

The Merchant of Venice as a Tragicomedy

Alaeddin Nahvi

English Instructor, Art University, Tehran

Email: faridnahvi@yahoo.com

Abstract: The Merchant of Venice, by William Shakespeare, does not fit the conventional definitions of a tragedy or a comedy. It is categorized as a comedy, although one of the two distinct plotlines is a tragedy. This play is multifaceted and is really a combination of two plays in one. The Merchant of Venice is a valuable learning experience. The comparison of comedy and tragedy can be observed in one play. The two plots, the one involving Portia and her marriage to Bassanio (comedy) and the plot involving Antonio and Shylock (tragedy) are interwoven into a rich tapestry of ideas, character study, and poetry. So many subjects can be discovered in this play: literature, drama, psychology, sociology, geography, economics, law, art, music, and ethical values. To those who can see Shylock as neither an entire villain nor a hero, but a gifted man whose fanatical hatred makes him his own worst enemy until he is saved from himself, The Merchant of Venice is no tragedy. To those who can view the play from the point of view of the wise, realistic and compassionate heroine, it is one of Shakespeare's most beautiful and most significant comedies. (*Myrick, xxxviii*).

[Alaeddin Nahvi. **The Merchant of Venice as a Tragicomedy.** *Stem Cell* 2016;7(2):120-125]. ISSN: 1945-4570 (print); ISSN: 1945-4732 (online). <http://www.sciencepub.net/stem>. 18. doi:[10.7537/marsscj07021618](https://doi.org/10.7537/marsscj07021618).

Keywords: Prejudice, Anti-Semitism, Vengeance, Otherness

1. Introduction

The Merchant of Venice is a tragi-comedy by William Shakespeare believed to have been written between 1596 and 1598, though classified as a comedy, in the first folio and sharing certain aspects with Shakespeare's other romantic comedies, the play is perhaps most remembered for its dramatic scenes, and is best known for Shylock and the famous "Hath not a Jew eyes" speech.

The title character is the merchant Antonio not the Jewish money lender, Shylock (the play's most prominent and most famous character). With the extreme cruelty of Shylock the view towards the said merchant in cutting a pound of his flesh.

The Merchant of Venice was written by William Shakespeare, between 1596 and 1598. It was first published in 1600. Although, this play is described as a romantic comedy, there is an underlying plot of moral dimension in the focus of much racial prejudice and repression. In fact the Jewish community in the middle ages suffered huge prejudice. Jews were associated mainly with money lending as Christians could not lend money to other Christian with interest. Shakespeare's portrayal of Shylock and Tubal is based on common prejudice and ignorance tempered by his own liberal tolerance.

This racial prejudice is relevant within the play because it justifies the behavior of Shylock. It is the prejudice that sets the plots and is a major theme within Merchant of Venice. Antonio who is supposed to be a hero is portrayed as a self righteous person at times. Portia who might be expected to play a timid and gentle heiress is in fact shown as a strong-minded

woman, and Shylock is represented as a tragic outsider. He is a money lender. He follows the Jewish religion and has a house in Venice. He lives with his daughter and is a widower. It is not easy to see Shylock as a straight forward villain, despite the fact that when we first meet him, this is what he appears to be.

The Duke calls Shylock an "inhuman wretch". The Duke's greeting for Antonio is warm, but he damns Shylock, with great forcefulness. What the Duke does here is enforce the audience's views of Shylock. Notwithstanding his jaundiced view of Shylock, the Duke tries to reason with him and attempts to play upon his feelings of comparison and mercy for a fellow human being. Everybody including Tubal hates Shylock. Tubal winds up Shylock about his daughter leaving him for a Christian and taking the family treasure. Shylock only concerns are for his Ducats, his jewels and now move for revenge. "Thou stick'st a dagger in me, I shall never see my gold again- four score ducats". This tells that he is extremely greedy and has more concerns over his wealth than his daughter. Jessica in turn acquaints us with her happiness at home because of her father.

The fact that Shylock is alone figure in the play is underlined by the fact that his own daughter is ashamed of him. She is ashamed because of the way Shylock acts towards everyone in the play.

As said earlier everyone hates Shylock even his own daughter. She describes the house they live in as "hell", what we must ask is what does this suggest about Shylock, being a father? If he cannot show any emotion as a father, surely he cannot be human.

Shylock is a racist and hates Christians. He shows evidence for it and when he is talking alone to himself, he says'

"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... (Act 1 scene 3).

This shows us his true feeling towards the Christians and hints us to his blood thirsty revenge that he longs to take Antonio. He shows us his view of Christians when he says. "I hate you for you are a Christian". This surely shows us his true feelings deep inside of him. Shylock is very cruel, his desire for Antonio's flesh is almost out of lust, and he shows no mercy for Antonio. It now seems to be that Shylock takes sadistic pleasures in the prospect of taking his pound of flesh from Antonio, for example, when Shylock is in the court room, he begins to sharpen his knife, at the same time grinning his face. Shylock is also full of bitterness and his thoughts of his Revenge are twisted. Shylock has many reasons for being who he is. Essentially the audience's sympathy for Shylock is turned away by his hatred for Antonio who is the hero of the play. His Eloquent description of Antonio's abusive language and behavior redresses the balance though. We learn of the cruelty that Shylock receives in the conversation that he makes throughout the play. This enforces the idea of Shylock not having naturally being the way he is.

Anti-Semitism

In the Middle Ages, Christians were forbidden to lend money for interest (but not to borrow), so the profession of usury was conducted by non-Christians. In *The Merchant of Venice*, the usurer is Shylock the Jew. Shylock is not so much a villain as he is an anti-hero. He is a fascinating character study because Shakespeare most certainly had never met a Jew since Jews had been banished from England for three and a half centuries (1290-1655)

In the last half of the Middle Ages, an increasing number of occupational groups formed guilds. Membership in a guild was limited to Christians, and only members of guilds were allowed to practice a craft. Jews were thus excluded from more and more occupations. The one alternative to trading in secondhand goods permitted was lending money at a rate of interest. For Christians this was explicitly forbidden by the Church as a sin. The unstable political and economic situation made interest rates high. This situation, the result of anti-Jewish measures, became the source of a new and tenacious anti-Semitic stereotype: the Jew as a greedy moneylender. Jews could buy protection from secular lords-for a great deal of money! -but they were never certain of their position. It was common for powerful persons who were in debt to Jews to banish them from

the city or the country. Various anti-Jewish attitudes of economic or religious origin became deeply anchored in the thinking of the Christian world towards the end of the Middle Ages, and the result was a fundamentally anti-Jewish attitude. (Boonstra, 36)

Shylock offers the opportunity to explore the roots of anti-Semitism in Medieval Europe as well as Renaissance England. One of Shakespeare's most famous speeches comes from Shylock in Act 3, scene 1:

Hath not a Jew Eyes? Hath not a Jew 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. (Shakespeare, 87)

When Charles Macklin revived *The Merchant of Venice* in 1741 (it had not been performed since Shakespeare's time), he played Shylock as a monster, reviving old biases. Shylock was not portrayed sympathetically till Henry Irving's 1879 performance. (Felsenstein).

Shylock, the man, appears to be his own worst enemy because he is so consumed with greed and hate. A discussion on destructive emotions could be approached here. Also, an additional lesson about rhetorical questions can enhance the understanding of this speech. In order to gain a larger understanding of the character, the relationship between Shylock and his daughter, Jessica, can be scrutinized. This is yet another interesting facet of this complex play.

The father-daughter relationship is another important component and motivation for Shylock's revenge. It gives some insight into the importance of his religion. He is ridiculed for mourning over the loss of his ducats and his daughter in the same lamentation, indicating to the other characters and the audience that his lost wealth is as important to him as his daughter. This reinforces the villainous clown and the stereotype of the greedy Jew whose only interest is money. To emphasize the human side of Shylock, it is a good idea to spend some time discussing his lamentation over the loss of his late wife's ring that his daughter so callously traded for a monkey. Shylock has a heart after all. His vengeance toward Antonio may be enhanced due to this later disappointment, even though Antonio had treated Shylock with cruelty before the action of the play. It is made known to the

audience in the dialogue between Antonio and Shylock. Antonio is portrayed heroically and the renaissance audience would see nothing wrong in Antonio's action of spitting at Shylock because it was acceptable practice in Medieval Europe to be able to show outward signs of disgust.

"Fair sir, you spet on me Wednesday last, You spurn'd me such a day, another time You called me dog; and for these courtesies I'll lend you thus much moneys?" (1.3)

Another scene which displays, not just cruelty, but an intention to „help“ the misguided Shylock is the courtroom scene in Act 4. Portia, disguised as the Duke (judge) orders Shylock to convert to Christianity. According to the belief of the European people in Medieval times and the Renaissance audience, Portia did Shylock a favor by "saving his soul."

This study's aim is to get metal flow and distributions of equivalent stress on some special sections such as longitudinal and transverse sections under processing tube tension-reducing.

Synopsis Of Merchant Of Venice

In the 14th Century, the city of Venice in Italy is one of the richest in the world. Among the wealthiest of its merchants is Antonio, who has a kind heart and is also a generous person. Bassanio, a young Venetian, of noble rank, but having squandered his estate, wishes to travel to Belmont to woo the beautiful and wealthy heiress Portia and he approaches his friend Antonio, who has previously and repeatedly bailed him out for three thousand ducats needed to subsidize his traveling expenditures as a suitor for three months. Antonio agrees but has no money, his ships and merchandise are still at sea. He promises to cover a bond if Bassanio can find a lender, so Bassanio turns to the Jewish money lender Shylock and names Antonio as the loan's guarantor. Shylock hates Antonio because of his anti-Semitism shown when he insulted and spat on Shylock for being a Jew. Additionally, Antonio undermines Shylock's money lending business by lending money at zero interest. Shylock proposes a condition for the loan. If Antonio is unable to pay it at a specified date, he will take a pound of Antonio's flesh. Bassanio does not want Antonio to accept such a risky condition but Antonio is surprised by what he sees as the money lender's generosity (no "issuance" – interest – is asked for) and he signs the contract. With money at hand, Bassanio leaves for Belmont with his friend Gratiano, who he has asked to accompany him, Gratiano is a likeable young man, but is often flippant, overly talkative and tactless. Bassanio warns his Companion to exercise self – control and the two leave for Belmont

Meanwhile in Belmont, Portia is awash with suitors, her father has left a will stipulating that each

of her suitors must choose correctly from one of three caskets – one each of gold, silver and lead. If he chooses the right casket, he gets Portia, if he loses, he must go away and never trouble her or any other woman again with a proposal of marriage. The first suitor, the luxury and money –obsessed prince of Morocco, reasons to choose gold casket, because lead proclaims "choose me and risk hazard", and he has no wish to risk everything for lead, and the silver's "choose me and get what you deserve "sounds like an invitation to be tortured, but "choose me and get what most men desire is Portia. Inside the casket are few gold coins and a skull with a scroll containing the famous verse:

All that glitters is not gold
Often have you heard that told
Many a man his life had sold
But my outside to behold
Gilded tombs do worms enfold
Had you been as wise as bold
Young in limbs, in Judgments old
Your answer had not been in scroll'd
Farewell your suit is cold.

The second suitor is the conceited Prince of Aragon, he decides not to choose lead because it is so common, and will not choose gold because he will get what many men desire and wants to be distinguished from the barbarous multitude. He decides to choose silver, because the silver casket proclaims greatness as he egotistically imagines himself as great. Inside it is a baffon which remarks "what's here? the portrait of a blinking idiot.../ did I deserve more than a fool's head." The Scroll reads:

Some there be that shadow kiss
Such have but a shadow's bliss
Take what wife you will to bed,
I will ever be your head.

Meaning that he was foolish to have imagined that a pompous man like him could ever be for Portia as a husband and that he is a fool, always will be a fool and the fact that he chooses the silver casket is a proof that he is a fool.

The last suitor is Bassanio who chooses the lead casket. As he is considering his choice of caskets members of Portia's house hold sing a song which says that "fancy" (not true love) is engerd ' red in the eyes with gazing fed. Seemingly in response to this little bit of Philosophy, Bassanio remarks "so may the outward shows be least themselves/the word is still deceived with ornament". And at the end of the same speech, just before choosing the least valuable and least showy metal, Bassano says, "the paleness moves me mores than eloquence. And here choose I, joy be the consequence. " he has made the right choice.

At Venice, Antonio's ships are reported lost at sea; this leaves him viable to satisfy the bond (in

financial language, in solvent). Shylock is even more determined to exact revenge on Christians after his daughter Jessica flees his home to convert to Christianity and elopes with Lorenzo, taking and substantial amount of Shylock's wealth with her, as well as a turquoise ring which was a gift to Shylock from his late wife, Leah. Shylock has Antonio arrested and brought before court.

At Belmont, Portia and Bassanio have just been married as have Gratiano and Portia's handmaid Nerissa. Bassanio receives a letter telling him that Antonio has been unable to return the loan taken from Shylock. Shocked, Bassanio and Gratiano leave for Venice immediately with money from Portia, to save Antonio's life by offering the money to Shylock. Unknown to Bassanio and Gratiano, Portia has sent her servant, Balthazar to seek the counsel of Portia's cousin, Bellario, a lawyer at Padua. The climax of the play comes in the court of the Duke of Venice.

Shylock refuses Bassanio's offer of 6,000 Ducats, twice the amount of the loan. He demands his pound of flesh from Antonio. The Duke, wishing to save Antonio but unwilling to set a dangerous legal precedent nullifying a contract, refers the case to a visitor who introduces himself as Balthazar, a young male "doctors of the law" bearing a letter of recommendation to the Duke from the learned lawyer Bellario. The doctor is actually Portia in disguise. Portia as "Balthazar" asks Shylock to show mercy in a famous speech.

"The quality of mercy is not strain'd

It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon
the place beneath. It is twice blest. It blesseth
him that gives and him that takes"

Shylock refuses. Thus the court must allow Shylock to extract the pound of flesh. Shylock tells Antonio to "prepare". At that very moment, Portia points out a flaw in the contract; the bond only allows Shylock to remove the flesh, not the "blood" of Antonio. Thus, if Shylock were to shed any drop of Antonio's blood, his "lands and goods" would be forfeited under Venetian laws. Defeated, Shylock concedes to accepting Bassanio's offer of money for defaulted bond, but Portia prevents him from taking the money on the ground that he has already refused it – She then cites a law under which Shylock, as a Jew and therefore an "alien", having attempted to take the life of a citizen, has forfeited his property, half to the government and half to Antonio, leaving his life at the mercy of the Duke. The Duke immediately pardons Shylock. Antonio asks for his share "in use" (that is reserving the Principal amount while taking only the income) until Shylock death, while the principal will be given to Lorenzo and Jessica. At Antonio's request, the Duke grants remission of the state's half of forfeiture but return, Shylock is forced to convert to

Christianity and to make a will (or deed of gift) bequeathing his entire estate to Lorenzo and Jessica.

Bassanio does not recognize his disguised wife, but offers to give a present to the supposed lawyer. First she declines, but after he insists, Portia requests his ring and Antonio gloves. Antonio gives his gloves without a second thought, but Bassanio gives the ring only after much persuasion from Antonio, as earlier in the play; he promised his wife never to lose, sell or give it. Nerissa as the Lawyer's clerk, also succeeds in likewise retrieving her ring from Gratiano, who does not see through her disguise.

At Belmont, Portia and Nerissa taunt and pretend to accuse their husbands before revealing they were really the lawyer and his clerk in disguise after all, the other characters make amends, Antonio learns from Portia that three of his ships were not stranded and have returned safely.

Shylock as the other

In both *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Merchant the character*, Shylock is highly conscious of his otherness. The concept of the otherness in Shakespeare's play is mostly manifested in the isolation his Shylock suffers because of being a Jew and a usurer. The Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* is reluctant to integrate with the Christian community he lives in. Wesker deals with the question of the other on a larger scale. He emphasises that Shylock is willing to integrate with the community he lives in but his attempts to do so are rejected by the Venetian law due to the deeply rooted prejudice against his race.

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock is the other who is isolated and humiliated, but he dominates the stage from the moment he is first introduced. John Palmer states that it is Shakespeare's art in portraying Shylock as a real man with flesh and blood that makes the Jew such a dominant figure. Shakespeare aimed to make people laugh by writing "a comedy about a strange Jew involved in a grotesque story about a pound of flesh" (114). However, through his representation of his antagonist "Shakespeare has humanised him to such good purpose that this comic Jew has become, for many brilliant and sensitive critics, a moving, almost tragic, figure" (114). Despite the initial impression of a malicious moneylender, a closer analysis of Shylock's nature reveals that he is a human being who is most of the time humiliated by the gentiles of Venice.

Palmer points out that Shakespeare borrowed the story of *The Merchant of Venice* from various sources in which Shylock appear as a villain; yet as a poetic genius, "taking Shylock's merry bond for a theme and accepting all the restrictions of the Elizabethan theatre, he expressed himself as freely and profoundly as" possible (115). Being an antagonist in a play already familiar to the Elizabethan audience restricts the

actions of Shylock making his “behaviour in the play settled in advance” (Palmer 114). However, Shylock presented in Shakespeare’s play is more like a human being than a villain condemned for his wrongdoing in the earlier versions. Although the play is constructed as a comedy, the way Shakespeare depicts Shylock makes him “cease to be a comic character” (114). Beneath the comic representation of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare reveals the kind of place the Jews occupied in Venice and how they were treated by the society in general. As it is suggested by Graham Midgley, being a Jew and the consciousness of being the other have destructive effects on his personality since all he is and all he regards dear is alien to the society in which he has to live (196). All the time he has to live with the reality that he is an outsider, only tolerated but never accepted (Midgley 196). Moreover, Midgley raises the point that “his being a Jew is not important itself: what is important is what being a Jew has done to his personality” (196). Shylock’s Jewish nature makes him the other in Venice, which means constant disgrace and humiliation that he has to suffer. He is so sensitive to his otherness that he becomes rather repulsive and aggressive towards people who remind him of it.

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock’s otherness is highlighted by the clear division of characters into two major distinctive and conflicting groups; the Jewish and the Christian circles. The former group consist of Shylock and the people who are closely related to him either by blood, like his daughter Jessica, or by status, like his servant Lancelot Gobbo, while the latter includes Antonio’s acquaintances who are Solanio, Salarino, Lorenzo and more importantly Bassanio. Through Shylock’s interaction with Antonio, his otherness as a moneylender and a Jew is revealed. The relationship between Shylock and Jessica, on the other hand, reflects Shylock’s otherness in his domestic life.

The way Shakespeare introduces Shylock in the play indicates the function he fulfills in the society as the source of money. It also reflects the mutual hatred that dominates the relationship between the Jew and the Christian gentry. Because he does not have any financial means to support his friend Bassanio, Antonio has no alternative but to ask Shylock, the usurer, to lend him “three thousand ducats,” which is the amount Bassanio needs to woo Portia (1.3.1). Being a usurer, quite naturally Shylock is very money oriented so he questions Antonio’s reliability to sign the bond as he does not want to waste his money. Until the moment he faces Antonio, the discussion about the bond remains only as a business deal. However, as soon as the Jew meets Antonio, Shylock becomes arrogant because Antonio had mistreated him several times in the past: “many a time and oft / In the

Rialto you rated me / About my monies and my usances” (1.3.98-100). One reason why he hates Antonio is his being a Christian, but the real source of his hatred is the fact that Antonio spoiled Shylock’s business by lending money without charging any interest. Because Antonio, “neither lend[s] nor borrow[s] by taking nor by giving of excess,” Shylock is filled with the desire of taking revenge (1.3.53-54). He lends the money to the merchant on condition that Shylock will have “an equal pound / of your [Antonio’s] fair flesh” if he is not able to repay the money in three months (1.3.142-143). Rather than charging any interest, Shylock demands the merchant to risk his life.

Before Shylock learns about Jessica’s elopement, his hatred for Antonio is based on business and the humiliation he received because of being a Jew and usurer. However, what strengthens his disgust towards Antonio is his only daughter’s flight with Lorenzo. As Alexia Firenze points out Shylock rejoices when he learns about the loss of Antonio’s ships once he overcomes his anger about his daughter’s elopement. The Jew is angry not only because Jessica has stolen very valuable possessions from him like the ring he received from his wife, but also because she has chosen a Christian as a husband. Shylock inevitably directs all his anger to Antonio. In addition to being a business rival who has been offending him, Antonio functions as the symbol of all prejudice against Jews and the degradation they undergo. Shylock expresses his fury by saying “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” (3.1.43-46). Shylock blames Antonio for all the misfortunes and hardships he encounters. That is why he chooses the most merciless way of taking his revenge. No one else, but Antonio can be a better object of revenge. Now that he has all the means in his hand, Shylock is determined to treat the Christian Antonio in the way he has always treated the Jew. Alan Cooper argues that Shylock’s motives are quite normal. These are the motives of an individual who has been wronged and therefore, seeks revenge. Thus, the bond will compensate for his degraded self.

In *The Merchant of Venice* Shylock and Antonio are both outsiders. Midgley regards Shakespeare’s portrayal of the Jew and the merchant as “a twin study in loneliness” (195). He views Shylock as the other and a solitary figure because he is rejected by the society as a Jew and a usurer. According to the critic, Antonio is also the other and lonely because of his attachment to Bassanio. Wesker chooses to elaborate on the “kinship of loneliness” and makes their otherness more pronounced (Midgley 204). Wesker

depicts Shylock and Antonio as close friends but their friendship is undermined with the fact that Shylock is the other in Venice while Antonio is the other in the Ghetto Nuovo.

Conclusion

There are three sets of newlyweds in this play and their happiness conveys the essence of the comedy in that everything works out well for the „good“ characters (Bassanio and Portia; Nerissa and Gratiano; Jessica and Lorenzo). Most of Shakespeare’s genuine lovers are, like Portia and Bassanio, humbled by their love (Myrick, xxx). It would be an interesting discussion to observe the original motive that Bassanio had in courting Portia and Portia’s initial impression of Bassanio.

In William Shakespeare’s and Merchant of Venice, the plays portray the fact that vengeance or revenge is not just something that one just plans. It is discovered in this play that the revenger maps out a plan that he feels would be the best way to inflict injury on the victim. While doing this, he is unaware that the decision he is making would be the cause of his downfall. This is because the only thing his mind will be set on is harming the offender and make him

feel the pain that he the revenger felt at the point when he was hurt.

References

1. Boonstra, Janrense, Hans Jansen, and Joke Kniesmeyer, eds. *ANTISEMITISM: A History Portrayed*. Amsterdam: Anne Frank Foundation, 1998.
2. Cooper, Alan. *Philip Roth and the Jews*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1996.
3. Felsenstein, Frank. *Anti-Semitic Stereotypes: A Paradigm of Otherness in English Popular Culture, 1660-1830*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1995.
4. Midgley, Graham. “The Merchant of Venice: A Reconsideration” in *Shakespeare: The Merchant of Venice* ed. John Wilders, 1969.
5. Myrick, Kenneth, ed. *William Shakespeare: The Merchant of Venice*. New York: New American Library, 1965.
6. Palmer, John. “Shylock” in *Shakespeare: The Merchant of Venice*. Ed. John Wilders. London: Macmillan, 1969.
7. *Shakespeare: The Merchant of Venice* ed. John Wilders, 1969.
8. Wesker, Arnold. *The Merchant*. London: Methuen Student Editions, 1983.

6/9/2016