

Short Assignment 1

Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* is a comedy that focuses on lovers and riches, particularly the loaning of riches. The play makes a clear distinction among the social classes portrayed in the story, with money being the primary indicator of ranking. There is, however, one character that defies the indication of class. Shylock, a man of Jewish faith, has the money to give him status but not the respect from others to give him a place in his rightful class. Shylock is separated and made to appear lower than those whose wealth he exceeds. The other characters in the play distinguish themselves from Shylock by using a single word that labels him less than equal, *Jew*. Other primary characters use the term as a label freely. The audience is fully aware as to which character is being addressed or referenced. There is only one time in the duration of the play that Shylock refers to himself as a Jew, although his Jewish faith is referenced and hinted at plenty. The use of the word therefore, becomes a derogatory discrimination with only one use of the word in the play that has a cry for equality.

The character of Shylock is more frequently referred to as the Jew. This is the characters way of discerning themselves from him in a matter of status. They play him in trying to force him to show mercy to Antonio. Portia, disguised as a lawyer, blatantly plays on his beliefs in this way.

Therefore, Jew,
Though justice be thy plea, consider this,
That in the course of justice none of us
Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy,
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy. (4.1.195-200)

Portia's use of the word Jew is discriminatory in the sense that she does not make a plea to the man as Shylock but rather as a determination of his faith. She plays his beliefs in a begging for the mercy of a man who owes a debt. Shylock's lack of a name for the majority of the trial scene is telling. It is clear with the use of the word that the other characters find it unjust that Antonio be made to hold up a bargain with Shylock.

It is very clear that Shylock holds the Christians of the play at a much lower religious standard than that of his own. He frequently marks them as fools (2.5.34) and spouts about his hate for them. Perhaps this would make the difference of religion a minute aspect of the play, but in a moment of contemplation about the debts of Antonio, Shylock deems himself a Jew.

I am a Jew. 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? And if you
wrong us, shall we not revenge? [...] If a Christian wrong a Jew,
what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. (3.1.55-67)

Shylock here is begging that he be seen as an equal and not be marked as unworthy simply by his religion. Here, the point is that the word should mean nothing. He is a man of wealth, he has lent another money, and the debt is owed. The word *Jew* has been deemed at his separation from the other characters and society. Shylock is trying to prove that he is not that different and the label does not change the primary dilemma of the story, the debt of Antonio.

The Merchant of Venice has many underlying tones and themes. The use of the word *Jew* is no exception. For Shylock the use of the word is meaningless; rather it is his faith that holds to be the most important factor, not the label of it. For others, the use of the word keeps Shylock separate from them. More importantly, it makes him less relatable, easier to manipulate and in turn less than them. The one instance in which Shylock refers to himself as Jew, and asks that others see him as equal in his rights, is the only time in which the word doesn't hold any negative connotations. For every other instance we see the pessimism that is carried with the word and the opinion of the other characters.