

### Justified Revenge in *The Merchant of Venice*

**Shylock:** To bait fish withal. If it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge. He hath disgraced me, and hindered me half a million. .... If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why revenge. The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction. (3.1. 50-69)

In Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, the audience is introduced to Shylock a Jewish moneylender in Venice. Within the play one of the main focal points is the contract that is formed between Antonio and Shylock, in the name of Bassanio whom is Antonio's great friend and in need of the ducats. As a result of the contract, Antonio agrees to either pay back the ducats in three months or provide to Shylock a pound of his flesh from whatever part pleases Shylock. While the contract initially seemed unthreatening to Antonio, it soon poses a dilemma and becomes a means for Shylock to execute his revenge. Despite, the conflict between Antonio and Shylock, Shylock's speech in Act III, Scene I, is used as a way for Shylock to justify himself to others by comparing Jews to Christians. Shylock's reasoning for justifying his revenge, as a result can denote a sense of understanding regarding his need to collect what is indebted to him by Antonio.

The speech is presented when Shylock enters in Act III, Scene I and crosses paths with Salerio and Solanio. Salerio and Solanio concerned about their good friend Antonio, question Shylock about the pound of flesh. Shylock's following speech denotes his lack of sympathy towards Antonio's current situation and how he now has to provide a pound of flesh to Shylock. Along with this, the speech provides a further understanding to the deep rooted history of Shylock's mistreatment by Antonio and other Christians. Shylock's speech of his past mistreatments by others, stirs resentment in Shylock and further fuels his need to seek out revenge. Overall, Shylock's mistreatment by others creates a character that has been victimized and mistreated by others. Shylock being portrayed as a victim helps provide an understanding to his need for revenge. Aside from being portrayed as a victim, Shylock provides the connotation that not much difference exists between Christians and Jews, and both are equal as human beings. He does this comparison order to further add to the justification that he is in his every right for revenge just as a person of Christian faith. While the conflict between Antonio and Shylock is a major part of the play, it can be interpreted as representing the greater conflict between Jews and Christians.

The conflict between those of Christian faith and Jewish faith is prevalent throughout *The Merchant of Venice*. Such prejudice of Jews by Christians can be seen, in the speech where Lancelot is debating with himself on whether to serve Shylock a Jewish man or serve Bassanio a Christian Man. The need for Lancelot to choose between whom to serve, can relate to the struggle of doing the right thing and staying with Shylock or accepting the prejudice notion of "the Jew is the very devil incarnation" (2.2. 25). Shylock being referenced as "the Jew that is the very devil incarnation" signifies the overall prejudice that Jews suffer by Christians. The fact that Jews are constantly insulted by the Christian characters in the play helps provide a sense of sympathy towards Shylock character. Furthermore, Shylock having suffered prejudice and being victimized by others can also create a sense understanding in his need to justify his revenge. Despite having lost his servant and his riches, Shylock is a person who is in his every right to feel and hold resentment just a Christian.

In Act III, Scene I, Shylock's speech provides an understanding to what fuels his revenge and why he is in his every right for revenge. Though, his revenge for Antonio can be considered

unmercifully and unsympathetic. Shylock is a character who has lost and suffered by the actions of others. Overall, Shylocks character is but a speck in a greater conflict between Christians and Jews.