

The Merchant of Venice

by William Shakespeare

“The Merchant of Venice” is a two-sided play, and if you aren’t able to “see” it in its entirety, you will find it unsettling, if not downright offensive.

On the dramatic side, it is anti-semitic. If you aren’t pleased by Shylock’s defeat, perhaps even laughing at it, you have missed the dramatic point of the show. You may feel a bit uneasy as the plot unfolds, but the dramatic thrust of the story demands Shylock’s downfall. In our modern, more self-aware times, we understand that what happens to him is shameful, but Shakespeare was a man of his own insular society, even though his generous nature was at odds with it. He simply took an existing theatrical model and built on it.

Jews have suffered at the hands of Christians for centuries. Every society tends to define itself by those who are accepted and those who are excluded. The ones on the outside may be put there for reasons of race, culture, religion, or simple habit. And they are subject to almost every degree imaginable of suffering and humiliation.

For Christian Europe, the handy scapegoats were the Jews. It is doubtful that Shakespeare ever met a Jew, but he built his play on the common assumptions of the day, which were that Jews were secretive, greedy, and cruel. There are people like that in every group, but all of a society’s ills are commonly lumped on those who are on the excluded.

The other side of the play is quite interesting and even subversive. You may catch a glimpse of it as the play progresses, but its full force registers on careful reading: the play is about Christian hypocrisy.

We get a hint of this in the very beginning. (Shakespeare is always careful to tip his hand in the opening scenes of all his plays.) The first lines come from “the Merchant of Venice,” who is, not Shylock, as many people suppose, but Antonio. He says:

In sooth, I know not why I am so sad.
It wearies me, you say it wearies you,
But how I caught it, found it, or came by it
What stuff ’tis made of, whereof it is born, I am to learn;
And such a want-wit sadness makes of me
That I have much ado to know myself.

Under questioning, Antonio says he is not worried about his business, nor is he in love, he’s just unhappy. In the very next scene, the play’s heroine, Portia, begins by echoing Antonio’s lines:

By my troth, Nerissa, my little body is weary of this great world.

Nerissa answers that, if she is sad, it is because she has too much. It seems that to be as rich as Antonio and Portia is no such defense against sadness. But is it truly sadness? No, it's boredom. These are shallow and insular people who have everything, yet feel empty; who are just bored. They have nothing to distract them and cannot seem to enjoy life. It's worth examining that boredom. If you have an inactive mind or a dull spirit, you are going to be bored. It makes you think of a line by Robert Louis Stevenson in his "Child's Garden of Verses":

The world is so full of a number of things
That I'm sure we should all be as happy as kings.

But these people are not happy. They are self-absorbed and listless. So what do such people do when they are bored? Look for distractions. Modern people who not "as happy as kings" tend to find it in games, TV, movies, constant, empty communication, and gadgets; little of which can fill the mind or delight the spirit for more than a few moments. Lacking these devices, the bored, wealthy people of Venice will find their distraction in manipulating other people: principally Shylock (who also tries some manipulation of his own, but from anger, not boredom; for he is clearly a man of some depth and imagination) and the ardent suitor Bassanio. And who does most of the manipulating? Portia, the heroine who may be the shallowest person in the play.

The plot is rather simple: Bassanio has fallen in love with Portia, but lacks the funds to make a sufficiently impressive bid for her hand. She is not going to marry a poor man. Actually, she doesn't have much of a choice: her father's will dictates that she must marry the man who correctly chooses, among three caskets, the one which contains her portrait. The caskets are made of gold, silver, and lead. Whoever chooses the wrong casket must forswear marriage. Only the wealthy need apply.

Antonio freely lends Bassanio the money he needs to make his bid at Portia's lavish estate, Belmont. Since all his wealth is tied up in three shipping ventures, he must borrow the cash and, for this purpose, seeks out the wealthy Jew, Shylock.

It is worth noting here that Christians made hypocritical use of Jews as bankers. Christian teaching forbade paying interest on loans, yet loans were necessary for the conduct of commerce. So, Jews were allowed to lend money at interest and could garner wealth through the practice. But it was not a safe business. At any moment, they could be stripped of their money by a capricious authority - which is what happens to Shylock.

Shylock lends the money, even though Antonio has always insulted him, even kicked him, in public. Antonio insults him even as he is asking for a loan. Shylock agrees but sets "a merry bond." If Antonio fails to repay the loan on time, Shylock may take a pound of flesh from any part of his body, which is a subtle suggestion that he may emasculate him. Antonio agrees and Bassanio sets off to woo Portia.

There are two other suitors, the Prince of Morocco and the Prince of Aragon. One chooses the gold casket; the other, silver. Neither contains the portrait. Bassanio selects the leaden casket and wins Portia's hand. It is worth noting that Portia does a little cheating here. She has one of her servants sing a refrain which seems designed to tip Bassanio off:

Tell me where is fancy bred
Or in the heart or in the head?
How begot, how nourished?
Reply, reply.

While all this is going on a subplot develops, involving Jessica, Shylock's daughter. She has fallen in love with a young ne'er-do well named Lorenzo who is in love with her and her father's money. Lorenzo has some friends, who might be considered the Venetian equivalent of frat boys, who assist him in helping Jessica to run away with him, taking her father's money with her. As she manages her escape and theft, one of the young men salutes her as "a gentile, and no Jew."

Now, a problem surfaces. All three of the vessels carrying Antonio's wealth have sunk. He is left without funds and Shylock, smarting at the loss of his daughter and his fortune, decides to exact his revenge on Antonio, the man who has so mistreated him. He will accept no money from another source; he wants only his bond. And he means to take his pound of flesh nearest Antonio's heart; in other words, to kill him.

Shylock's decision is wholly unreasonable, but he is beyond reason. He has had enough and wants revenge for all that he has endured. While his action is monstrous, we also remember his deeply affecting speech which gives us some measure of what motivates his anger:

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.

Where did that come from? This is not the sort of thing you encounter in the several plays of the time which dealt with Jews. It is one of the most convincing examples of Shakespeare's humanity, his ability to understand others and speak from the center of their being. No nobleman would have written it, nor any of the university wits of the

day. It sprang from the genius of this country lad who was able to give expression to the full range of his insight, thought, and feeling in the theatre.

There is also something worth noting here as well. When people are oppressed, is it possible for them to develop forbearance and forgiveness for their oppressors. Think of Nelson Mandela. But, as Shakespeare suggests, it is more likely that they will simply learn how to become oppressors themselves if given the opportunity.

Back to the play. Bassanio is stricken to learn of his friend Antonio's predicament. He leaves Portia's estate in Belmont to return to Venice to give what help he can. Portia decides to step in and assist Antonio, but in disguise. She gives Bassanio a ring before he goes, telling him never to part with it, for her love will leave if it does. Nerissa, who weds Bassanio's friend, Graziano, does the same.

When the men have left, Portia and Nerissa disguise themselves as young lawyers. They go to the Venetian court, armed with a letter (possibly faked) from a legal scholar, Bellario of Padua, who is supposed to supervise the proceedings. Portia (as the lawyer Balthasar) is there to replace him,

Portia quickly decrees that Shylock is in the right and may take his bond. She follows this with her celebrated soliloquy, "The quality of mercy is not strained." It may well be the best known lines from the play, but it is all talk.