usually as a minor character, but also too, as a major character.

It is from this medieval literary tradition that Shakespeare borrows the figure of Shylock, just as Marlowe did for his *Jew of Malta*. Some commentators have said that the character of Shylock is an example of Elizabethan (and Shakespeare's own) anti-Semitism. In contrast, many have seen the creation of Shylock as an attack on this kind of intolerance. But Shakespeare, they forget, was a dramatist. He was not concerned with either anti- nor pro-Semitism, except in the way it shaped individual characters in his plays to produce the necessary drama that he was attempting to create. The play is thus emphatically not anti-Semitic; rather, because of the nature of Shylock's involvement in the love plots, it is about anti-Semitism. Shakespeare never seriously defined or condemned a group through the presentation of an individual; he only did this for the purposes of comedy by creating caricatures in miniature for our amusement. Shylock is drawn in bold strokes; he is meant to be a "villain" in terms of the romantic

comedy, but because of the multi-dimensionality which Shakespeare gives him, we are meant to sympathize with him at times, loathe him at others. Shakespeare's manipulation of our emotions regarding Shylock is a testament to his genius as a creator of character.

When Shylock leaves the courtroom in Act IV, Scene 1, he is stripped of all that he has. He is a defeated man. Yet we cannot feel deep sympathy for him — some, perhaps, but not much. Shakespeare's intention was not to make Shylock a tragic figure; instead, Shylock was meant to function as a man who could be vividly realized as the epitome of selfishness; he must be defeated in this romantic comedy. In a sense, it is Shakespeare's own brilliance which led him to create Shylock as almost too human. Shylock is powerfully drawn, perhaps too powerfully for this comedy, but his superb dignity is admirable, despite the fact that we must finally condemn him. Perhaps the poet W. H. Auden has given us our best clue as to how we must deal with Shylock: "Those to whom evil is done," he says, "do evil in return." This explains in a few words much of the moneylender's complexity and our complex reactions toward him.

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