



Villainy, Taught and Executed:

REFLECTIONS ON *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE*

It would be a mistake to think that literature exists only to give us simple morality lessons. It instead exists to display human experience. It manifests before us some human beings in human circumstances, faced with human dilemmas and choices, acting for human reasons, and enduring the human consequences. It does not direct our moral considerations; it merely informs them. But oh, what information is supplied! Treat a man like a beast, and he will grow

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brutal. Give that brutal man an opportunity to slay his tormentor, he will leap at it. Realize such revenge, and destruction will be consummated. Let mercy present itself as an option against a deadly earnest, and some may nobly seize upon it. We can then assign moral praise or blame according to our own lights, but through literature we must first get our facts straight.

The Merchant of Venice portrays the power and claim of mercy in our affairs, but first shows forth that no one seeks revenge out of thin air; there is always a reason, otherwise it would not be revenge. Except for the restraint of proportion, there is little to no natural check against it as such boiling

spite is emulsified with some sense of justice. Resolute and narrow in its vision, it is frequently impervious to reason, even to the caution of the unforeseen ruin that so often attends such pursuits. Unflinching, it can usually yield to nothing other than grace; that is, the whole paradigm shift that grace can effect on the vengeful mind, radically altering the perspective to consider mercy, if the will is not walled up in stubbornness.

But grace requires our cooperation in order to work on the soul, and it takes regular doses over time to produce significant effects. The lecher doesn't come to his senses immediately after leaving the brothel and then taking a wife; chastity is a process. The sullen and resentful wretch doesn't blossom with pity at the breath of a platitude; he must be coached by serial gentleness. And we Christians especially must be the cooperative instruments in God's hands in His dispensing of that grace, or the work comes to nothing and the useless tools are tossed into the trash heap and eventually replaced by ones more reliable. Thus, note the hypocrisy of the Christians begging for mercy and rebuking Shylock for his hateful endeavor, who are the same people who have been spitting upon him and assaulting him his entire life, who revile him for the only financial practice allowed to him by the law that forbids him to own property, who damn him and his nation collectively for the crime of the murder of God, who force him to live in a ghetto. If your knuckles are cut and bruised from beating people up, can you really preach about turning the other cheek when your victims hit back?

Hold on, one might object, *this sounds dangerously like a defense of Shylock. He wants to cut the heart out of a man who can't pay back a loan, despite being offered twice the amount owed. Shylock is evil, and he is responsible for his own actions.* Yes,

our lives are shaped by our deeds, but we are just as formed by the deeds of others. We must take responsibility for our choices, but we are also our brother's keeper and our choices hugely affect him. Shylock's malice doesn't spring from a vacuum; his knife of vengeance was sharpened by the abuse he suffered over the course of a miserable life.

This leads to an important question: is *The Merchant of Venice* anti-Semitic? In

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a real sense, yes. It is chock full of characters belching anti-Semitism. But is it anti-Semitic in the sense that we should hate Jews when we come away from reading it? I don't think so at all. I have great sympathy for Shylock, wicked though he is. Anyone who has ever been repeatedly bullied or abused should cheer for this strange and yet oh-so-human villain. But surely Shakespeare himself, creature of the late-sixteenth century, would be anti-Semitic given the cultural climate and its prejudices? Yet it is extremely unlikely that he would have ever met a Jew, as Jews were legally prohibited from living in England, as had been the case for centuries. It seems

more likely that Shylock's religion is there for dramatic purposes, to create a plausibly mistreated character who plausibly retaliates. It is even possible that Shakespeare chose that identity as a thin disguise for his contempt for the Puritans, who were the real-life cold, miserly, and coin-worshipping scum of the time.

Shylock is not a villain because he is Jewish—he is a villain who happens to be Jewish, and he has to be Jewish so that, for the purposes of the plot, he can be consistently and intensely mistreated by a society of cruel Christians, which fertilizes a soil of bitterness and hatred that sprouts into a flower of bloodlust when the opportunity arises, as in the case of Antonio's default. Indeed, we have a lesson from Bassanio's wager of the caskets for Portia's hand, for "the world is still deceived with ornament". The Christians in the play, for all the finery of their orthodoxy and virtue supposedly flowing from their creed, are barbaric and hypocritical in their treatment of Shylock. Shylock himself, despite the outward show of his alien faith and taboo customs, shows he is just as human as anyone else; when he is wronged, he will revenge. Our common nature is indisputable and its claims are inescapable.

But let us not forget the main conceit of the play: revenge is evil. The Christians are right about mercy, even if they do not have the right to be right. The principle—the commandment—of mercy is still absolute, particularly when vengeance can be cloaked in the mantle of justice, as it so easily is. Wrath, like pride, is most dangerous when it is justified and we should always, in our anger, err on the side of *not* disemboweling someone who has wronged us. The clamor for payback should give us pause, for as Portia (in disguise) warns us in the courtroom scene, "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". What is Shylock's response? "My deeds upon my head; I crave the law." What thermometer could measure the chill that goes through the soul after these words?

And can we not hear the nails being hammered into his own coffin as he freely welcomes any doom that follows his bloody resolution? Whether in a cold earnest or in a frenzy, this embrace of whatever evil that may befall us so long as we accomplish our retribution is the biggest red flag of this hideous sin. Determined to slay, we are also determined to perish as our hearts beat

for our enemy's demise and turn to stone to any influence of turning back.

That is, until our revenge is thwarted and the ruin we glibly invited in our pursuits now knocks on our door—or rather, bursts through it. Now, all too conscious of our endangered good—which is the goal of the mercy we so ardently rejected—we are faced with another's ravenous appetite for "justice"—which we so recently salivated after but which now looks rather unappetizing. Prey to him who was to be our victim, mercy's imperative becomes all the more real. But how do we make claim on it when



we were, just a moment ago, ready to spurn it with such glee? "On what compulsion", as Shylock says, must our enemy now show us clemency?

"The quality of mercy is not strained", declares Portia: it is a free choice to yield to a nobler calling while loosing oneself from the grasp of baser impulses, however compelling. Antonio intercedes for Shylock to maintain the latter's life and wealth, but on the condition that Shylock convert to Christianity. No doubt this, in Shakespeare's time and for the playwright's purposes, is intended to be part of the happy ending, but to a modern audience this should come off as dreadful. A forced conversion to the true religion—on peril of death or poverty—is still a forced conversion; this is not how disciples of Christ are made. I, for one, feel even sorer for the antagonist, coerced to abandon the faith of his ancestors to become a pariah to his fellow Jews and to the Christians whom, though he is now technically one of them, will never accept him in their society. This may indeed drive home

the warning against revenge: whether in success or failure, even if you should get away with it, it will cost you your soul. You will most likely come away from the attempt broken and in despair, with no one to blame but yourself, and yet too proud and humiliated to acknowledge it.

Here then, in *The Merchant of Venice*, is vengeance on display: its cause and effect, its cradle and graveyard, its motivation and misery. We cannot deny the genesis of Shylock's brutality any more than we can ignore our horror of its practice. A twisted type of mercy resolves it in the end, but all of this could have been avoided by a more perfect mercy, practiced proximately by Shylock towards Antonio by forgiving his debt or accepting Bassanio's double repayment, but more remotely and essentially by the Christians who chose to abuse Shylock his whole life. As he says to Antonio when the latter first comes to ask for money,

. . . many a time and oft
In the Rialto you have reviled me
About my moneys and my usances.
Still have I borne it with a patient
shrug,
For suff'rance is the badge of all our
tribe.
You call me misbeliever, cut-throat
dog,
And spit upon my Jewish gaberdine.

Shakespeare makes it difficult for us to despise this villain despite his obvious villainy. We can no more hate him than we could hate a starving man who steals food. If human beings are to exercise nobility and gentleness, there must be some significance of the noble and gentle in their lives; if we treat them with barbarism, then we should not gape at them becoming monsters—monsters which bear an uncomfortable similarity to what we see in the mirror. This is the portrayal and the opportunity offered by the Bard's creation.

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