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## ***The Merchant of Venice* as an Anti-Semitic Play: Whether William Shakespeare is Anti-Semitic or not**

**Surabhi Jha**  
Guest Lecturer  
Raiganj University.

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### **Abstract:**

*The Merchant of Venice* is one of the most provocative plays of William Shakespeare, the greatest writer in English language. *The Merchant of Venice* is now an artifact that can provide historical evidence about the oppressive nature of 16<sup>th</sup> Century Christian society. It is no longer a play that can be enjoyed as an art form in the way that it was intended. Shylock was the creation of an anti-Semitic society that has been on the decline since the end of World War II. Among the circles of scholars and intellectual authorities, William Shakespeare enjoys highest praise as the western world's ultimate poet and moral compass. What is ironic about this high status is that it yet allows for the taint of an unseemly anti-Semitism alleged to be found in his play, *The Merchant of Venice*. This intrudes as so disturbing and inconsistent a blot on his reputation that it has encouraged attempts to soften its impact if not to entirely explain it away. The most common strategy used for this has been to suggest that it would have been virtually impossible for even the best of men to altogether escape the Elizabethan period's unsavory attitudes toward Jews. Hence, a balanced view would be contented by the fact that the poet's genius occasionally overrode this hateful bias by his strong expressions of sympathy for the Jew in his play. William Shakespeare, being a man of the theatre, would have been heavily influenced not only by history, but also by the theatre that had preceded him. He was also an exceptionally good businessman with a keen sense of what his audience wanted. Portrayals of Jews in drama were a long-standing tradition by the time Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice*. The Jew seems to have been the guy audiences loved to hate in the dramas of the medieval and Renaissance time. Viewing the play, through modern eyes, Shylock can be seen as both an Elizabethan stereotype and a fully drawn human being. Ironically, it is precisely because of the stereotypical elements in Shylock's character that many people argue against *The Merchant of Venice*, viewing it as an anti-Semitic work- an understandable reaction in a post-Holocaust era. Shakespeare, however, did not write a one-dimensional villain, but a complex character who defies explanation and who will probably never be fully understood. The Holocaust permanently changed the perspective from which *The Merchant of Venice* is read. It ended the debate as to whether Shylock is a victim or a villain. Arnold Whisker, the writer of *Shylock*, compares in 'Preface to the Merchant', the Holocaust to a "ball and

chain”. Like a ball and chain, it is entirely restrictive and cannot be removed. The audience is tied to this event and is unable to stop it from influencing their understanding of the performance. If *The Merchant of Venice* were a contemporary play, rather than a Shakespearean play, then it could never be produced. It only survives on stage because it is the product of the greatest playwright in history. To view Shylock in the way that many believed Shakespeare intended, as a beastly Jew, is unacceptable today.

**Keywords: Anti- Semitism, Second World War, Holocaust.**

William Shakespeare doubtlessly saw himself as merely one of the professional men of the theatre who moved almost casually from play acting to play writing. And indeed he was very much a man of his time, a man of the Elizabethan theatre, who learned to exploit brilliantly the stagecraft, the acting, and the public taste of his day. It happens very rarely in the history of literature that a craftsman who has acquired perfect control of his medium and a masterly ease in handling the techniques and conventions of his day is also a universal genius of the highest order, combining with his technical proficiency a unique ability to render experience in poetic language and an uncanny intuitive understanding of human psychology. Shakespeare has been praised for his “Knowledge of the human heart” for his aesthetic cunning in his disposition of the action, for his theatrical skill, and for his ability to create living worlds of people.

Shakespeare wrote several plays that have been assigned the designation ‘problem plays’. These plays have been defined, as rudimentarily as possible, as those “in which point of view is ambiguous”. The term “problem play” is applied to a group of his plays, also called “bitter comedies”- *Hamlet, All’s Well That Ends Well, Troilus and Cressida, Antony and Cleopatra,* and *Measure for Measure*— problematic plays of sober realism, to be sure. But over the past century, a different varietal of Shakespearean drama has emerged as far more problematic. These plays’ problems are caused by their social emphases far more than by whatever vagueness of viewpoint or characterization might be contained within. Their controversies revolve around matters of sexism, racism, colonialism, anti-Semitism—issues Shakespeare, more than likely barely considered. *The Taming of the Shrew, The Tempest, Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice* have become plays requiring nearly super-human delicacy if they are to be staged today.

The word “anti-Semitism”, mentioned above means specific hatred towards the Jews that led to a horrified stigma of mankind- the Holocaust period. Hitler came under the strong influence of Anton Drexler and Julius Streicher considering anti-Semitism. Anton Drexler along with journalist Karl Harrer, founded the German Worker’s Party (DAP) in 1919. At the behest of Adolf Hitler who had joined the party shortly afterwards, Drexler changed the name to the National Socialist German Workers Party (NSDAP) early in 1920, of which Hitler had taken the charge later. Julius Streicher has become one of the most notorious Nazi leaders despite the fact that he played little part in World War II and lost a great deal of power during the war. Julius

Streicher is infamous for his publication “Der Sturmer”, a virulent anti- Semitic magazine ,and for his anti- Semitic speeches.

The Holocaust can be defined as the systematic, bureaucratic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of approximately six million Jews by the Nazi regime and its collaborators. Holocaust is a word of Greek origin, meaning, “sacrifice by fire”. The Holocaust occurred when German Nazis believed that many individuals (e.g., mentally and physically challenged, homosexuals), religions (e.g., Judaism, Catholic), and cultures (e.g., Gypsies, Slavakians) were unworthy of existence. The Holocaust refers to the period from January 30,1933- when Adolf Hitler became chancellor of Germany – to May 8, 1945, when the war in Europe officially ended. During this time, Jews in Europe were subjected to progressively harsher persecution that ultimately led to the murder of 6,000,000 Jews and the destruction of 5,000 Jewish communities. The Jewish people were too shocked by the intensity and universality of the hatred that had allowed such savagery to befall them, and too bereft to speak. Adolf Hitler’s particular ideology had led to the enslavement, degradation and death of millions.

The Holocaust permanently changed the perspective from which *The Merchant of Venice* is read. It ended the debate as to whether Shylock is a victim or villain. Shylock is a victim and to say otherwise would be wrong, both morally and analytically. There is no other way to view this play other than in a contemporary context. Modern society view Jews through the lens of history and as a result are more aware of their suffering. This makes *The Merchant of Venice* in its original conceptualization a very difficult play to relate to.

Arnold Whisker, who wrote the play “Shylock” as an alternative to Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*, shares this view. In his “Preface to the Merchant”, he compares the Holocaust to a “ball and chain”. Like a ball and chain, it is entirely restrictive and cannot be removed. The audience is tied to this event and unable to stop it from influencing their understanding of the performance. If *The Merchant of Venice* is a contemporary play, rather than a Shakespearean play, then it could never be produced. It is only survived on stage because it is the product of the greatest playwright in history. To view Shylock in the way that many believed Shakespeare intended, as a beastly Jew, is unacceptable today.

*The Merchant of Venice* is now an artifact that can provide historical evidence about the oppressive nature of 16<sup>th</sup> century Christian society. It is no longer a play that can be enjoyed as an art form in the way that it was intended. Shylock was the creation of an anti- Semitic society that has been on the decline since the end of World War II. The creation of Shylock is offensive to an entire race of people. This offensiveness was only brought into sight after the Holocaust and Whisker’s “Shylock” is an attempt to re-package a Shakespearean story in a form that could survive the culturally appropriate atmosphere of society today.

“I am a Jew.

Has not a Jew eyes? Has 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 summer and winter,

As a Christian is?"

- SHYLOCK (ACT III, SCENE I)

The Holocaust has rendered 'traditional' *Merchant of Venice* productions so problematic as to make them virtually extinct everywhere but in the United Kingdom. Portia's idyllic Belmont is ignored, rejected as romantic obfuscation, all emphasis now focused upon the troubled world of Shylock and the ghetto. *The Merchant of Venice's* contemporary performance history is awash in guilt, controversy, re-examination and re-interpretation—becoming receptacle for innumerable ethnic, religious and political corrections, and adaptations. Since the Holocaust, *The Merchant of Venice* has perhaps become as much 'history play' as 'problem play'—a historical play about the relationship between Jew and Gentile. In her article "Shylock's Return—The Transformation of Guilt into Compensation or: The Symbolic Exchange of Reparation", Sigrid Weigel acknowledges the play's paradigmatic role in the historic bond of Jew to Gentile. But Weigel goes further, arguing persuasively that Shylock and Antonio's 'impossible exchange of flesh and money' has become a contemporary abstraction of Holocaust guilt through 'the tangible concept of debt, reparation and conciliation.' Weigel writes: "Shylock's name marks the bloodstained boundary of equating flesh with money, as his return signifies, within the later history of the Holocaust, the places in which the delinquency of the sought transformation of guilt into compensation becomes visible". The connection of Shylock to the Holocaust, and the 'pound of flesh' to concentration camp atrocities, has led to adaptations and offshoots of *The Merchant of Venice* that have re-set the play within the environment of kristallnacht Germany and inside the Auschwitz and Theresienstadt concentration camps. But Jewish concern over ways to deal with *The Merchant of Venice* and Shylock was nothing compared with the disordered state of the play's performance history in Nazi Germany. The play was performed at least eighty-six times in 1933, the year in which Hitler was appointed German Chancellor. After kristellnacht in 1938, a radio version was broadcast. At that time, a provincial critic proudly hailed, 'Shakespeare's ... feel for racial purity'. It was also in 1938 that adjustments to Shakespeare's plot and text began to be enforced. Nazi writer Hermann Kroepelin determined that the suggestion of Lorenzo's Aryan blood mixing with Jessica's Jewish blood would be in obvious violation of Third Reich law. Kroepelin's solution was to have Jessica abandon Lorenzo before Act IV (and, presumably, prior to consummation of their marriage), allowing her to return to the ghetto to assist her father. Another production turned Jessica into Shylock's 'adopted' daughter, thus putting her credentials as racially full-blooded 'Jewess' into question. The indelible mark of the Holocaust led to a virtual taboo in regards to performing Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. Shylock's negative traits, his role as comic villain, so

intrinsic to its prior performance history, in the wake of the near annihilation of European Jewry, rendered the play ‘unplayable, transforming any ‘traditional’ interpretation into a horrific display of religious insensitivity. This was an extreme form of reductive Shakespeare. Some of the audience questioned, whether it was Shakespeare at all, despite the fact that about ninety per cent of Shakespeare’s text was spoken. But as political theatre, and as Holocaust memory play, it was chillingly effective. Thus, Shakespeare’s Shylock evolves within the eddy of these transformations. We may debate whether this is indeed Shakespeare’s character that is enduring through these interpretative manipulations; whether Shakespeare’s character can survive these provocations, or even whether Shakespeare’s character, with all his portentous ‘baggage’, warrants preservation at all. Perhaps George Tabori has best summarized the relevance of these explorations—these attempts at equating the character of Shylock and his encounters with the anti-Semitism of the Venice of long ago with the indescribable devastation of the Holocaust. It was Tabori’s belief ‘that Shakespeare’s Shylock stands denuded of everything that makes life worth living or, which is the same thing, that makes death worth dying.’ And it is this image of Shylock; as post-apocalyptic subversion of Shakespeare’s naked ‘unaccommodated man’... and ‘poor forked animal’ that has allowed for his transformation into the beleaguered Everyman he has become on the post- Holocaust stage.

Published in 1596, *The Merchant of Venice* tells the story of Shylock, a Jew, who lends money to Antonio on the condition that he get to cut off a pound of Antonio’s flesh if he defaults on the loan. Antonio borrows the money for his friend Bassanio, who needs it to court the wealthy Portia. When Antonio defaults Portia, disguised as a man, defends him in court, and ultimately bests Shylock with hair-splitting logic: His oath entitles him to a pound of the Antonio’s flesh, she notes, but not his blood, making any attempt at collecting the fee without killing Antonio, a Christian, impossible. When Shylock realizes, it’s too late. He is charged with conspiring against a Venetian citizen, and therefore his fortune is seized. The only way he can keep half his estate is by converting to Christianity Shylock plays the stereotypical greedy Jew, who is spat upon by his Christian enemies, and constantly insulted by them. His daughter runs away with a Christian and abandons her Jewish heritage. After being outsmarted by the gentiles, Shylock is forced to convert to Christianity— at which point, he simply disappears from the play, never to be heard of again.

The fact that *The Merchant of Venice* was a favorite of Nazi Germany certainly lends credence to the charge of anti-Semitism. Between 1933 and 1939, there were more than 50 productions performed there. While certain elements of the play had to be changed to suit the Nazi agenda, “Hitler’s willing directors rarely failed to exploit the anti-Semitic possibilities of the play,” writes Kevin Madigan, professor of Christian history at Harvard Divinity School. And theatergoers responded the way the Nazis intended. In one Berlin production, says Madigan, “the director planted extras in the audiences to shout and whistle when Shylock appeared, thus cuing the audience to do the same.” To celebrate that Vienna had become *Judenrein*, “cleansed of Jews,” in

1943, a virulently anti-Semitic leader of the Nazi Youth, Baldur von Schirach, commissioned a performance.”Of course, Shylock hasn’t always been played like a monster. There’s little argument that he was initially written as a comic figure, with Shakespeare’s original title being *The Comical History of The Merchant of Venice*. But interpretations began to shift in the 18th century. Nicholas Rowe, one of the first Shakespearean editors, wrote in 1709 that even though the play had up until that point been acted and received comedically, he was convinced it was “designed tragically by the author.” By the middle of that century, Shylock was being portrayed sympathetically, most notably by English stage actor Edmund Kean, who, as one critic put it, “was willing to see in Shylock what no one but Shakespeare had seen — the tragedy of a man.” But just what exactly did Shakespeare see in the character? Was Shakespeare being anti-Semitic, or was he merely exploring anti-Semitism? Susannah Heschel, professor of Jewish studies at Dartmouth College, says that critics have long debated what motivated Shakespeare to write this play. Perhaps Christopher Marlowe’s 1590 *Jew of Malta*, a popular play featuring a Jew seeking revenge against a Christian, had something to do with it. Or perhaps Shakespeare was inspired by the Lopez Affair in 1594, in which the Queen’s physician, who was of Jewish descent, was hanged for alleged treason. And of course, one has to bear in mind that because of the Jews’ expulsion from England in 1290, most of what Shakespeare knew about them was either hearsay or legend. Rodrigo López, a Portuguese former physician in chief to Elizabeth I, was accused of plotting with Spanish emissaries to poison the Queen. Some consider Lopez and his trial to be an influence on William Shakespeare's 'Merchant of Venice'. (Lebrecht/Lebrecht Music & Arts/Corbis)Regardless of his intentions, Heschel is sure of one thing: “If Shakespeare wanted to write something sympathetic to Jews, he would have done it more explicitly.”According to Michele Osherow, professor at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County and Resident Dramaturg at the Folger Theatre in Washington, D.C., many critics think sympathetic readings of Shylock are a post-Holocaust invention. For them, contemporary audiences only read Shylock sympathetically because reading him any other way, in light of the horrors of the Holocaust, would reflect poorly on the reader.“[Harold] Bloom thinks that no one in Shakespeare's day would have felt sympathy for Shylock,” she says. “But I disagree.”Defenders of *Merchant*, like Osherow, usually offer two compelling arguments: Shakespeare’s sympathetic treatment of Shylock, and his mockery of the Christian characters.

While Osherow admits that we don’t have access to Shakespeare’s intentions, she’s convinced that it’s no accident that the Jewish character is given the most humanizing speech in the play. Indeed, a Jewish villain turns out to deserve our sympathy. His Christian opponents turn out to deserve our skepticism. And the play which tells their story turns out to be more complicated than we originally assumed.

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