

Any reader of William Shakespeare's "Merchant of Venice" would agree that the play depicts highly anti-Semitic characters whose attitudes and beliefs reflect those commonly held in Elizabethan England. The only question is whether Shakespeare endorses this mindset or seeks to discredit it through satire and humanism. Nothing that happens in the play would lead a modern observer to believe that Shakespeare rejects the views of his contemporaries. Shakespeare extends racial prejudices through his portrayal of Shylock while manipulating the bigotry of the era to enhance the play's comic value.

There is no getting away from it: Shylock is the villain, bent on disproportionate revenge. Crucially, his villainy is not depicted as a quirk of his own, individual personality, but is rooted overtly in his Jewishness. Thus, he is shown as obsessed by money, a man who dreams of moneybags, whose very opening words are "three thousand ducats." (pg. 11) When his daughter betrays him and elopes with a Christian lover, it is her theft of his money which is said to trouble him as much as the loss of a child. "As the dog Jew did utter in the streets/'My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter!' "(pg. 37) Making Shylock into a greedy practitioner of usury, plays to the stereotype that Jews are stingy and conniving. Even the plot seems to rely on the accusation of Blood Libel that Jews use Christian blood for religious rituals. (Robinson) Shylock engages in sinister plots to acquire Christian flesh for no better purpose than baiting fish. Given contemporary attitudes, these traits are not specific to Shylock but would be ascribed to any one-dimensional stock character. Shylock is in fact the embodiment of all the negative perceptions held by people at the time.

The play's defenders would argue that the Christian characters are cast in an equally negative light. This argument holds little sway because the play relies on the basic assumption that Christianity is a righteous and noble faith while Judaism is corrupt and inflexible. Shylock's demand for revenge is tied to the Old Testament teachings of vengeance and justice: "And by our holy Sabbath have I sworn/To have the due and forfeit of my bond." (pg. 67) In contrast, Portia extols the values of mercy and forgiveness in the face of evil. Shylock's fall from grace is directly linked to his rejection of Portia's sermon on New Testament values. Shylock could have saved himself by embracing the Christian doctrine of forgiveness but instead reverted to his evil Jewish nature. The court's scheme for his rehabilitation consists of a conversion to Christianity and the confiscation of the ducats that allowed him to lend money at interest as if

these measures address all the causes of Shylock's behavior. Shylock plots Antonio's downfall with his friend Tubal, promising to continue their dark talk "at our synagogue". (pg. 47) If the play's Christian characters act against accepted decorum, their actions are excused because no one is perfect, whereas Shylock's actions are portrayed as being in full accordance with Jewish traditions.

"Merchant of Venice" is classified as a comedy because all the events in the play move from disorder and sorrow to conflict resolution and levity. In the end, Shylock fades into the background, replaced by fluffy romance at Belmont. The work, like many Shakespearean comedies, uses slapstick humor, cross-dressing, and buffoonery to draw cheap laughs from the boisterous crowd. Shylock's Jewish background and behavior in the play preclude any sense of empathy and attachment that might weaken racist attitudes or diminish his stature as a scoundrel. Shakespeare uses anti-Semitism to reinforce Shylock's isolation and ridicule. Shylock fits the model of the comic villain whose undoing draws laughter and derision from the audience. If Shakespeare was truly interested in battling the rabid anti-Semitism of the period he would have tried to break the Jewish stereotypes rather than using stereotypes to enhance the play's comedy.

"Merchant of Venice" could not possibly be interpreted to as a work of satire at the point at which it embraces the very cornerstones of anti-Semitism. The play's purpose is comedy and the ending in no way reflects on lessons learned or discredits the actions taken by Shylock's opponents. Shylock's "Hath not a Jew eyes ..." speech comes too late in the play to affect the audience's perceptions of him. Even if the reader tries to look past Shylock's characterization and see his humanity, the oration morphs into a justification for the taking of Antonio's flesh thereby limiting its power and legitimacy. The play ends with a certain element of poetic justice that the Jew was punished while Portia and Bassanio live happily in Belmont.

Works Consulted

Robinson, B.A. "Two Christian myths against Jews: Blood libel & host desecration; 1144 CE to present time." Religious Tolerance. 15 June 2003. Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance. 17 February 2005 <http://www.religioustolerance.org/jud_blib2.htm>.