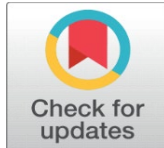


SHYLOCK: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE PORTRAYAL OF THE JEW IN MERCHANT OF VENICE AND ITS CONTEMPORARY ADAPTATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This article explores Shylock, the antagonist of the play *The Merchant of Venice* by William Shakespeare and its contemporary adaptations, including *The Merchant* by Arnold Wesker (1976) and *Shylock is My Name* by Howard Jacobson (2016). Despite the established hatred against the Jewish population, Shylock has succeeded in winning over readers' sympathies. Although the Elizabethan audience despised Shylock at the play's first performance, he potentially gained sympathy as a father. Compared to the play's protagonists, Shylock has been able to carve out a distinct position for himself in literature. Many of the adaptations have focused on the suffering of the Jewish character and how he came to be seen as a victim of prejudice in society. Considering that antisemitism is one of the main themes in the play and its many adaptations, it is necessary to consider how the Jewish people are represented in traditional historiography. Based on their religious beliefs, the Jewish people have been ostracized socially for centuries. They have suffered atrocities like the Holocaust and other genocide, which are among the darkest moments in history. The security of the Jewish people is still at risk in the twenty-first century. As such, comparing the original play and the adaptations reveals the ways in which Shylock has been manipulated to perpetuate negative stereotypes and how this has contributed to an anti-Semitic environment.

Keywords: Jew, Antisemitism, Christianity, Faith, Drama

1. INTRODUCTION

Shylock's greed and lust for revenge have often been subject to criticism, particularly in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. The very name "Shylock" acquired negative associations, and the figure became synonymous with moneylending, greed, and revenge. However, contemporary interpretations have provided fresh insights into Shylock over time, presenting him as a Jew marginalised by society and a father deceived by his daughter.

Even the characters in Shakespeare's play harbour ingrained prejudices against Shylock, the story's purported "villain." Antonio, the seemingly moral Christian businessman, is a perfect illustration of this bias because he refers to Shylock as "cur" (dog). In contrast, Antonio in Arnold Wesker's *The Merchant* is

presented as Shylock's close friend and a man who genuinely cares for his Jewish friend, untainted by societal prejudice. Their relationship is only being strained by the strong social pressures they cannot escape.

In this book, Shylock is portrayed as a wise man who shares his life events and insights with his contemporary Simon Strulovich. These two readings reinterpret Shylock's character so that he may be seen from a fresh and enlightening angle. Howard Jacobson's Shylock, set in the modern era, makes his character complex and human by appearing as a bereaved widower and a father damaged by his daughter's betrayal.

2. THE TRADITIONAL SHYLOCK

In Shakespeare's play, Shylock is portrayed as a quintessential villain, whose actions bring suffering to those around him. This is especially evident in his relationship with his daughter, Jessica, who is often seen as a symbol of kindness. The other characters in the play struggle to reconcile Jessica's virtuous nature with the fact that she is the daughter of the moneylender. Shylock's deeds are universally condemned as immoral by the other characters, a judgment heavily influenced by the prevailing anti-Semitic attitudes of the Elizabethan era. Living under a monarchical system where even minor offenses could result in execution and reliant entirely on the revenue his plays generated, Shakespeare had little choice but to portray the Jewish character in a negative light. This characterization was an expression of the prevalent anti-Semitic attitudes of the Elizabethan period. Although Shakespeare characterized Shylock as a vengeful and heartless character, there was one scene in the play where he showed a softer side—a man who had been betrayed by his daughter, lost his means of livelihood, and ultimately had his wealth taken away from him. While the other characters in the play got their own happy endings, Shylock was stuck to live the humiliation of being a Jew, dependent on Christians' mercy for the rest of his existence.

That Shylock's destiny mirrors the social ostracism Jews were subjected to in the period, and thus he becomes a symbol of the cruelty of the times, indicates that Shakespeare himself must have had some sympathy for the character. The antisemitism was further fueled by the wide-spread antisemitism among Christians. Borrowing money at interest is a normal thing today, and Shylock was no exception. But the prime reason for the disdain he faced was that Antonio, his Christian equivalent, provided interest-free loans. By this action, Antonio was portrayed as a good, almost divine character, while Shylock was established as the antagonist. This glaring disparity in their methods also fuelled Shylock's resentment of Antonio. Shakespeare depicted Antonio as an idealistic and utopian character who remained untouched by the complexities of real-world monetary practices. In reality, financial transactions of the time did not mirror this idealised version. Jews, often associated with moneylending during that era, were demonised for charging interest—a practice that conflicted with Christian ideals—and were consequently labelled as greedy villains. Usury was discouraged in Christianity, and Shylock was not merely an individual but a representative of an entire community. While he may not have been an ideal father, this alone does not justify Jessica's choice to elope with his money and her mother's cherished ring—a token Shylock had guarded with deep affection. The ring symbolised the love between her parents and stood as the last tangible memory of her mother. Shylock was devastated when he learned that the ring, left to him by Leah, had been traded away for something as trivial as a monkey. This betrayal cut deeply, prompting Shylock to publicly denounce his daughter. Both the characters in the play and its

readers were taken aback by his reaction, though his behaviour was an instinctive response any father might have displayed. However, as a member of a community ostracised for centuries, Shylock bore the weight of societal scorn and prejudice. This incident further diminished him in the eyes of his oppressors, casting him as a pitiful figure trapped by both personal and societal tragedies. He had no choice but to submit to the Christian dominance that claimed to deliver justice. Another source of backlash against Shylock arose from the payment he demanded from Antonio. Seeking revenge against Antonio for being the so-called 'generous' moneylender who disregarded the norms of moneylending, Shylock was further enraged upon discovering Antonio's role in his daughter's elopement. As a result, he demanded a pound of Antonio's flesh as collateral for a loan of 3,000 ducats. This grotesque and unorthodox condition was explicitly outlined in the bond between the two. Shylock cemented his position as the antagonist when he insisted that the flesh be cut from the area 'nearest Antonio's heart.' This demand heightened the dramatic tension, underscoring Shylock's deeply personal and vengeful motives. Shylock's unusual demand for a pound of flesh earned him the hatred of everyone around him. Even readers are taken aback by the grotesque nature of his request. However, what often goes unnoticed is the story beyond *The Merchant of Venice*. Shylock had endured years of ridicule, rebukes, and oppression at the hands of Christians, including Antonio. Long before the events of the play, he had been ostracised by society. As a human being, Shylock had feelings of his own, and each insult aimed at his religion wounded him deeply. He did not choose his circumstances, yet he had no option but to suppress his emotions. His famous monologue, delivered when Salanio and Salerio mock him, was an outburst of long-contained emotions—a rare moment of vulnerability. Even so, Shylock remained labelled a villain, largely because of his macabre demand for a pound of flesh. This demand became the defining flaw of his character. Without it, he might have been seen as a victim of societal cruelty rather than inherently villainous. As literature evolved, new analytical approaches began to shed light on the complexity of Shylock's character, allowing him to be viewed from multiple perspectives. This change of heart highlights the societal and historical contexts that shaped his actions and character development.

3. JACOBSON'S SHYLOCK AND STRULOVICH

The characterization of Shylock in Roman Jacobson's *Shylock is My Name* is completely different. This Shylock is a more mature man who has learned from his experiences and knows what the world thinks about Jews, as opposed to his original characterization as a man of curses and harsh bonds. This modernized Shylock is in the 21st century, where social perceptions have evolved.

He encounters Simon Strulovich, his contemporary equivalent, at a graveyard where Simon has visited to visit his mother. There, Simon immediately identifies Shylock as he walks past Leah's grave. Simon is astonished at the devotion that Shylock had towards his wife. Shylock is shown in this version as more sensitive and sympathetic, expressing affection instead of wrath.

Every day Shylock visits his wife's tomb since he loves her without wavers. Leah, in his view, looks forward his visits to learn about his daily life. Deeply affectionate for Leah, Shylock freely shows it all through the book. Often arguing who deserved the title of "the best," they would have animated conversations about their preferred music and artists. Shylock occasionally even arranges a picnic-like scene by her tomb, as if making sure she relishes their times together. He shares with Leah the small details of his day—things that might seem

insignificant to others but held special meaning for her. Despite knowing she is no longer alive, Shylock's every effort seems directed at making her happy. To protect her peace, he avoids mentioning upsetting news, such as their daughter's elopement.

Simon Strulovich, witnessing Shylock's devotion, is struck with amazement. He marvels at how a man could show such dedication to a wife who has passed away. Strulovich is drawn to compare Shylock's situation to his own. His wife, Kay, lies bedridden after a severe stroke, yet he struggles to make time for her, preoccupied as he is with chasing after their rebellious daughter, Beatrice. Recognising parallels between their lives, Shylock offers Simon advice on navigating his relationship with his daughter. Interestingly, Jacobson leaves unexplained the mysterious circumstances of Shylock's transition from the 15th to the 21st century.

The character of Shylock is understood to appear solely to guide his modern counterpart, Simon Strulovich. Simon, also a Jew, has faced his own share of humiliation due to his faith. When he divorced his first wife, Ophelia Jane, she taunted him by asking if he was satisfied now that he had taken his "pound of flesh." This remark, coupled with being disowned by his father for marrying a gentile Christian, reminded Simon of the ridicule and discrimination he had endured throughout his life. While some individuals treated him with kindness and maintained respectful relationships, others openly mocked him.

Much like Shylock, Simon is a wealthy businessman leading a life of affluence. He also has a rebellious daughter, Beatrice, with whom he frequently clashes. Shylock, upon meeting Beatrice, becomes wary of her, as she reminds him of his own daughter. This shared concern for their daughters forms a bond between the two fathers, allowing Shylock to share the wisdom and life lessons he gained from the pain of Jessica's elopement. Though Simon initially believes that Beatrice will not follow the same path as Jessica, the unfolding events of the novel plant seeds of doubt in his mind. Jacobson skilfully intertwines the shared struggles of the two fathers, using their mutual love and concern for their daughters as a central theme in his work. This thematic focus not only bridges the gap between the characters but also reinforces the timeless relevance of their experiences.

4. PARALLELISM BETWEEN SHYLOCK AND STRULOVICH

The appearance of Shylock in this contemporary novel remains unexplained, and even the characters themselves show little surprise at his presence. Jacobson uses Shylock's mysterious arrival as a way to forge a connection between him and Strulovich, allowing the former to be viewed from a new perspective. Historically branded as a villain, Shylock was eventually re-evaluated by scholars who examined him through his own lens. From a post-colonial standpoint, Shylock came to be seen not just as an individual, but as a representation of a marginalised community that had endured centuries of ostracism. This shift in interpretation led to a more sympathetic view of his character, inspiring various reinterpretations like Jacobson's portrayal. Strulovich and Shylock are compared in this book on a number of levels. One of the daughters betrayed her father, and the other almost did the same. Both men struggle with anxiety caused by their daughters. They frequently engage in criticisms of one another while discussing their favourite songs and performers. Even offering to bring Shylock home with him and have him live there as long as he cares to, Strulovich appears to go the extra mile in trying to be hospitable to him. Through this time, Shylock gets to understand more about the relationship between Strulovich and his daughter, which reinforces the bond

they have. Jacobson skilfully uses these encounters in order to engage with timeless issues of family, identity, and reconciliation.

Strulovich and his daughter Beatrice are always at odds with each other; she resists his efforts to place restrictions on her and struggles for her freedom. In the midst of their conflict, Strulovich's bedridden wife, Kay, is distant, lost in her own world.

Beatrice's scathing comments frequently cause Strulovich to lose his temper, and when he confronts her about her relationship with a vagrant, the tension erupts. Beatrice replies defiantly, implying that he portrayed her in this way only in his own mind. Enraged, Strulovich loses control and slaps her, believing no daughter should speak to her father in such a manner. Their relationship becomes strained as a result of this incident, which widens their gap. Father and daughter are already at odds by the time Shylock shows up in their lives. Shylock considers his own experiences as a father after witnessing Strulovich's treatment of Beatrice. He wonders if he had ever wronged his daughter, feeling the sting of regret for his perceived neglect, though he knows he never mistreated her. Jessica, in Shylock's eyes, was not as defiant as Beatrice. She had been a quiet child until the fateful decision to elope with a Christian—a choice that brought Shylock humiliation that time could never erase. The pain of her betrayal was compounded by her theft of his wealth and her sale of the cherished ring he had received from Leah, exchanged for a mere monkey. Strulovich, deeply troubled by Beatrice's rebellious nature, fears she might bring him an even greater disgrace if he continues to impose his will on her. He is haunted by the thought of enduring the same anguish as Shylock.

Strulovich's worst fears come true when Beatrice elopes with Gratan Howsome, a gentile drawn to Jewish women. Gratan, the modern counterpart of Lorenzo, is twice Beatrice's age but was initially infatuated with her. The couple's elopement is aided by Plurabelle, D. Anton, and Barnaby—modern-day iterations of Portia, Antonio, and Bassanio. Strulovich's rival, D. Anton, exacerbates his rage. Gratan and Beatrice had asked Strulovich for his blessing prior to their escape, but they were forced to disobey him when he insisted that Gratan become a Jew by being circumcised. A series of events culminate at D. Anton's house as a result of their elopement.

D'Anton wanted a painting that Strulovich owned for Barnaby, who would give it to Plurabelle. D'Anton gave up a great deal of his own life to acquire the painting. Strulovich used this action as retaliation for the humiliation he had received from D'Anton on multiple occasions. Strulovich continued in spite of Shylock's cautions against such ludicrous demands.

Guests were invited to observe the momentous occasion, which took place in Plurabelle's garden. Here, in an attempt to atone for his past transgressions, Shylock gave a stirring speech on compassion and forgiveness. This moment allowed him to finally voice his thoughts, demonstrating that, had he been given such an opportunity in Shakespeare's original play, he might have presented himself in a different light. Through Strulovich's actions, Shylock found a form of justice, though Strulovich himself remained unaware.

It was later revealed that D'Anton was already circumcised, and the entire scheme had been orchestrated to ridicule Strulovich. This mirrored the injustices Shylock faced in the original drama, as if Shylock had foreseen the outcome and tried to warn Strulovich, who chose to proceed regardless.

Through this narrative, Jacobson draws parallels between the two Jewish characters, offering closure to their stories. Shylock, at last, was able to express himself without mockery or judgment, achieving the justice denied to him in

Shakespeare's play. Meanwhile, Strulovich, though initially dejected, returned home to find his daughter in his wife's room. This reunion restored his family and convinced him that further revenge was unnecessary. Both characters' problems and feelings are ultimately resolved in a way that Jacobson finds satisfactory.

5. WESKER'S SHYLOCK

In *The Merchant* by Arnold Wesker, Shylock is recast as a learnt bookworm who has a deep love for antiquated literature, especially Jewish writings. One of his most valued belongings is a copy of a banned manuscript, which he shares with Antonio, a close friend. Contrary to Shakespeare's portrayal, Wesker's Antonio serves as Shylock's confidant and ally, a position Tubal initially held. Antonio opposes Venetian society's anti-Semitic prejudices and sympathises with Shylock's struggles. Shylock, meanwhile, ignores social criticism because he is engrossed in his books and manuscripts.

Antonio is transformed by Wesker into the perfect example of friendship. Antonio asks Shylock for a 3000 ducat loan on behalf of Bassanio, who is his godson in this adaptation. Shylock readily grants Antonio's request without requiring a bond. Antonio, making fun of the odd Venetian law that demands such agreements between Jews and Christians, is the one who insists on forming a bond. Characters like Lorenzo try to demonise Shylock throughout the narrative, but Antonio always defends his friend from these charges. By altering the original story's dynamics, Wesker provides a more complex examination of friendship and societal biases.

In a dramatic shift from the original, Wesker delivers the well-known Shylock speech to Lorenzo, to which Shylock responds forcefully, saying, "My humanity is my right, not your bestowed and gracious privilege." Wesker is able to challenge historical condescension and present a strong case for universal humanism through this deliberate reworking of Shakespeare's words.

One significant distinction is found in the play's ending. Wesker presents a different resolution, rewriting the story to offer a more fair and provocative ending, in contrast to Shakespeare's original, in which Shylock is the only character denied a happy ending. Jessica distances herself from Lorenzo and supports her father in Wesker's adaptation. The sincere love and affection that Shylock freely shows for his daughter throughout the play is the cause of this metamorphosis. Wesker's portrayal of Shylock strengthens his relationship with his daughter, in contrast to Shakespeare's original, in which he curses Jessica for eloping with his wealth and puts control over showing his love. Due to this, Jessica remains committed to her father and to her religion, showing how individuals can change when they are brought up in a more compassionate and loving environment. Jessica's conversion after eloping with Lorenzo in Shakespeare's original play can be seen as an effort to cut all ties with her father and reject the stigmatised ideas connected to him, most likely in an effort to avoid the widespread antisemitism in her community. She would have been criticised for upholding her Jewish identity and further compared to her alleged "villainous" father if she had remained faithful.

Wesker's adaptation, however, produces a different effect. Jessica chooses to remain with her religion and her father because she trusts his love. Shakespeare's conclusion, which leaves Shylock alone and forsaken, is very different from this. In Wesker's adaptation, Shylock still enjoys his daughter's unwavering loyalty. Yet the tension of antisemitism in society tensions his relationship with Antonio. The

prejudices of the story against Jews are underscored by characters such as Bassanio, Gratiano, and Lorenzo who display blatant disrespect for Shylock. By doing so, Wesker subverts social prejudices and reimagines a more sympathetic interaction between Jessica and Shylock. Shylock in Wesker's version is a well-developed, complex character who evokes empathy and sympathy, transcending the stereotypical presentation of a voracious Jewish caricature. By focusing on Shylock's moral fibre rather than his religious identity, Wesker reinterprets him and makes him more relatable and accessible. The Merchant reminds us of the power of friendship, empathy, and trust in altering people's perceptions and reviving the moral fibre of individuals who were previously viewed through a prejudiced lens.

6. CONCLUSION

Because of the widespread anti-Semitic attitude in society, Shylock has traditionally been considered to be the quintessential villain. From a postmodern point of view, however, the character has been subjected to many interpretations and understandings. Shylock's character has been introduced in different forms in books like Howard Jacobson's *Shylock is My Name* and Arnold Wesker's *The Merchant*. Interestingly, Wesker and Jacobson are both Jewish writers, and due to their shared heritage with Shylock, they know what it feels like to be a Jew. But the indignities Shylock has to face are unparalleled. These authors utilize Shylock as a vehicle for promoting change and representing their own community. To perceive Jews as ordinary individuals, they appeal to society to eliminate stereotypes and prejudice regarding them. Antisemitism and hatred towards Jews exist today, and in their writings, Jacobson and Wesker underscore that the time has come to remove the hate against Shylock and the Jewish people in general.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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