

ESSAI

Volume 1

Article 35

Spring 2003

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Recommended Citation

Swindle, Dan (2003) "Shylock: A Hidden Hero," *ESSAI*: Vol. 1, Article 35.
Available at: <http://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol1/iss1/35>

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Shylock: A Hidden Hero

by Dan Swindle

(English 228 Shakespeare)

The Assignment: Write the first essay that will demonstrate your understanding of and acculturation to Shakespeare, intrigued by his plays closely examined up to midterm.

Since the first staging of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, the character of Shylock was depicted as the play's antagonist, or villain. However, in the 400 years since the play's conception, increasingly critical scrutiny and modern thought have focused on this character. Upon objective thinking, it is seen that although Shylock is classically the play's villain, he is also its only true victim as well. This contradiction has been heatedly debated for many years, but it is this author's opinion that Shakespeare's clear victimization of Shylock was meant to form a hidden sympathy for the bereaved Jewish population.

Let us examine the origins of Shakespeare's Shylock. As with almost all of Shakespeare's stories, *The Merchant of Venice* is not truly original. According to author John Gross in his book *Shylock*, Shakespeare took the main plot for *The Merchant of Venice* from a fourteenth-century collection *Il Pecorone*, "The Simpleton." What is interesting about Shakespeare's adaptation are the additions he made to the plot.

In *Il Pecorone*, the Jewish moneylender sought to take a pound of flesh from the merchant Ansaldo because "he wished to be able to say that he had put to death the greatest of the Christian merchants" (Gross 17). It would have been easy for Shakespeare to simply leave his Shylock as a stock evil character; an ill-willed Jew who simply tears up his contract and quietly leaves the story. The comedic outcome of Antonio's predicament would not have been any different; people would still have cheered when the Jew was sent offstage and the good Christian was allowed to live in happiness. This implies that Shakespeare had a very good reason for adding so much vital background motivation for Shylock.

Shylock did not necessarily come from one pre-existing play. It is widely acknowledged by Shakespeare scholars that a large part of Shylock certainly comes from *The Jew of Malta*, written by Shakespeare's fellow playwright and colleague, Christopher Marlowe. Marlowe achieved early success before Shakespeare was ever known, and Shakespeare definitely followed Marlowe's career until the latter's death in 1593. John Gross writes:

Most of Marlowe's Christians turn out to be as unscrupulous as his Jews, and hypocrites into the bargain. We are in a harsh, self-serving, double-dealing world, and within such a jungle Barabas at least has the appeal of being more agile and more clear-sighted than his enemies. (20)

Although Marlowe might indeed have shown some insight by adding some human touches to Barabas to make him a more rounded and likeable character, it is certain that no one who went to see *The Jew of Malta* was truly sympathizing with the Jew; or at least, Jewish sympathy was not meant to be a theme of the play. In light of Shakespeare's ardent study of Marlowe's work, it is an intriguing and feasible theory that Shakespeare sought to take the tiny incubus of Marlowe's Barabas and transform him into a truly sympathetic character, bringing with him a thematic undercurrent just below the radar of the common playgoers.

Shylock was not simply a product of Shakespeare's research; he was also formed by Shakespeare's contemporary sociological setting. The stigma branded onto all followers of Judaism cannot be overstated. When Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice*, it had been almost 300 years

since King Edward I had kicked the Jews out of England. For that time past and longer, Jews have been hated by Christians, not to the least degree in England. John Gross helps to illustrate this by pointing out a Marlowe quote concerning Barabas' evil: "As for myself, I walk abroad a-nights and kill sick people groaning under walls; sometimes I go about and poison wells..." (24). Gross explains that the allusion to poisoning wells is not a fabrication. During the bubonic plague that swept across England, Jews were often accused of poisoning the well water and consequently were massacred by the thousands. This stigma continued to carry through the years as a general hatred of Jews by the general English public. In Shakespeare's time, this racial profile was alive and well. One can picture the Globe Theatre, with its ragged crowd of spectators, booing and hissing while Shylock whetted his knife on stage; and erupting into cheers when he was defeated by Portia's wits.

A few words should be said about the true extent of the Jewish condition in Shakespeare's contemporary scene. Gross submits the idea that Shylock, like other Jews, was even seen as a manifestation of the devil. Although this may seem a bit extreme, let us not forget that Shakespeare did include supernatural occurrences in his plays, such as the ghost of Old Hamlet, and the black mysticism of the three witches in *Macbeth*. If a satanic allusion is a bit too farfetched for anyone's taste, they still must acknowledge the biblical references which Shakespeare adds to the play. One example is when Shylock says, "I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him" (1.3.47). This passage is referring to the "ancient grudge" of Jews against the Christians, not just Shylock against Antonio. In fear of driving this point *ad nauseam*, let the thesis be restated that Shakespeare was able to put aside these incredibly overwhelming racial stereotypes and see Shylock as a human being under the boot-heel of cruel Christian oppression.

It is clear through all of the above examples that Shakespeare definitely had an uphill battle trying to make Shylock a character of hidden virtue. What remains is to look at how he actually achieved this feat.

At the most base levels, Shylock is initially established as being a simple man with religious differences who will gladly have day-to-day relations with Christians: "I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you, and so following; but I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you" (1.3.35-37). In this way, the audience's initial insight into Shylock (first impressions truly are as important as they are purported to be) is one of relative reservation. Through this method of introduction, the audience can take Shylock's future rants with a grain of salt.

Throughout Shylock's sporadic appearances *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare uses a dichotomy approach in order to keep the audience grounded; that is to say that whenever Shakespeare gives Shylock an extreme or disturbing comment concerning his blood lust for Antonio, he balances it out with down-to-earth justification which anyone can sympathize with. Directly after Shylock says that he hates Antonio because he is a Christian, he also points out that Antonio hates the Jewish "sacred nation":

He hates our sacred nation, and he rails,
Even there where merchants most do congregate,
On me, my bargains, and my well-won thrift,
Which he calls 'interest.' Cursed be my tribe
If I forgive him! (1.3.48-52)

This speech by Shylock is actually an aside, which the audience understands to be completely truthful because the character is talking to himself. Therefore, if we can then assume that Shylock is being honest, then apparently he offers "bargains" to people, is constantly slandered in public by Antonio, and considers his fight against Antonio to be a fight for the dignity of all Jews. These three reasons alone are reason enough to harbor ill will for Antonio, but Shylock goes on to reveal even more grievances:

Signior Antonio, many a time and oft
In the Rialto you have rated me
About my moneys and my usances.

Still have I borne it with a patient shrug
(For sufferance is the badge of all our tribe).
You call me misbeliever, cutthroat dog,
And spat upon my Jewish gaberdine,
And all for use of that which is mine own. (1.3.116-123)

Here Shylock points out that suffering is commonplace among Jews, which is no new information, although it does help the audience to further sympathize with him. He goes on to point out that Antonio has called him a cutthroat dog and spat on him. What every viewer of this play should ask of him/herself is, “if I were called names because of my religion, berated in public among my colleagues and even spat upon, what would I do?” If there is any truth in the world, the answer would be much more than Shylock has done up to this point. This is simply years of pent-up humiliation being unleashed on a cruel tyrant.

Shylock shows some insight with the line, “O father Abram, what these Christians are, whose own hard dealings teaches them suspect the thoughts of others!” (1.3.172-74). In essence, Shylock is saying that Christians treat others with caution and doubt because of the way they treat each other.

All of these quotes point to the theory that Shakespeare was in fact attempting to make his audience sympathize with Shylock. As a result, more and more productions of *The Merchant of Venice* are featuring Shylock as a hero instead of a villain. If there is any doubt left that this is truly what Shakespeare intended, let the following Shylock speech be noted:

He hath disgraced me and hindered me 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. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. 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 villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction. (3.1.52-72)

For 400 years, Shylock has been portrayed as a conniving, vengeful, bloodthirsty monster; but we see here that he is actually the only true victim of the play. He struggles for the equality that is kept from him due to his ardent religious faith – not just as a single man, but a representation of the entire Jewish community. Although classicists might scoff at the idea of a protagonist Shylock, certainly there is ample reason for modernists to dust out the cobwebs of this hallowed play and make it breathe new life again.

Works Cited

- Gross, John. *Shylock: a Legend and its Legacy*. Simon & Schuster: New York, NY 1992.
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