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An Unsatisfying Savior: Shylock as Failed Christ in *The Merchant of Venice*

Criticism of William Shakespeare's comedy *The Merchant of Venice* has long contemplated how our understanding and interpretation of the play hinges on perhaps the most unique character out of all of Shakespeare's comedies: Shylock. A Jew among Christians in Venice, he is profoundly othered by the Christian characters, insulted and berated throughout the play with respect to his religious identity and consequent profession as a moneylender. Not only do the Christian characters reduce Shylock to his racial and religious identity—identifying him throughout the play as "Jew" rather than his name—but he is subject to all kinds of abuse at the hands of these Christians: Antonio is said to have spat on him and called him "misbeliever" and "cut-throat dog," and Lancelet calls him "the very devil incarnation" (*The Merchant of Venice* 1.2.104-111, 2.2.23). One could say that from the very outset of the play, Shylock is "despised and rejected of men," just as Jesus was (*1599 Geneva Bible*, Isa. 53.3). Indeed, there are several insights to be gleaned from viewing *The Merchant of Venice* in the allegorical framework of Christ.

Some scholars have endeavored to assign a Christ role in the play: both Sir Israel Gollancz, as well as Barbara Lewalski in her "Biblical Allusion and Allegory in 'The Merchant of Venice,'" have considered Antonio specifically as the Christ figure of the play, which Lewalski contends is by virtue of his exemplification of "Christian love" (327, 334). This

argument, however, conveniently sidesteps the Christian hypocrisy pervasive throughout the play, rendering such an allegory incomplete in its treatment of the religious tensions central to the play's interpretation. In this case as well as others, elevating a character to a Christ role results in one-dimensional or otherwise limited conclusions. Adequate Christ figures are, admittedly, difficult to completely reconcile at the risk of oversimplifying Christian atonement theology, effectively pigeonholing that which cannot, and perhaps should not, be pigeonholed; ultimately, employing biblical allegory in search of a redemptive Christ figure in *The Merchant of Venice* may fall short of addressing the complexities of the play.

What if, then, we search for a different sort of Christ? In her article on Christian supersessionism in the play, Susannah Heschel juxtaposes Jesus and Shylock, concluding that "Shylock is not so much an anti-Christ as an anti-Jesus: Jesus is generous, but Shylock is usurious; Jesus preaches, but Shylock rages; Jesus offers his body, but Shylock demands the flesh of another" (430). Heschel offers a reasonable evaluation of Shylock's role, but I would modify it as follows: Shylock is not the absolute antithesis of Jesus, but is in some ways poised to serve as a merciful Christ figure in the eyes of the other characters—in this, however, he ultimately fails. When provided the opportunity, Shylock does not turn the other cheek, declines to show mercy and, as Heschel has observed, demands the sacrifice of another's flesh rather than offering his own. As we examine Shylock's role and representation throughout the play, he emerges not as the anti-Jesus, but rather as an inverted Christ—even a failed Christ.

Heschel proposes that "in the figures of Jesus and Shylock, two specters are evoked...one symbolizes Christianity's traditional hope of what a Jew might become -meaning Jesus" (422). I would take this one step further and argue that there are certain parallels between Jesus and

Shylock that set up the possibility or expectation—by the Christian characters, at least—for Shylock to step into the Christ role. As mentioned previously, he is othered, despised, among strangers—but hated other is not the only role he fills in the Christians' eyes. In some of the first lines Shylock utters in the play, he says of Antonio, "...my meaning in saying he is a good man is to have you understand me that he is sufficient" (*MV* 1.3.13-15). There is a double meaning in "sufficient" that Heather Hirschfeld observes in *The End of Satisfaction: Drama and Repentance in the Age of Shakespeare*, where she places Antonio and Shylock in the context of satisfaction. The Reformation was a time when the meaning of the concept of "satisfaction" was changing: from the penitential sacrament of Catholic understanding, to a concept of "enough" that was "something that men and women were obliged to make and have in the conduct of their economic and social lives…[but] not something that they could do or feel in matters of atonement" (Hirschfeld 96). She argues that Antonio, in the midst of this change that makes him feel so melancholy at the start of the play, is attracted to the merry bond that Shylock offers because, rather than some indeterminate concept of "enough," Shylock is "the only figure that can assess him in the very language he cannot, as 'sufficient'…[the] supervisor of a compensatory punition otherwise unavailable to him" (108). This supervisory figure to which Antonio is so attracted is reminiscent of Christ as a merciful judge, filling an aspect of that role that would be lacking during this shift of "satisfaction" during the Reformation. In looking to Shylock for this punitive satisfaction, and searching in him for something that he believes to be missing, Antonio sets him up to fill a Christ role.

In addition, the Christian characters—while constantly fixating on Shylock's "Jewishness" and perceiving essential differences between them—at the same time expect

Shylock to act like Christ. In the trial scene, Portia says to Shylock "we all expect a gentle answer, Jew" (*MV* 4.1.34). The pun on the word "gentile" indicates that they are expecting him to show the more "Gentile" quality of mercy, and abandon his cruel project of revenge to exact his pound of flesh. Lewalski also sees this parallel when she notes that Shylock appears to turn the other cheek when he tells Antonio and Bassanio, "I would be friends with you and have your love, / Forget the shames that you have stained me with, / Supply your present wants and take no doit / Of usance for my moneys—and you'll not hear me. / This is kind I offer" (1.3.131-34). This offer of friendship, however, turns out to be a ruse; "kind" has a double meaning—that is, Shylock cannot forgive Antonio's cruel treatment of him and promises to act "in kind," which is confirmed in his aside where he reveals that this gesture is merely intended "to buy [Antonio's] favor" (*MV* 476n8; 2.1.161). Shylock is certainly in a position to turn the other cheek and answer Antonio's cruelty with fairness; Antonio even jokes "The Hebrew will turn Christian—he grows kind" (1.3.171). However, with his merry bond, Shylock fails to live up to this Christlike virtue, and instead of being a "gentle Jew," evokes the second specter Heschel mentions: "what happens when a Jew remains a Jew in the bitter and usurious Shylock" (422). The Christian characters expect him to choose the New Law of "Christian" mercy over the Old Law of justice, and Shylock disappoints them.

The clearest way Shylock subverts the savior role is his adamant declination to show Antonio mercy. Once it is apparent that Antonio's ventures have failed, his ships have all sunk and he cannot repay Shylock, the latter drags the former to jail, railing against him and ultimately deciding that he will take his pound of flesh: "I'll not be made a soft and dull-eyed fool, / To shake the head, relent and sigh, and yield / To Christian intercessors" (3.3.14-16). He refuses to

budge on this decision, saying “I will have my bond” five times during the sixteen lines he speaks in this scene. This desire for revenge and refusal to show mercy indicates what several critics, including Lewalski and Heschel, have pointed out: the tension within the play between the “Old Law,” which Christ in his Sermon on the Mount describes as “an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth”—and the “New Law” of turning the other cheek (Matt. 5.38). Ultimately, Shylock and his Christian adversaries are operating within two different frameworks of justice, but the Christians demand Shylock to abide by their rules and not his own. They vilify him for being a Jew, while at the same time waiting for a “gentle answer,” expecting him to act like a Christian.

Shylock’s passionate speech in Act 3 effectively encapsulates the progression of his buildup and ultimate failure as a Christ type in the play. In order to justify exacting revenge upon Antonio and “having his bond,” Shylock asks:

> 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? (*MV* 3.1.49-54)

Some have pointed to this speech as evidence of Shakespeare the humanist, rather than Shakespeare the antisemite, because of the sympathy it generates for Shylock’s predicament. Moreover, here we see evocations of a kind of love-thy-neighbor discourse; this first part of the speech could serve as an answer to the question the young lawyer asks Jesus in the book of Luke:

"who then is my Neighbor?" (Luke 10.59). However, as Shylock continues his speech, the rhetoric begins to shift:

> 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! (*MV* 3.1.48-59)

This is a turning point in the play: to justify his revenge, Shylock abandons the "neighborly" sentiment, and decisively subscribes to the Old Law—justice in the form of "an eye for an eye." Shylock veers sharply from an almost Christlike sermon to an Old Testament smackdown; at this moment where he decides he will have his bond, the progression of his speech, which has built him up as someone who is like Christ, transforms him into someone who is quite the opposite. By demanding justice and not mercy, he becomes incapable of filling that role.

Shylock's speech is also perhaps the most compelling textual evidence in support of how Shylock reflects the behaviors and morals seen in his Christian counterparts. In *A Theater of Envy*, René Girard writes that Shylock's speech "unequivocally defines the symmetry and the reciprocity that govern the relations between the Christians and Shylock" (244). Indeed, their treatment of Shylock—calling him dog, devil, spitting on him, and persecuting him for both his religion and his occupation—is far from Christlike mercy. Thus, their "Christian example" is one of hypocrisy, with Shylock's own mercilessness serving to reflect this hypocrisy. Shylock concludes his speech by declaring, "the villainy you teach me I will execute" (*MV* 3.1.59-60). In a way, by demanding his pound of flesh, he is simply showing the other characters what he has perceived to be the essence of their behavior as supposed Christians. By echoing their behavior,

Shylock becomes not the Christ figure they claim to want, but instead the bloodthirsty, merciless figure they perceive him to be by nature: “Thou called’st me dog before thou hadst a cause; / But since I am a dog, beware my fangs” (*MV* 3.3.6-7). Shylock operating as a failed Christ and as a reflection of hypocritical Christian values points us towards a reading that is critical of poorly-applied Christianity.

While this treatment of Shylock the man is neither forgiving nor apologetic, it is by no means unsympathetic to Shylock the Jew: his unabashed cruelty points us towards a characterization that is perhaps anti-Shylock, but not necessarily antisemitic. His failure is not a reflection of any kind of vice inherent in his own religion or race, but rather a reflection of the hypocrisy of the other characters’ Christianity. Without making excuses for his cruelty, it still provides a sympathetic view where Shylock’s actions could be better understood. After all, Shylock, as a Jew, would not be subject to the scrutiny of the New Law because he has not yet made that covenant; the Christian characters, who purport to subscribe to the New Law, have. Punishing Shylock for breaking rules that technically would not apply to him could reflect, then, as a moral failing on their part rather than Shylock’s, and he emerges as victim rather than villain.

At the very least, Shylock’s forced conversion at the end of the trial invokes sympathy in the audience. Heschel argues that this conversion exemplifies the anxiety over Judaism’s presence at the core of Christianity, and particularly the anxiety inherent in the reconciliation of Jesus as both Christian and Jew: she says that the play “...reflect[s] a theological problem for Christian self-understanding. Had Jesus, in fact, fully transformed himself from Jew to Christian? Would his own transformation offer a legitimizing basis for the transformation of all

Jews into citizens of European society?" (Heschel 409). This tension serves to reflect not just the failure of the merciless Christian characters as Christians, but anxieties within Christianity itself regarding Jesus the Jew and the implications such a conversion would have for the rest of the Jewish population.

Shylock may fail in his role of Christ figure, but when he is forced to convert to Christianity at the end, it creates a palpable tension in the play that is at odds with the otherwise happy ending. When he is forced to accept this conversion on pain of death, Shylock says, resigned to his fate, "I am content" (4.1.391). No one in the play, however, seems to be content with the events of Act 4. Portia's observation at the close of the play—"And yet I am sure you are not satisfied / Of these events at full"—echoes a similar feeling in the audience after the injustice of the trial scene (5.1.296-297). This unease is heightened when we consider Shylock as a failed Christ: without a successful Christ figure in this play, there is no Atonement performed, and without justice, no satisfaction. Moreover, this reading of Shylock is ambiguous on two levels: the ways Shylock is like Christ and the similarities which set him up to fill that role, and the ways Shylock subverts the Christ type. By being both like and unlike Jesus, he is deconstructing the Christ type itself. This is the reason for our ambivalence towards Shylock and his fate, as well as the unsettling feeling the end of the play creates: on a fundamental level and in more ways than one, it is all deeply unsatisfying.

Debora Shuger has noted that the Reformation was "the cultural matrix for explorations of virtually every topic" (qtd. in Hirschfeld 10). The topic that has divided Shakespeare critics, and which Martin D. Yaffe explores in *Shylock and the Jewish Question*, is the question of whether *The Merchant of Venice*—and by extension, Shakespeare himself—portrays an

antisemitic or sympathetic perception of the Jew. I believe that two other questions emerge from this discourse: the first, is it possible that the play can be both? René Girard seems to think so: he argues that choosing one interpretation over the other is unnecessary, and perhaps even favorable because the irony of the play rests upon the tension between the two interpretations; if they coexist, the play simultaneously "satisf[ies] the most vulgar as well as the most refined audiences," both undermining and supporting an antisemitic interpretation of Shylock's purpose in the play (Girard 247, 249). Likewise, Steven Shankman seems content with this ambiguity when he comments on how the play's representation of Jewishness has stirred antisemitism, but also has the potential to transcend that hatred (106). The second question: does the Jewish question even need an answer? John Lyon suggests that an answer to the Jewish question may not be necessary when he proposes that we "characterize, rather than resolve, the play's puzzles" (qtd. in Yaffe 6). It is clear that many critics think *The Merchant of Venice* can be at once antisemitic and sympathetic towards Shylock.

However, this reading of Shylock as a failed Christ does not agree with the ambiguity these critics claim to be present. Rather, the tension of Shylock's representation in the play as both like and unlike Jesus—an anticipated and unrealized Christ figure—exposes a society where Christians are not acting Christian, demanding our sympathy for the Jew. One could argue that this is too subtle of a message on Shakespeare's part, to which I would argue: when have Shakespeare's plays ever been known to be blunt, straightforward, and uncomplicated?

Yaffe's answer to the Jewish question, as well as the questions asked by the Jewish question, is that it is necessary to take a stance on the issue of the play's treatment of the Jew, observing that "[c]ontroversy over the treatment of Shylock is not confined to questions of

character but permeates the entire fabric of the play" (Yaffe 6). Shylock as a failed Christ figure offers us a reading of the play that, while critical of Shylock's individual moral failings from a Christian perspective, is far more critical of the Christians in the play than it is antisemitic. Shylock is the failed Christ to their failed Christianity, and while he is not the savior they expect or demand, he is perhaps the savior they deserve.

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