

The Sins of the Fathers: Marlowe's Barabas and Shakespeare's Shylock

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Then answered all the people, and said,
His blood *be* on us, and on our children.

Then released he Barabbas unto them:
and when he had scourged Jesus, he
delivered *him* to be crucified.

(The Gospel According to St. Matthew)

If St. Mathew's well-known account of the public judgement inflicted by Pilate on Jesus to ease his own conscience is to be taken literally, Jews can be said to have brought on themselves and their descendants the curse that has been their lot through centuries of Christianity.

However, it is an indisputable fact that the misfortune of the Hebrews goes back much further; it seems to stem from the remote hazy era when they began to consider themselves as a "nation" comprising many tribes. These were held together by the belief in a single almighty male divine being who, not only had created heaven and earth, but all existing things as well, living or otherwise.

Jews were not alone in favouring a monotheistic religion. At one time or other, in the Egyptian History, a misguided Pharaoh tried to impose on his subjects a similar creed with disastrous results for himself, his family and his proselytes. Be it as it may, monotheism always brought with it a blind faith in a quite often ruthless, jealous and, frequently, unpredictable God whose Word was the supreme law and had to be obeyed without question. On the other hand, the unusual creed implied a change in mentality, a whole new approach to life, unfamiliar rites and practices which estranged the Jews from the other peoples they came into contact with, and who still worshipped a multitude of deities as their fathers and forefathers had done before them.

Although the religious issue, both in pre-Christian and Christian times always lay at the core of the persecutions inflicted on the Jewish people, the real crux of the matter is to be found deeper into the past. Actually, it seemed to be deeply rooted in some features inherent to the character of the members

of the Hebraic community which always singled them out wherever they might be living.

In fact, God had lavished many a bounty on his Chosen People; Jews were, generally speaking, highly intelligent, hardworking, learned men (there were many famous doctors and scholars among them) who displayed a remarkable capacity for enduring in the face of adversity and possessed an inbred knack to multiply the money that happened to fall into their laps.

This last gift might be considered a blessing but was really a curse in disguise, since Hebrews increased their fortunes mostly by lending money with interest. This procedure supplied the grounds for the treatment that the members of the Jewish community suffered at the hands of the medieval and renaissance dramatists who tended to consider they were one and the same as the loathed, highly stereotyped, greedy usurer.

In England, during the Elizabethan period, labelled as the Golden Age of the theatre, both Marlowe and Shakespeare depicted Hebrews, male and female alike, in their plays. However, the women were not that important. Their role as daughters of the leading characters meant, in practice, that they were mere pawns in a twisted game of lies, intrigue and revenge which their respective fathers played with gusto.

Marlowe very aptly starts *The Famous Tragedy of the Rich Jew of Malta* with a Prologue delivered by Machevill, a character that was bound to draw the full, immediate attention of his audience. Elizabethans believed Machiavelli or Machevill, as Marlowe prefers to call him, to be the devil incarnate or, at least, the greatest archvillain ever, in short a bettered (or should it be worsened?) version of the Morality Vice. The fact that the Poet chose him to present the play, lends it a certain atmosphere and, above all, speaks volumes for the main character that Machevill claims as one of his followers:

But to present the tragedy of a Jew,
Who smiles to see how full his bags are crammed,
Which money was not got without my means.
I crave but this, grace him as he deserves,
And let him not be entertained the worse
Because he favours me. (Marlowe 1992: 10)

But even if Barabbas (the name could not be more appropriate and ambiguous; actually, it means son of the father) were not a devotee of Machiavelli, he would always be the rich despicable Jew who thrives on the hatred that Christians bear him. Although he pays everybody back in their own coin whenever the opportunity arises, most often than not, he has to hide his feelings for safety's sake:

Or who is honoured now but for his wealth ?
Rather had I a Jew be hated thus,
Than pitied in a Christian poverty :

For I can see no fruits in all their faith,
 But malice, falsehood, and excessive pride,
 Which methinks fits not their profession. (Marlowe 1992: 15)

Even the love he insists he feels for his daughter, Abigail, it is also tainted by his cunning devious mind, as it can be inferred from the simile he uses when he tries to put that emotion into words:

I have no charge, nor many children,
 But one sole daughter, whom I hold as dear
 As Agamemnon did his Iphigen: (Marlowe 1992: 16)

However, as contemptible as Barabbas may be considered by Christian standards, he is definitely a respected member of the Jewish community, at least for most of the play. In fact, his peers value his counsel in matters of importance:

2 JEW
 Come therefore let us go to Barabas ;
 For he can counsel best in these affairs;
 And here he comes. (Marlowe 1992: 16)

Although Barabbas has been showing himself all along as the base rascal he is supposed to be, his true machiavellian ways will only reveal themselves to their full extent after he has been trapped by Ferneze into relinquishing to the State of Malta what the Governor thought was the entire fortune of the accursed Jew:

BARABBAS
Corpo di Dio ; stay, you shall have half,
 Let me be used but as my brethren are.

GOVERNOR
 No, Jew, thou hast denied the articles,
 And now it cannot be recalled.

BARABBAS
 Will you then steal my goods ?
 Is theft the ground of your religion

GOVERNOR
 No, Jew, we take particularly thine
 To save the ruin of a multitude. (Marlowe 1992: 22)

The dialogue between Barabbas and Ferneze and the Knights precedes the scene in which Barabba's riches are misappropriated with the excuse that the tribute to the Turk had to be paid. Apparently all had been said and done. Nothing could be further from the truth. As a matter of fact, the dialogue goes on relentlessly and becomes a vigorous exchange of arguments and counterarguments which accurately voice the antagonism between Christians and Jews. Both Ferneze and his Knights and Barabbas openly

reveal the hostility they feel towards one another and their words reach unexpected peaks of violence:

1 KNIGHT

If your first curse fall heavy on thy head,
And make thee poor and scorned of all the world,
'Tis not our fault, but thy inherent sin.

BARABBAS

What? Bring you scripture to confirm your wrongs
Preach me not out of my possessions.
Some Jews are wicked, as all Christians are: (Marlowe 1992: 22)

In his heart of hearts Barabbas knows that he has brought on himself the public humiliation he suffered at the hands of the Governor and his Knights. As a Jew, living permanently in the thin divide between illusory security and total danger, he should keep a low profile at all times. However, his machiavellian nature drives him to seek revenge on his torturers. To achieve that purpose he is prepared to use everybody about him and sacrifice anyone that stands on his way.

His first victim is his daughter whose affection and allegiance he exploits shamelessly when he needs her to play the renegade Jewess, as a means to recover the riches he had hidden in his house, now turned into a nunnery by the Governor's orders:

ABIGAIL

Now have I happily espied a time
To search the plank my father did appoint ;
And here behold (unseen) where I have found
The gold, the pearls, and jewels which he hid. (Marlowe 1992:
.34)

He also succeeds in persuading her to exert violence over herself and pose as the coy maid who cannot choose or decide between Don Lodowick and Mathias . This foul behaviour leads to the untimely, futile death of Mathias, the man Barabbas knows his daughter is in love with. Abigail is so distressed by the whole procedure, for which she cannot help but feel partly responsible, that she resolves, there and then, to embrace the Christian faith for good:

ABIGAIL

Then were my thoughts so frail and unconfirmed,
And I was chained to follies of the world :
But now experience, purchaséd with grief,
Has made me see the difference of things.
My sinful soul, alas, hath paced too long
The fatal labyrinth of misbelief,
Far from the sun that gives eternal life. (Marlowe 1992: 60)

Mathias' death is, thus, one of the first of a succession of murders, some planned from the beginning by Barabbas and others brought about by the dire need of avoiding being discovered. Others still were committed out of sheer wickedness. These assassinations coupled with plots, counterplots and double--dealings both with Christians and Turks will only come full circle when the Jew, once again is tricked by the very Christian Ferneze, building a parallelism of sorts with what happens in the first stages of the play:

GOVERNOR

Should I in pity of thy complaints or thee,
Accurséd Barabbas, base Jew, relent ?
No, thus I'll see thy treachery repaid,
But wish thou hadst behaved thee otherwise.(Marlowe 1992:
104).

As befits a true Marlovian character, Barabas dies raving, cursing and lashing out at everybody around him:

BARABBAS

Know, Governor, 'twas I that slew thy son ;
I framed the challenge that did make them meet :
Know, Calymath, I aimed thy overthrow,
And had I but escaped this stratagem,
I would have brought confusion on you all,
Damned Christian dogs, and Turkish infidels;(Marlowe 1992:
104)

With all due respect for Harold Bloom's critical insight, his attempt to subvert the traditional interpretation of Shylock as a 'humanized Jew'^a is not very convincing. Actually, any attentive reading of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* will prove that Shylock's most outstanding feature consists in giving outward expression to feelings that any human being can relate to.

His first dialogue with Antonio shows as much. Bassanio's model friend treats Shylock with contempt and chides him for being a usurer. This was, in fact, the Christian merchant's right since his opponent was the hated Jew. Shylock's demeanour, by contrast, never lacks dignity while he lists the indignities that he has suffered at the hands of Antonio. It stands to reason, Shakespeare never meant to defend a Jew against any Christian, nor could he, for that matter, but the way in which he shapes the Shylock's speech is such that sorrow and grief can be easily perceived:

Shy. 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 spet upon my Jewish gaberdine
 And all for use of that which is mine own.(Shakespeare 1959:
 196)

No matter how absurd the bond of a pound of flesh may sound and be, Shylock would probably never have claimed it, if he had not been deeply hurt by certain events. In fact, this Jew, unlike Barabbas, who never really cared for anybody but himself, had definitely loved his wife Leah and was intensely devoted to his daughter Jessica. This is why Jessica's betrayal hurts him so deeply. Although the riches that she takes away with her for her own benefit and that of her Christian lover weighed heavily on the scales, it still cannot be denied that Shylock valued some of the things, she so lightly parts with to please her whims, for the fond memories they conjure up in his mind:

Tub. One of them showed me a ring that he had of
 your daughter for a monkey
Shy. Out upon her ! Thou torturest me,
Tubal : it was my turquoise ; I had it of Leah
 when I was a bachelor : I would not have given
 it for a wilderness of monkeys. (Shakespeare 1959:
 204)

Scene I Act IV in the Court of Justice is so well-known and has been so sifted through by every scholar and critic that it defies any attempt to come up with something that has not been mentioned before. In it, the conflict that opposes Jews to Christians, finds its roots. It is the confrontation between the ways of the Old and New Testaments, that is, between an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth and the belief in God's Mercy towards all his creatures. It is this virtue that Portia urges Shylock to exercise towards Antonio:

Por. 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. (Shakespeare 1959: 211)

However, Shylock's religion does not allow him to accept this idea, and his stubbornness in being repaid according to the tenets of the law is his undoing: all his assets are seized upon by the State of Venice and his life lies at stake. *Mercifully*, the Duke foregoes the death penalty but, in exchange, at Antonio's suggestion, the Jew must be christened:

Ant. Two things provided more, that, for this favour,
 He presently become a Christian; (Shakespeare 1959:
 213)

There has been a lot of speculation about the reason or reasons why the Jew does not rebel against this decision, or rave and rant about it. And, once again, Shylock seems to compare unfavourably with Barabbas. The tenor

of the whole argument lies in the supposed improbability of Barabbas accepting such a deal, had he been offered one, favouring death instead. But Shylock, after all he has been through and as befits the "humanized" Jew he portrays, is already "dead" inside. So, the prospect of enforced baptism, however repulsive and insulting it might have been to him in other circumstances, can no longer worsen the feeling of sheer, utter emptiness that comes with the realisation that ultimate defeat cannot be evaded.

So, both Barabbas and Shylock should be accepted as Marlowe and Shakespeare thought fit to create them, that is to say, as different characters that have been assigned different roles in different plays to fulfil different purposes. And, as such, all disparaging comparisons, both ways, are meaningless.

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