



English 300

Detesting the Rogue Jew: Understanding Anti-Semitism Through Shakespeare and Sixteenth-Century Europe

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Discrimination is an unfortunate but irrefutable fact within societies. It is an extreme, negative manifestation stemming from individuals who desire reverence from others. Attention that is hyper focused on differences generates stereotypes, inequalities, and tensions among society's members. The result is a hierarchy of social order often consisting of sharp contrasts of opinion. This disparity is extremely apparent in the Christian/Jewish dichotomy. During the sixteenth-century in Europe, anti-Semitism was the dominant ideology in a society that regarded Christianity as superior. Notions of Jewish identity and moral fiber through the eyes of Christians relied on villainous stereotypes that dehumanized Jews and rendered them unworthy of coexisting with Christians unless they were willing to abandon their religion and convert to Christianity. Shakespeare's play, *The Merchant of Venice*, illustrates how Jews in European society were marginalized. It is a brief glimpse into the common creed of the time in which the play was written.

Unlike sixteenth-century Christians, Jewish people did not have a permanent place to call their own. Once claiming Israel as home, their country had been invaded and conquered throughout history leaving them to wander Europe and the Middle East

and establish precarious communities in between bouts of displacement (Koenigsberg). Consequently, Jewish people were vulnerable to the malevolence of their Christian hosts. In Spain, The Inquisition that had begun in the previous century was still active. This "royal agency" was an aggressive faction appointed by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabel to identify and convert followers of Islam and Judaism. If they could not be converted, they were punished by imprisonment, hanging, and often burnt alive (Bentley 384). Not only was it unsettling to be Jewish, in some cases it was a death sentence.

This kind of animosity was the culmination of many myths regarding Jewish people that Christians held as truths. After the denial and crucifixion of their savior in 33 A.D., resentment ensued and intensified among the Christians toward Jews. This shaped an enduring Christian sentiment that Jewish people were "subhuman" (Mamet 12). It became embedded in the minds of the Christians that Jews were villainous, rotten creatures by nature. In fact, "the treatment of the Jews as vampire" was widely held; Christians maintained that Jews regularly kidnapped Christian children in order to circumcise them, sacrifice them, and drink their blood (Mamet 12). In 1290, this kind of paranoia led to the Expulsion of the Jews which forbade any Jew to reside in England (Shapiro 4). The deportation effectively reduced the Jewish population "to somewhere around 2000" (Shapiro 46). What began centuries before had ramifications that lasted well into the sixteenth century, and Jews were not officially declared to have legal readmission back into England until 1656 (Shapiro 46).

Once Jews were permitted to reside in England once again, they worked as moneylenders. Money lending was regarded as abhorrent work, and it was "absolutely the only profession open to the Jew" (Abrahams

241). In the sixteenth and seventeenth-centuries, England did not have an established banking system that provided savings plans or personal loans. Paper currency and a regular system of credit had not been implemented yet either (McMurtry 80). As a result, anyone who needed to borrow money did so via Jewish moneylenders. The lenders would charge interest on top of the original amount loaned to the borrower, much in the same manner of a modern day credit card. This activity was called usury. According to Christian analysis of the Bible, it was against Christian code for Christians to charge each other interest but perfectly acceptable to be charged interest by Jews (McMurtry 80). "Unto a stranger thou mayest lend upon interest; but unto thy brother thou shalt not lend interest" (Deuteronomy 23:20). Author Jo McMurtry analyzes how the association between Christians and Jews in regard to money lending:

Upon examination one finds that this interpretation depends on a somewhat twisted logic. In Exodus 22:25 and Deuteronomy 23:19, Jews are forbidden to lend money "upon usury" to fellow Jews but are allowed (in Deuteronomy) to enter such transactions with "strangers" - interpreted as Christians, although an Old Testament text could hardly be specific about this particular type of stranger. Neither passage goes into what kind of loans strangers are allowed to make with each other. (81)

Despite its convoluted reasoning that leaves many questions unanswered, this interpretation endured and Christians and Jews structured their lives accordingly. Thus, Jewish people became the designated lenders Christian borrowers turned to. This pigeonholed Jews and agitated Christians by design because it required Christians to not only interact with Jews, but also to depend on them for financial purposes. Christians

became increasingly disgruntled with the notion that a "despised people" could accrue wealth, especially through a manner the Bible criticized in any way (Halio, Understanding 25). Christians also became convinced that they were being unfairly charged exorbitant interest by the Jews, victims of Jewish "ill-gotten wealth" (McMurtry 147). Thus, usury and all its connotations caused immense tension and animosity between the two groups.

In Venice, Italy it was common for Jews to practice usury openly despite Christian backlash. Venice was quite different from England. It was regarded as a refined, innovative, powerful, wealthy, liberal city that tolerated lowly classes such as the Jews. Venice's liberal attitude allowed Jews to make a living much more comfortably than they had in England. The Venetians would ignore the negative implications of usury allowing lending arrangements to transpire openly. Yet even in Venice, Jews were forced into ghettos by law. The ghettos were located along the outer boundary of the city and equipped with gates that were locked and guarded at night (Halio Understanding 23-25). Jews were effectively "in the city but not of it" (Yaffe 25). Also, Jewish moneylenders were often spat upon and verbally attacked in the streets of Venice by disapproving Christian citizens. In an exchange between Antonio and Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, Antonio, a Christian, seeks to borrow money from the Jewish Shylock. With a newfound shift of power Shylock retorts:

Signior Antonio, many a time and oft
In the Rialto you have rated me
About my moneys and my usances:
Still have I borne it with a patient shrug,
For sufferance is the badge of all our
tribe. You call me misbeliever, cut-
throat dog, And spit upon my Jewish
gabardine, And all for use of that which is
mine own

(I.iii.103-109).

Sixteenth-century Europe, including Venice, was simply unable to allow Jewish people to live and thrive peacefully. Stereotypes and animosity toward Jews were so pervasive, there was nowhere for the rogue Jew to exist.

The only way the Jew could obtain salvation in the mind of the Christian was through conversion. The sixteenth century marked the beginning of an eager Christian movement in England to convert Judaic followers. "This demand was met in part by the idea of the stubborn Jew whose conversion not only revealed the truths of Christianity in general but also... the rightness of their own particular beliefs" (Shapiro 134). The campaign included pamphlets such as *Light for the Jews*, or the Means to Convert Them and books such as *The Converted Jew* began circulating Europe (Shapiro 133-138). Additionally, it was popular Christian opinion that a Jewish woman despised her heritage and actually preferred conversion. She longed for "nothing more than to be rescued from her cultural fate by some handsome Christian" (McMurtry 147). In *The Merchant of Venice*, Jessica, the Jewish daughter of Shylock, is in love with the Christian Lorenzo and desperate to denounce her faith and replace it with that of her beloved. She confesses aloud:

Alack, what heinous sin is it in me
To be ashamed to be my father's child!
But though I am a daughter to his blood,
I am not to his manners. O Lorenzo, If
thou keep promise, I shall end this strife,
Become a Christian and thy loving wife
(II.iii.16-21).

Jessica exemplified the stereotype that Jewish women were anxious to abandon their Judaic values lest they sacrifice the Christian men they worshiped. It also conveyed the message that in order to be vindicated one must be happily converted. When Shylock's plan to seek revenge on Antonio turns on him and he is forced into Christianity, it is with dissonance. This is indicative of the philosophy of the time: a Jew must either

adopt Christianity willingly and prevail (like Jessica) or live as a despondent Jew who eventually converts anyway (Shylock).

Despite all the aggressive ventures on behalf of the Christian ideologies, the Jews were not eradicated. The conversion thrust upon them by Christian propaganda was unsuccessful. As a result, Jews ensured that their religion, values and people did not succumb to the hostile European climate in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and beyond. This survival enabled their legacy to continue to live on. The tenacity of this outcast race leaves a lingering question worthy of consideration: can two opposing religions ever be mutually exclusive when it is the conviction of their genuine faith that allows them to persevere?

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