

CONTEXT

Jews in Britain

Most Jews were expelled by Edward I in 1290. A few Jews had come to England working as merchants in Tudor times, but they were often Portuguese ‘Conversos’ who had converted (often because of the Inquisition). Lopez, Queen Elizabeth’s surgeon was a ‘Converso’ and was hanged for treason in 1594. The crowd mocked and jeered him when he claimed to love Elizabeth as much as he loved Jesus.

In 1590, Christopher Marlowe’s ‘The Jew of Malta,’ which was a resounding success and played on this vehement hatred and prejudice against Jews – Barabas,- the eponymous Jew, poisons drinking water and is an outright villain. Shakespeare’s portrayal of Shylock is, in contrast, far more sympathetic.

Jews - and 16th century Venice

The original audience of MOV would not know the geography of Italy, but they would have known that Venice was a wealthy trading city of businessmen and money, an important trading post at the crossroads of Europe.

Jews were not allowed to own land, but in 1516, they were allowed to create a settlement (and pay rent) in Ghetto Nuova – a small dirty island that became the world’s first ghetto. They were permitted to leave during the day, but locked in at night. Out of the ghetto, they had to wear distinguishing clothing. In addition to state-imposed restrictions, they faced hostility from Christian citizens, because of their ‘otherness.’ Shakespeare does not seem aware of this in MOV.

Usury/moneylending

By Shakespeare’s time, the word ‘Jew’ had come to be applied to hard-hearted, unscrupulous moneylenders, even if the people referred to were not Jewish. In Venice, the Jews were only allowed to work in pawn shops, act as moneylenders, work the Hebrew printing press, trade in textiles or practice medicine. Venetian banking laws kept their interest rates low and made life difficult for many. One of the reasons Jews were disliked was they practised usury, often because this was one of the few professions open to them. There was a long Christian tradition against this.

Representation of Shylock since Shakespeare’s time

Jacob Adler, a 20th century Jewish American actor, wrote that the tradition of playing Shylock sympathetically began in the first half of the 19th century: previously the role had been played ‘by a comedian as a repulsive clown or, alternatively, as a monster of unrelieved evil.’ 19th century productions often cut Act 5 completely, and ended with Shylock’s defeat, acknowledging him as the main character.

In the 20th century, the treatment of Jews by the Nazis under Hitler accelerated theatrical attempts to show the full complexity of the character (the Nazis even used Shakespeare as part of their anti-Semitic propaganda). Since 1945, it has been impossible to stage the play without taking account of the Holocaust.

Modern productions are careful not to portray Shylock as a racist caricature, and take pains to show the sources of his thirst for vengeance. The 2004 film adaptation with Al Pacino as Shylock begins with a montage showing Jews being abused by bigoted Christians, and ends with Shylock no longer allowed into the ghetto as he is a Christian convert. The 2015 Globe Theatre stage production ended with a scene showing Shylock being baptized, which left the audience thinking about Shylock’s punishment, rather than the reconciliation of the lovers at the end.

Love and marriage

Marriage was often seen as property transaction and wealthy women would be much sought after as a means of ensuring financial stability for the sons of noble families. It is in keeping with the times for Portia to be viewed as a commodity, however unromantic this might appear to a modern audience.

Lorenzo seems a romantic lover, but his situation mirrors Bassanio’s as marriage makes him rich.

Portia submits in a conventional Elizabethan way to her husband, calling him her ‘king.’

WOMEN in Elizabethan times

Noble women and men generally had arranged marriages in Elizabethan times. Women could not go to school, but noble women had private tutors as the example of Queen Elizabeth had set a trend amongst noble families of having their daughters well-educated and able to converse wisely. Perhaps, Shakespeare had Queen Elizabeth in mind when he created Portia. Like Elizabeth, she was a woman in a man’s world and like Elizabeth and many of Shakespeare’s female characters, she actually proves to be more intelligent and resourceful than the males! You could even see the rings episode in 5.1 as an echo of the trial scene, where Portia traps Bassanio with her determination to exploit the fact he has not fulfilled his bond to her.

Venice

Venice was famous as an important Mediterranean trading centre for goods from the Far East. Silks, spices, jewels and other expensive items were bought and sold there - including slaves. It had the reputation of being full of fashion, culture and sophistication. It would have been a very exotic location for an Elizabethan audience. Because of Venice’s position as a centre for trade, it was full of people of many different nationalities, religions and races. The Christian leaders were keen to suppress the activities of the Jews, and so created one of the first Jewish ghettos, forcing the Jews to live in a particular area. Yet the Jewish community continued to flourish in spite of the prejudice shown against them.

The Elizabethans had attached many romantic and exotic ideas to Venice.

Belmont, Portia’s home, is an imaginary setting. All we know about it is that it is two days’ sail away from Venice. It seems to be a beautiful, rich country estate.

Renaissance thought on relationships

The Renaissance brought with it a revival of Ancient Greek thought about the types of love. Plato deemed that ‘Philia’ or love between brothers/ men was the highest form of love and far exceeded in importance ‘Eros’ or love between man and woman.

Patronage was also an important part of Renaissance culture, so the relationship of undying devotion with money and support between Bassanio and Antonio would not have surprised the Elizabethan audience.

Yet, Shakespeare had composed many sonnets (traditional love poems) to an unnamed younger man ‘G.H.’, allegedly of higher status. Perhaps this creeps into the portrayal of the love between Bassanio and Antonio? Michael Radford’s film (with Jeremy Irons as Antonio and Al Pacino as Shylock) certainly portrays this love as homo-erotic in nature, but there is not sufficient evidence in the text.

The courtly lover: Playing the courtly lover was very popular in the Renaissance and involved the pose of a tortured lover who experienced unrequited love. He would praise and idealise his beloved. Famous Renaissance lovers included Petrarch’s Laura and Dante’s Beatrice. Bassanio sometimes indulges in this, eg. ‘As I am, I live upon the rack’ before he chooses the casket and perhaps in the way he praises Portia excessively after he wins her.

DRAMATIC STYLISTIC DEVICES

Use of location in the play’s structure:

Action divided between Venice (masculine world of trade/business) and Belmont (feminine setting of courtship, music, love). Initially separate, until arrival of Bassanio, when the relationship of love and money is highlighted as characters from the one visit the other.

Verse v Prose:

Theatrical convention at the time was that unrhymed verse written in iambic pentameter (blank verse) was spoken by high status characters. It is used for scenes of high emotional intensity. Prose was traditionally used by low status or comic characters.

Soliloquy/Aside:

One character, alone on stage, sharing their inner thoughts and feelings, making an audience complicit, is a soliloquy. If other characters are present on stage, and the character still speaks directly to the audience, it is an aside. E.g.: Shylock’s ‘**I hate him for he is a Christian**’ is an aside to the audience in 1.3

Rhyme:

Rhyming couplets emphasise key ideas, and signal an end. E.g.: **Jessica’s ‘Farewell; and if my fortune be not crost, I have a father, you a daughter, lost.’** 2.5

Dramatic irony:

Audience knows more than characters; e.g. see ASIDE above (I hate him, for he is a Christian)= audience realizes the depth of Shylock’s hatred.

Antithesis:

People or things that oppose each other. It intensifies the sense of conflict: Christian v Jew; justice v mercy; love v hate; father v daughter; appearance v reality; greed v generosity; Venice v Belmont.

Hyperbole :

Overstatement or exaggeration, e.g.: Bassanio’s admiration of Portia in 3.2. Often makes allusion to classical or mythical stories, thus stressing the virtues and (impossible) perfection of the person being praised.

Repetition:

Repetition contributes to atmosphere, creation of character, and dramatic impact.

Three of the most frequently repeated words are ‘**Jew/Jews**’ (**around 70 times**), ‘**bond**’ (**nearly 40**) and ‘**ring**’ (**37**) – a clear indication of the major themes of the play. Repetition is a clear feature of Shylock’s speeches: to show his careful, calculating mind (**1.3 ‘three thousand ducats’, etc**); his anguish (**2.8 ‘My daughter! O my ducats!’ etc**); his insistence on the bond (3.3); his praise of Portia when he thinks he will get what he wants (**4.1 ‘O wise young judge’**). Even his ‘**Hath not a Jew eyes?**’ speech has distinctive repetitions of words, phrases and rhythm which are used to affirm his passionate argument for common humanity.

Humour:

Humorous scenes often contrast with a serious scene that precedes it. Some of the humour is witty verbal humour (Portia); rude (Gratiano) and some pure slapstick (Lancelot Gobbo). For the latter, prose is used. Gobbo is a minor character, often used as a messenger between characters and relaying information to the audience, but even in the comedy, there are telling moments – such as the fact that we find out through Gobbo that Bassanio is spending Antonio’s money buying expensive new uniforms for his servants. Gobbo’s leaving Shylock for a new master also points towards the bigger loss of Jessica.

Scenes:

Shakespeare often uses the structural device of changing scene at a moment of great tension: e.g. just as we learn about Bassanio going to borrow money in Antonio’s name, the scene switches to Belmont.

Figurative language and Motifs:

There was little use of scenery at the time, so Shakespeare evokes the world of the play through figurative language, imagery and the use of motifs (recurrent images, ideas or symbols that develop or explain theme)

Some of the more minor characters – add your own notes too.

LORENZO is in love with Jessica, a friend of Gratiano and Bassanio.

MOROCCO failed suitor who realises - “All that glisters is not gold.”

DUKE –the Judge at the trial who shows prejudice vs Shylock: “A stony adversary, an inhuman wretch.”(4.1) “We all expect a gentle answer, Jew.” (4.1)**Mercy towards Shylock:** “That thou shalt see the difference of our spirit, /I pardon thee thy life before thou ask it.”

SALANIO- On Shylock: “...the dog Jew did utter in the streets: ‘My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter!’”**SALARINO- On Antonio:** “A kinder gentleman treads not the earth.”

GRATIANO: as described by B.: “Gratiano speaks an infinite deal of nothing.”; *Thou art too wild, too rude and bold of voice*” (2.3) **Parallel to Bassanio:** “You saw the mistress, I beheld the maid.”

Hating Shylock at the trial scene: “O, be though damned, inexecrable dog!”

Unmerciful to Shylock after the judgement: “Beg that thou mayst have leave to hang thyself.”

NERISSA – loyal friend and confidante to Portia, she is also witty and clever.

MAIN CHARACTERS - SOME KEY QUOTATIONS :

ANTONIO – loving and loyal friend, but still prejudiced!

Tragic- “*I hold the world but as the world, Gratiano:/ A stage where every man must play his part/ And mine a sad one;*”(1:1)**Generous -** “*My purse, my person, my extremest means/ Lie all unlocked to your occasions.*”(1:1)

Prejudiced - “*I am as like to call thee so again,/ To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too./ If thou wilt lend this money, lend it not/ As to thy friends, for when did friendship take/ A breed of barren metal of his friend?*”

Patient/Loving at the trial scene (vs Shylock): “*I do oppose/ My patience to his fury, and am armed /To suffer with a quietness of spirit...*”(4.1) **Christ-like at the trial scene:** “*I am armed and well prepared. /Give me your hand, Bassanio. Fare you well. / Grieve not that I am fall’n to this for you.*” (4.1) **Resigned:** “*I am a tainted weather of the flock.*” (a neutered sick sheep that is going to be slaughtered).

Loyal and in love: Solanio describes A’s feelings for B: ‘*I think he loves the world for him*’ (Act 2:8)

Merciful - At the end of the play, he lessens Shylock’s sentence as long as he promises to give half of his inheritance to

Lorenzo: “*The gentleman who lately stole his daughter*”(4.1) This acknowledges the wrong done to Shylock as his prop for his old age has stolen away and also refers, indirectly, to the theft that took place.

Acting as Bassanio’s surety at end of play: “*I dare be bound again, /My soul upon the forfeit, that your lord/ Will never more break faith advisedly.*”(5.1)

BASSANIO – popular, handsome, but perhaps a cad?

Indebted/ spendthrift - “*...my chief care/Is to come fairly off from the great debt.*” (1:1) “*To you, Antonio,/*

I owe the most in money and in love.” (1:1) **Money- oriented:** “*In Belmont is a lady richly left,/And she is fair/Nor is the wide world ignorant of her worth/...her sunny locks/Hang on her temples like a golden fleece.*”(1:1)

Loyal and a good friend? “*You shall not seal to such a bond for me!/ I’ll rather dwell in my necessity.*” (1.3). However, he does allow his friend to take the loan!

On false appearances of the lead casket, but perhaps implicitly Shakespeare suggests stuff about him: “*So may outward shows be least themselves.*” **Praising Portia’s excessively (suggests he is assuming the pose of the courtly lover:** “*What demi-god/ Hath come so near creation?*”; “*The substance of my praise doth wrong this shadow/ In underprizing it.*”**Honest**

– after he has won her, Bassanio tells Portia his true financial worth: “*When I told you/ My state was nothing*” it was not true, for “*I was worth than nothing; for indeed,/ I have engaged myself to a dear friend,/ Engaged my friend to his mere enemy.*”~

Loyal to Portia: “*When this ring/ Parts from this finger, then life parts from hence.*”

Loving to his friend over his wife: “*I am married to a wife.../But life itself, my wife, and all the world,/ Are not esteemed above thy life.../I would lose all, ay sacrifice all/ Here to this devil to save you.*” **Disloyal to Portia as gives away the ring!**

PORTIA – the true hero of the play?

Obedient - “*So is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father.*”(1:2)

In love with Bassanio and dutiful as a fiancé/wife: “*Her lord, her governor, her king./ Myself, and what is mine, to you and yours/ Is now converted.*” **Loving (after B’s debt is revealed):** “*Since you are dear bought, I will love you dear.*”

Generous: “*Pay him six thousand, and deface the bond.*” **Wise and eloquent, giving a series of arguments for Shylock to have mercy at the trial scene. These begin with religion and God:** “*The quality of mercy is not strained,/It droppeth a the gentle rain from heaven.*” (4.1); Then **appeal to Shylock’s self-interest:** “*Here’s thrice the money offered thee.*”(4.1) **and finally Shylock’s humanity:** “*Have by some surgeon...To stop his wounds, lest he do bleed to death.*” **However, this fails and she must reverse the judgement on him becoming vengeful:** “*Though shalt have justice more than thou desirest / He shall have merely justice and his bond.*”(4.1) **Witty and funny in her scorn of her suitors – see Act 1:3; Clever:** “*And for love, I’ll take this ring from you.*” (4:1) “*For, by this ring, the doctor lay with me.*” (5:1) **Prejudiced . After Morocco’s failure:** “*Let all of his complexion choose me so.*” (2:7)

SHYLOCK – victim or villain?

Prejudiced/villainous: “*I hate him for he is a Christian/ But more, for that in low simplicity/He lends out money gratis, and brings down/ The rate of usance with us here in Venice.*” “*If I can catch him once upon the hip,/I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him.*” “*I am not bid for love, they flatter me;/But yet I’ll go in hate, to feed upon/The prodigal Christian./Lock up my doors...*”

A victim: “*You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog,/And spit upon my Jewish gabardine,/And all for use of that which is mine own*”; “*Hath a dog money? Is it possible/ A cur can lend here thousand ducats?*”; “*I say my daughter is my flesh and blood.*” “*Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?*” “*If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die?*” After the judgement: “*You take my life when you do take the means whereby I live.*” (4.1)

Vengeful and villainous:“*It will feed my revenge...*” “*The villainy you teach me, I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.*”“*I would my daughter were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear/ I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys.*” “*Tell me not of mercy.*” (3:3); “*Thou call’dst me dog before thou hadst a cause,/But since I am a dog, beware my fangs.*” (3.3) “*I’ll have no speaking, I will have my bond.*” (3:3) “*If you deny me, fie upon your law;/There is no force in the decrees of Venice. /I stand for judgement. Answer: shall I have it?*” (4.1); “*My deeds upon my head! I crave the law,/ The penalty and forfeit of my bond.*”(4.1)

JESSICA –Oppressed or a disobedient and spendthrift ‘shrew’?: “*Our house is hell.*” **Ashamed** “*Alack, what heinous sin it is in me/ To be ashamed to be my father’s child!/For though I am a daughter to his blood/ I am not to his manners.*” **In love:** “*Love is blind and lovers cannot see/ The pretty follies that they themselves commit.*”

Treacherous and a thief: “*Here, catch this casket; it is worth the pains.*” “*I will...gild myself/ With more ducats.*” (2:6)

Independent:“*I have a father, you a daughter, lost.*” **Desiring to change faith:** “*I shall end this strife,/Become a Christian and thy loving wife.*” **Spendthrift – gave away Leah, her deceased mother’s ring “for a monkey,” spent “fourscore ducats at a sitting!.” (about £8000) **Loving Lorenzo, yet also warning him in Act 5.1:** “*In such a night/ Medea gathered enchanted herbs/ That did renew old Aeson.*” Medea healed her husband’s father, but when her husband was unfaithful much later, she killed him! The couple speak in blank verse suggesting their closeness here, but also warn each other through references to classical mythology. Lorenzo responds calling her ‘shrew.’**