



# Shylock Was More Sinned Against Than Sinning

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## Abstract

This paper in its present form will discuss the character of Shylock from William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* as being more sinned against than sinning. Here, a discussion is put forward on Shakespeare and the subaltern and also how he treated the marginalized section of the society.

## Key words:

Subaltern, Shakespeare, Shylock, Sinned.

## Introduction

*The Merchant of Venice* is one of the most popular plays of Shakespeare. As there are two strong characters in the play the problem of hero identity arises. Shylock and Antonio, each of whom may be considered the hero in one way or the other. Shylock is a forceful and dynamic personality who is strong enough, self-assertive, who can hold himself well against his enemies. During the trial scene his argument is convincing enough. He stands out with a single-minded devotion, strong determination and energy for the rights of his people. His resoluteness is admirable when he pursues his ambition of taking a revenge over his enemies who were Christians. He believed strongly that he was wronged and insulted because of his race and religion. He fights till the end like a hero.

## Objectives and Methodology

The objective of the paper is to make an analysis of the subaltern character of Shylock from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* as being more sinned against than sinning. The methodology used here is analytical and help of secondary sources of information has been taken like journals, articles, books etc.

## Discussion

To begin with A G Hales as he points out, "he has inherited a nature embittered by centuries of insult and outrage and his own wretched experience had only aggravated its bitterness." We find Shylock tough, relentless, vindictive and cruel but he was made so by the prolonged oppression inflicted upon him and his race. This was done by Antonio and all the Christians during that time. Shakespeare tried and succeeded in developing the readers with a sympathy for Shylock as he tries to show that he was made what he is by the persecution and oppression to which he was subjected by the Christians. Thus, we are convinced to find that

he was “more sinned against than sinning”. Cowden Clarke, therefore, puts forward a question, “Who does not sympathize with Shylock? Who, with the most ordinary notions of right and wrong, derives any satisfaction from the merchant Antonio’s being brought off by a quirk of the law and that law an unjust one, which decreed the demolition of the Jew’s whole wealth and state?”

Shylock was once a man with splendid power and wealth; he was made to say the finest things in the play by Shakespeare. He was shown to be right on his side but was defeated by a legal quibble. He fights for the justice of his whole community and so he cannot be regarded as self-centred. It was through Shylock that Shakespeare was presenting the Christian code of conduct exposing their emptiness, ego and hypocrisy.

Portia: Have by some surgeon, Shylock, on your charge, to stop his wounds, lets he do bleed to death?

Shylock: Is it so nominated in the bond?

Portia: It is not so expressed, but what of that? ‘Twere good you do so much for charity,

Shylock: I cannot find it; ‘tis not in the bond,

The inhumanity of the bond is thus presented before us. Despite everything against him he was a true Jew. In one passage he seems to show a trace of affection and sentiment of human feelings. As the “good” Tubal has been torturing him for Jessica’s luxuries in Genoa, that amongst all she did exchange his ring for a monkey, he cries out,

Out upon her; Thou torturest me, Tubal: it  
was my turquoise: I had it from Leah when,  
I was a bachelor: I would not have given it for  
A wilderness of monkeys

It is definitely true that Shylock was wronged; oppressed and great injustice was done to him. He was insulted, put to financial crisis for no fault of his own. Only because of his religion, he was spat and hated. In Act III Scene I, as a tragic hero he says,

“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, heated by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is?”

The Merchant of Venice introduces Portia as the beauty or heart of the play but the strength of the play lies in Shylock, a good personification of an irrational hatred and a plausible human being. An ironical treatment is shown in regards to the Christian plea for toleration and mercy. The emptiness of the Christian ideal of charity and mercy is exposed in the play where we can find that practically the Christians do not live up to their own ideals. Thus, the vindictiveness of Shylock is in a large scale the outcome of the hatred of the Christians themselves. The character of Shylock is drawn to proportion. S A Brooke has rightly pointed out that the passions of revenge and hatred which burn like red hot fire within his heart are the tragic flaws of his character.

“Let me go hence, I am not well,” he utters these as he leaves the court.

A G Hales points out, “he has inherited a nature embittered by centuries of insult and outrage and his own wretched experience had only aggravated its bitterness.” Raleigh truly writes: “Antonio and Bassanio are pale shadows of men compared with this giant, tragic figure whose love of his race is as deep as life; who pleads the cause of a common humanity against the cruelties of prejudice: whose very hatred has in it

something of the nobility of patriotic passion, whose heart is stirred with tender memories even in the end, is dismissed, unprotesting to insult and oblivion.

I pray you give me leave to go from hence

I am not well. Send the deed after me

And I will sign it.

In his tragic personality and pose Shylock stands tall. We find him entirely right when he says,

The villainy you teach me.

I will execute; and it shall go hard

But I will better the instruction:

With time, critical opinion, as to the play is a plea for or against toleration has changed. Shylock was condemned as an unmitigated villain by the earlier critics whereas a crown was put on his head by the romantics with their imaginative perception. Modern criticism, thus, represented Shylock as a man who was more sinned against than sinning. During the middle ages, Jews never dined or had any relation with the Christians. Christians had a belief that Jews can commit any kind of crime. In Elizabethan times, Christians never liked the Jews for they practiced usury. They also believed that it is through conversion to Christianity only that the Jews may attain salvation. But forcible conversion is a sin and here the Christian court of Venice lacks in justice. It was inhumanity to force Shylock to change the religion of his forefathers and this remains undefendable. The trial scene reveals the good qualities of Shylock being undisturbed by emotion or passion, to raise himself as a logical thinker. He concentrated only on one thing and that was the revenge on the Christian. We find him not really as a bad man for he proposed the bond merely in merry sport. He remains only a victim of the circumstances that conspired to make him a villain. When Shylock utters the words, "I am not well," we can understand very well that he was more sinned against than sinning.

### Conclusion

Shakespeare painted Shylock as the hero "the depository of the vengeance of his race" through his dramatic instinct. Audiences sympathize with Shylock, the hero, as he leaves the stage as a towering figure, ruling over the man who spat upon him. He was tricked out of all his rights and wealth. As a professional, he used to charge interest for the money he lent. He was in need of power and wealth for these were the two most powerful things by which he protected himself from the violently hostile Christians. If love for one's own race and country is immoral then one can claim that Shylock was one such. Throughout the play, Shylock is consistent, be it in trade or at home. There is no hesitation or change of mood in him which makes him a strong person. The tenacity and resoluteness make his character an unforgettable one in spite of all the good natured characters surrounding him. He was undoubtedly provoked to do all the wrongs but was definitely more sinned against than sinning.

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