

SHAKESPEARE'S FORGIVABLE PORTRAYAL OF SHYLOCK*

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The extended equation "Shylock = detestable usurer = Jew" is an incendiary excuse for fostering anti-Semitism in Western civilization. The association of Jews with usury precedes Shakespeare's portrayal of Shylock in his play *The Merchant of Venice*; it had been used to mock and degrade and kill Jews before his time. However, the word "usury" has no negative connotation, as its original meaning is simply the fee for the "use" of borrowed money. The money we pay to live in the house of another person is called "rent." The money we pay to use the money of someone else is called "usury."¹

The negative connotation developed in Christian writings. From the fifth century C.E., popes prohibited usury based on the words of the Gospel according to Luke 6:35: "lend, expecting nothing in return."² Nevertheless, lending for interest was so widespread in the church that from the 12th century onward Christian moneylenders taking usury were threatened with excommunication.

Jews were excluded from owning land and practising most professions in Christian countries but were allowed to lend money for interest, and Shakespeare knew that. The Protestant Reformation legitimized usury for its followers, and Shakespeare's own father was a money-lender among other businesses.³ The Roman Catholic Church lifted its ban but in 1917, with an artificial distinction between "interest," which it said is reasonable return on a loan, and "usury," which is excessive return on a loan.⁴ Despite these changes in Christian practice, the negative association of Jews with money-lending seems well imbedded in the Christian mind not only in Shakespeare's time but also until the present day. His audience probably accepted Shylock's demand for a pound of flesh as merely an aggravated example of the Jew-usurer's nature.

If Shakespeare had known more about Judaism, he would have understood that Shylock, an observant and committed Jew, could not under normal circumstances have acted as the playwright portrayed him. Nevertheless, his

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treatment of Shylock shows the depth of his understanding of human character and emotions. Shakespeare creates an immortal character even though "there are times when one might wish it were otherwise."⁵

Unwittingly, he makes Shylock, in his dealings with Antonio, commit four violations of biblical and talmudic laws concerning the lending of money:

First, on the issue of interest on a loan: *If you lend money to My people, to the poor among you, do not act toward them as a creditor: exact no interest from them* (Ex. 22:24). Implicit here is the permission to require interest from a non-Israelite. The distinction between lending to Israelites and non-Israelites is clearer in Deuteronomy. Moses tells the Israelites: *You shall not [take] interest from loans to your countrymen, whether in money or food or anything else that can be [taken] as interest, but you may [take] interest from loans to foreigners* (Deut. 23:20-21). According to Maimonides, the Jewish lender **must** require interest on loans to non-Jews: He writes in *Mishneh Torah* [The Code of Maimonides]: "It is an affirmative commandment to lend money at interest to a [foreigner]."⁶

Second, Shylock's earlier friendly posture changes by the time the loan is due, and he means to kill Antonio, which, of course, is a violation of the Sixth Commandment: *You shall not murder*. Something has happened in Shylock's life which almost turns him into a murderer. I shall explain that later.

Third, in one of the great speeches of English literature, Portia, pretending to be a lawyer, asks Shylock to reconsider his demand: "The quality of mercy is not strained, It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath; it is twice blessed, it blesseth him that gives and him that takes."⁷ Shylock refuses, thereby violating instructions from the prophet Micah who said: *He has told you, oh man, what is good and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God* (Mic. 4:8).

Fourth, when Shylock shouts: "My deeds upon my head! I crave the law, the penalty and forfeit of my bond," Shakespeare unknowingly makes Shylock violate the Talmud's dictum, "He who is merciful to others, mercy is shown to him by Heaven, while he who is not merciful to others, mercy is not shown to him by Heaven" (Shabbath 151b, Makkoth 24a).

To sum up this important fourth point, an observant Jew like Shylock, who will do business with Christians but not eat with them, knows that the law

must be interpreted and reinterpreted in changed circumstances. Therefore, when Shakespeare makes him say "I crave the law," we know (as Shakespeare could not) that Shylock is distorting Jewish tradition, culture and law. Unfortunately, it is these words that resonate through the centuries in the calumnies of anti-Semites of all stripes. Max Weber, an apologist for capitalism, wrote that "Jewish capitalism was speculative pariah-capitalism, while the Puritan was bourgeois organization of labor."⁸ Karl Marx, the quintessential self-loathing Jew, delights in referring to a panoply of exploiters as "Shylocks."⁹ But an anti-Jewish bias cannot explain the fact that the first Shakespeare play to be performed in China and in Japan, where the history of the Jews vis-à-vis Christendom carries no weight, was *The Merchant of Venice*. The second Shakespeare play to be translated into Yiddish was *The Merchant of Venice*. Habima Theater in Tel Aviv produced it in Hebrew in 1936.¹⁰ It is simply a great work of art, owing to the towering figure of Shylock.

Who remembers that it is Antonio, not Shylock, who is the merchant of Venice of the title? Shylock is unforgettable even though he "is present in only five of the play's twenty scenes . . ."¹¹ Shakespeare's depiction of Shylock's emotions and failings is brilliant, and this character overwhelms everyone else. Shylock is at times mean and vengeful, loving and affectionate. "[H]e is also remarkable for pride, energy, quickness in argument. He has an abrasive sense of humor and a large capacity for being hurt."¹² To understand this man, let us look at the reason for the peculiar "pound of flesh" clause in the original agreement between Shylock and the merchant of Venice and then at the reasons for Shylock's desire to kill Antonio.

Shylock is an alien in Venice, a member of a despised minority, who is nonetheless a necessary fixture in the business community. He and Antonio have known each other for years. In the past, Antonio has lent money at no interest partly to undermine Shylock, and when he sees the Jew in public he regularly abuses him by spitting on him and mocking him. All his life Shylock must accept such insults and worse. He knows that according to the laws of Torah and of Venice he has a right to interest, but at first he refuses the regular and expected interest on the loan to his enemy. Shakespeare implies that his Jewish character is trying to ingratiate himself. He wants to be accepted as a man, like everyone else in the city. He thinks that Antonio and the other Christians may change their negative views about him and the Jewish com-

munity if he declines to take interest.¹³ Antonio understands the gesture very well and responds with what he considers to be the highest compliment: "Hie thee, gentle Jew, the Hebrew will turn Christian; he grows kind."¹⁴

Under Venetian law there has to be some penalty for non-payment written into such agreements, and Shylock thinks of the most absurd penalty of all: namely, a pound of human flesh. He says to the audience: "What should I gain by the exaction of the forfeiture? A pound of man's flesh taken from a man is not so estimable, profitable neither, as flesh of muttons, beefs or goats. I say to buy his favor I extend this friendship."¹⁵

Time passes, and Antonio has apparently lost his ships at sea. He is unable to repay the loan. Others come forward to offer Shylock the money Antonio owes him – even more than the original 3,000 ducats – but he refuses. His deep hate for Antonio boils to the surface, and he wants to kill him. Why is this ordinarily self-controlled man suddenly so enraged?

The answer is clear to me: In the period of time between the signing of the agreement and Antonio's default, Jessica, Shylock's only child, rejects her widowed father and the Jewish people; she is ashamed of him, saying: "But though I am a daughter to his blood, I am not to his manners." She elopes with a Christian man, Lorenzo, and declares her desire to become a Christian. She steals money and jewels from her father, including a ring that Shylock cherishes because his late wife had given it to him before they were married.¹⁶ He hears from a Jewish friend that Jessica traded the ring for a monkey.

Shylock wants revenge for the loss of his daughter and for the years of insult and humiliation. How can he think clearly? How can he remember Jewish law and ethics? How can he show mercy when no mercy or respect has ever been shown to him and his people? He is totally overwhelmed by rage. Shylock admits his desire for revenge for Antonio's abusive behavior toward him: "And what is [Antonio's] reason? I am a Jew." Shylock then takes on the anti-Semites full force:

Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions,
senses, affections, passion? 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.¹⁷

Without Shylock, this play is a light comedy peopled with forgettable shallow characters, including the nonentities surrounding Antonio. In Shylock, Shakespeare created a tragic character as great as Othello, Lear and Hamlet. Here is a man who is forced to lend money because other professions are closed to Jews. Here is a man who is an alien in Venice; despised and mocked by his Christian contemporaries. He is a man dedicated to his community and family, but is betrayed by his daughter. His very human rage leads him to challenge an unforgiving power and to violate Jewish law and tradition. Crushed by his adversaries and condemned by the Duke of Venice to convert to Christianity, Shylock is isolated and feels unwell. He goes home and says no more. Shakespeare gave it to him to have said it all.

NOTES

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1. J. Bentham, *Defence of Usury* (London: Routledge, 1992, reprint of 1787 edition) pp. 13 – 14.
2. See S. L. Buckley, *Teachings on Usury in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2000) p. 107.
3. J. Gross, *Shylock: A Legend and Its Legacy* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1992) p. 59.
4. See Buckley, pp. 132, 152 – 159.
5. The excellent words of J. Gross, p. 209.
6. *The Code of Maimonides – Book Thirteen – The Book of Civil Laws*, translated by Jacob J. Rabinowitz (New Haven: Yale University Press, Yale Judaica Series, Vol. II, 1949) p. 93.
7. All references to the play are from K. Myrick, ed, *William Shakespeare: The Merchant of Venice* (New York: A Signet Classic of New American Library, 1965) Act IV, Scene 1, lines 183-186, p. 78.
8. Cited by Buckley, p. 271
9. Gross, pp. 343 - 344.
10. Gross, pp. 250, 276, 282.
11. Gross, p. 64.
12. Gross, p. 64.
13. Myrick, Act I, Scene 3, p. 20.
14. Myrick, Act I, Scene 3, p.20.
15. Myrick, Act I, Scene 3, p. 20.
16. Myrick, Act III, Scene 1, p. 51.

17. Myrick, Act III, Scene 1, p. 49.