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2012-12-14

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Wonnacott, Marsha, "The Merchant of Venice as a Non-Racist Text" (2012). *All Student Publications*. 103.
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ENGL 382

11/15/12

The Merchant of Venice as a Non-Racist Text

Although one of his most well-known plays, *The Merchant of Venice* is among Shakespeare's most censored plays. David C. Kupfer explains that "the censorship of William Shakespeare's 'The Merchant of Venice' commenced in this country before the First World War" (*The Merchant of Venice: Schools, Libraries, and Censorship*). More recently, Robert J. Wilson complained in his "Censorship, Anti-Semitism, and The Merchant of Venice" that the teachers of Suffern High School were forbidden to include the play in their curriculums from 1988 to 1995, and a 2012 letter to the editor of the *Providence Journal* is just one example of a popular call for a ban on the play's performance (Raskin). Bans on either the production or study of this play result, of course, from the Anti-Semitic sentiments as well as discrimination against Africans and other groups which are foregrounded in the story and language of the play.

Although it is a subject of debate among scholars, most who read or study *Merchant* consider it a racist text. Mika Nyoni notes in "The Culture of Othering: An Interrogation of Shakespeare's Handling of Race and Ethnicity in *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*" that Shylock's ethnicity is mentioned twenty-three times in the court scene alone (IV.1). Similarly, when Portia is faced with a Moroccan suitor, she detests him seemingly on the sole basis of his

“complexion” (II.7.87). From these and other proofs, Nyoni concludes that “she is blatantly racist and so was her creator, Shakespeare” (The Culture of Othering).

What we do know is that, based on historical evidence, like the fact that Jews in Venice at the time were segregated into ghettos and were outright banned from England (Danson, 95,112), Shakespeare’s *audiences* most likely viewed it as a racist production due to its confirmation of their own sentiments. But this has little relevance to the question of whether it is appropriate in modern settings—where this particular kind of racism is, at the worst, dormant or minor—except in that it provides what a high school English teacher calls a “safe environment” in which to “confront and come to terms with prejudice and hatred” (Burgess).

It is the intent of this paper to demonstrate, by analysis of Shylock’s character and the role he plays in the text, that *The Merchant of Venice* is appropriate for audiences all the way down to children not only as it is an opportunity to discuss modern stereotyping issues, but also because the play in itself need not be read as a racist one in the first place. The text itself actually never provides any definitive conclusion on whether or not Shylock, the Christians, or any other characters are accurately defined by their respective “categories” (Jews, Africans, Christians, etc.); rather it is just an *exploration* or even an exhibition on the topic of whether they are judged that way or not, the accuracy of those judgments, and their results. Teresa Love adds yet another question “How does the ‘Other’s’ response to treatment affect the prejudice?”

By leaving all these questions unanswered, *Merchant* may be read not as a racist text, but as a text about racism. In that way it actually presents itself as a perfect avenue for a positive discussion on the causes and effects of racism, and thus can be appropriate for

audiences of all ages and in all ages, because let's face it—"whether we read the Jew as 'bad' or 'good' we cannot avoid the 'us' and 'them'" (O'rourke), and those are terms that any generation can understand.

Sergio Nunes Melo asserts in his "Deconstructing the Transhistorical in Contemporary Productions of 'The Merchant of Venice,'" that "every era is an invariably generous source of pressing issues that can transhistorically interact with topics of the past." Teresa Love understood this as she adapted the play in 2012 for a children's audience at Brigham Young University: instead of Shylock being a Jew, and the other characters Christians, audience members were asked to assign modern, more applicable stereotypes to each of the characters. She explained that "the details of the unreasoned racial/religious discrimination are not as important as the fact itself." She recognized that Anti-Semitism in our culture was an issue children can hardly relate to, yet was able to use *Merchant* as almost a blank slate for discussions of prejudice.

As Danson summarizes in his "Shylock on Stage," Shylock's character has undergone many different interpretations—from a comical stock character, to a serious villain, to an object of pity (191). To anyone hoping to come to a conclusion about the racism of the text, this would present a problem. Yet, as mentioned above, no matter who Shylock is in a given production, he is unavoidably a Jew—or "other"—and thus subject to discrimination—whether that is comical, frightening, or sad makes little difference in that respect. Although his transformation to some degree chronicles the changes in the world view of Jews, in this way Shylock can be applied to many different kinds of prejudice and his representation need not be interpreted as a comment specifically on Jews. A discussion of his character is thus left unfettered by the

specific racism which Shakespeare's audiences perceived, and opened to applications of various kinds.

So, then, what does it mean that Shylock is a Jew in the play? Throughout the story we seem to see two different sides of him which appeal in very different ways to our modern sensibilities. These two sides make themselves known throughout the play, and yet are never reconciled, leaving readers or viewers unsure of who exactly Shylock really is, and so unsure of how to judge him as a Jew. He is not blatantly condemned for his Jewishness, neither fully pitied for being harshly treated.

First, there is the harsh treatment Shylock receives at the hands of the Christians. In today's age when tolerance and equality are so sacred to us, we squirm to read or see Antonio's and the other Christians' blatant and harsh prejudice against him for his Jewishness: "You call me misbeliever, cutthroat dog/And spet upon my Jewish gabardine" (I.3.121/122). The more we see of Shylock, the clearer it becomes that this mistreatment results directly from his being a Jew. Antonio demonstrates his judgment of Jews in the very end of the first act as he and Shylock have just come to their agreement: "The Hebrew will turn Christian; he grows kind" (I.3.191). In this line Antonio clearly defines Christianity and kindness together as the opposite of Jewishness, as if demonstrating even a little kindness precludes one's Jewishness. Nyoni notes, "the phrase 'he (the devil) comes in the likeness of a Jew' tends to generalize as if all Jews are carbon copies of each other in terms of their behavior" (The Culture of Othering). Undeniably, the Christian characters are blatantly racist.

This blatant prejudice naturally inspires in a modern reader at least a little pity. Nyoni suggests that the reason Shylock prefers seeing Antonio suffer to any kind of financial

compensation is because of his desire for “human dignity.” He goes on to explain: “It seems Shylock stomachs all the insults stoically. If one gets so much in terms of insults and his heart hardens as a result can we really blame him? If he gets an opportunity to revenge and seizes that opportunity, bizarre as it might seem, do we not or should we not at least understand where he is coming from especially when the perpetrator threatens to heap even more insults?” (The Culture of Othering).

Even in the text, Shylock makes a defense for himself; just after he has learned Antonio’s ships have failed in the third act, he exclaims: “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?” (III.1.57-66). Here Shylock claims our anti-prejudice sensibilities, and naturally gains at least a little pity, whereas an audience in the sixteenth century may not have been as sensitive to the wrongs being dealt him. Since this racism is not particularly relevant in a modern classroom or on a modern stage, it invites a relatively non-biased discussion of racism in general.

But, on the other hand, Shylock still seems little concerned with proving to us that he deserves this pity. He himself is clearly less than kind to the Christians in return. When they invite him to eat with them he responds, “...To eat of the habitation which your prophet the Nazarite conjured the devil into!...I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you” (I.3.33-38). He is unashamedly rude to his Christian debtors who have invited him to eat with

them. Then, after Antonio arrives, he expresses his prejudice explicitly: “I hate him for he is a Christian” (1.3.42). Shylock then continues to explain other reasons he hates Antonio, but it is remarkable that he mentions this reason first, and separately. By mentioning this reason first, Shakespeare emphasizes that while there are many reasons Shylock may hate these Christians, prejudice between the two peoples is the main issue at hand, and Antonio and Bassanio are not the only ones guilty of discrimination.

Shylock’s harshness and even cruelty conflict so much with the urge of a modern reader to victimize him that it leaves us a little confused, and we are unsure if there is any conclusion to draw. However, it does draw to attention the effects prejudice may have on the discriminated against, and may be used as a tool for discussion in a classroom setting which will be varied and thought-provoking, as students would be required to come to their conclusions about prejudice in the play on their own. The answers are not cut and dry, and the characters are not black and white. Viewers or readers who believe themselves untouched by racism may find themselves digging a little deeper to explore how they really feel about prejudice.

Finally, of course, there is Shylock’s insistence on taking the flesh (and, consequently, the life) of Antonio. This cruelty (and the aforementioned cruelty) is often read as a confirmation of the racism within the play, as Shylock falls into place as the stereotypical devilish Jew. However, now we must return to Love’s question: “How does the ‘Other’s’ response to treatment affect the prejudice?” Is Shylock acting the part of the cruel Jew because that is what he is, or because he has been mistreated so much that now he has become hardened or seeks revenge?

Shylock subtly addresses this question himself in the third act, scene three, lines seven and eight: “Thou call’dst me dog before thou hadst a cause,/But since I am a dog, beware my

fangs.” His claim here is that he had been called a dog because of his ethnicity, and this is no “cause.” But his second claim, that he *is* in fact a dog, complicates this. Our understanding of this statement changes depending on what we assume Shylock means when he says “dog.”

Firstly, “dog” in this statement could be referring directly to Shylock’s Jewishness; at this point he is all too aware that to Antonio, “Jew” and “dog” are synonymous, and he is simply using that same terminology—although to him, of course, the imitation would be ironic. In this case, Shakespeare would be suggesting that race is, in fact, a justifiable avenue for judgment, as Shylock claims that Antonio ought to “beware [his] fangs” *because* he is what he said he is—a Jew. However, another reading is available to us: Shylock may be implying not that he is a dog (here referring to ‘dog’ as a base person) by nature, but that he has been turned into a dog by being treated like one so much, and so now Antonio will, essentially, ‘get a taste of his own medicine.’

In this case, Shakespeare leaves the lines unexplained. While they certainly invoke the questions we’ve asked about how to judge Shylock, they do not even attempt to explain them. We are left to wonder what they mean both literally and in their broader significance.

Shylock horrifies us with his cruelty in refusing mercy for Antonio, but then surprises us with his silence when he in turn is in position to beg for mercy (“I am content”(IV.1.410)). Susan Burgess points out: “There’s a moment in the courtroom when the disguised Portia asks...‘Which is the merchant, and which the Jew?’ (IV.1.176) The implication here is apparent: in many ways, the two characters are indistinguishable in their mutual hatred.” Bruce Boehrer notices when Shylock calls Antonio a dog that “as Shylock maneuvers himself into the position of his slave-owning Christian antagonists, he inevitably adopts the Christians’ habits of speech”

(Shylock and the Rise, 162). In short, to answer my previous question—what it means that Shylock is a Jew—we must admit we are not really sure. We see such different accounts of him and his Christian counterparts that we're not sure how to compare them, or whether we even should. However, the issue of race, or "otherness" is ever-present.

Shylock's conversion at the end of play leaves us even less certain of how we should judge him. In fact, at this point, we can't even be sure anymore how the other characters will judge him. How do the other characters judge the new "converted" Shylock? What does his conversion entail? Will his character change from his conversion? Naturally we must ask these questions at such a turn of events, and on these questions rest even greater ones: If Shylock becomes a Christian and he is suddenly kinder, what does that mean about the difference between Christians and Jews? If he does not change due to this religious switch, how should we judge him then? It seems the aftermath of this court ruling would reveal the answers to many of the central questions of the play regarding race and stereotype.

Antonio tells Shylock that he must "become a Christian" (IV.1.403). Literally, this means Shylock must be christened. However, we know from previous experience that Antonio applies more meaning than just that to being "Christian." Let us return to his line in the first act—"The Hebrew will turn Christian; he grows kind" (I.3.191). Becoming a Christian, to him, means becoming a respectable, kind-hearted person. Remembering that Antonio, up to now, has meant much more than just "christened" when he says "Christian," we must ask if he still means so now. We cannot be sure if Antonio believes Shylock will ever have the ability to change. He still requires the court to force him to give over his money and sign an inheritance for Lorenzo, even though he knows he will be a Christian in the near future. Clearly he does not

believe conversion will redeem him from his Jewish nature. Surely that is a sign that Shylock's Jewishness will follow him. He will not be able to escape the ruling of the judge whether he converts or not.

However, we are left with a most notable lack of resolution in the case of Shylock. His role, although perhaps the most important force in the play up until the end of the fourth act, ends rather suddenly with the conclusion of the court scene. Shylock is not mentioned again but briefly as Portia and Nerissa go to deliver papers to him.

It is so remarkable that we never hear from Shylock again after he agrees to convert, because this is such a critical moment in the play, with such potential to determine the racism of the play. However, Shakespeare leaves us to wonder, and the questions unanswered. He doesn't proclaim that conversion has changed Shylock and redeemed him, or show that he is the same person whether Jew or Christian. We are left to wonder, and so we have to answer for ourselves what we think might happen. There is no racism in this ending, except that it makes us think about it, perhaps much more than if it *had* been proclaimed that Jews are bad, or that discrimination is bad.

It is natural that so much debate has arisen over how to read *The Merchant of Venice*, since all the issues concerning prejudice and racism are left unresolved. Melo comments that "*Merchant's* 'happy ending' is an unconvincing resolution to the play's conflicts from every angle: Antonio's unexplained inadequacy throughout the play; Shylock's exclusion from the final act, notwithstanding his official inclusion in the community; and the questionably easy artificiality with which Portia resolves the pending problems. These three outcomes suggest incompleteness" (Deconstruction the Transhistorical). He goes on to note that so many systems

(Shylock's usury, Gratiano and Bassanio's vows to their wives, Shylock's oath) are broken, we can conclude that "Judaism versus Christianity [among other things] in *Merchant* are representations of systems that lack integrity." Indeed, "in the end we must ask ourselves: 'What if Antonio's and Shylock's spirits share significant commonalities?'" And really, that is a question that we must apply to every case of "otherness."

There are some who believe the racism in *The Merchant of Venice* is inappropriate for modern audiences. Even those who believe it is appropriate tend to consider it so as an *example* of racism, and thus an example of the opposite of what they want to teach or learn. However, when we really look closely to what is actually in the text, we find that it does little more than raise a whole lot of questions—questions that everyone should learn to answer themselves.

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