

Shylock's five-faceted character

Jesús Cora Alonso

UNIVERSIDAD DE ALCALÁ DE HENARES

The figure of Shylock has engaged the imagination and attention of critics when dealing with Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. Many have dwelled on Shylock's Jewishness and have pondered whether the play is imbued with anti-semitism or not.¹ Shylock's being a Jew is certainly important, but focusing exclusively on this aspect of the character is sheer reductionism, especially blatant when assuming an extreme new-historicist or post-structuralist approach which may render Shakespeare as a despicable Dead White Male full of prejudice against other races.²

Indeed, Shylock can be considered in some respects the archetypal Jew, but it is also true that he also shows characteristics appertaining to other dramatic archetypes such as the malcontent and the New Comedy father in both its usurious and miserly subtypes. If we want to make a full appraisal of Shylock and see whether the play is racist or not, we will have to take into account that he is a Jew, a malcontent, a usurer, a miser and a father, the five facets I refer to in the title of my paper, and, this is most important, that his Jewishness is, paradoxically, both qualified and enhanced by the other four aspects.

Shylock as a Jew illustrates the commonplaces and prejudices of Christian societies against his "nation". He is the cruel usurer who knows no mercy, a misbeliever, a dog, a devil, as he is many times called in the play, and, possibly, a cannibal as show his desire for a pound of Antonio's flesh "to feed fat the grudge" (I. iii. 42)³ he bears him and his decision to accept Bassanio's invitation to supper "to feed upon/ The prodigal Christian" (II. v. 14, 15), remarks that hark back to the

¹ For a brief summary of opposed views see John F. Andrews's afterword essay entitled Perspectives on *The Merchant of Venice*, in the Everyman Edition (London, Dent, 1993) 202-19, esp. 205-6.

² Even moderate new-historicist approaches like that of Ania Loomba's in *The Color of Patriarchy: Critical Difference, Cultural Difference, and Renaissance Drama in Women, "Race", and Writing in the Early Modern Period*, ed. by Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker (London, Routledge, 1994) 17-34, include sorry instances of "positive bigotry" like race-oriented readings of "black" and "darkness" and other images in John Webster's *The White Devil*. Loomba paranoiacally sees racist connotations in the use of these words as qualifiers because of their moral implications: «In *The White Devil*, "blackness" is a signifier for various forms of socially unacceptable behaviour. Flamineo says: "As in this world there are degrees of evils, / So in this world there are degrees of devils." (IV. ii, 57-8). The term "black" is obsessively used to describe all of them. Monticelso calls Lodovico a "foul black cloud" (IV. ii, 99); Flamineo, at the end of the play, sums up his own life as a "black charnel" (V. vi, 267); there is "black slander" (II. i, 60), "black lust" (II. i, 7), "a black concatenation of mischief" (III. ii, 29-30), "black deed" (V. iii, 247), and Monticelso's "black book" in which "lurk the names of many devils" (IV. i, 33, 36). (27). Overlaps between the construction of women and cultural outsiders [...] are similarly evident in the process of "naming" Vittoria. "Black dust" and "black concatenation of mischief" are attributes of this "debauch'd and diversivolent woman" (III. ii, 29-30). The "jade" Vittoria is obliquely referred to as a "resty Barbary" horse" (IV. ii, 93), and when Brachiano suspects Vittoria's fidelity, he describes her not only through the patriarchal stereotypes of "changeable stuff" and "whore", but as a "devil in crystal", whose beauty is fatal as a "heathen sacrifice" (IV. ii. 43, 46, 85, 86)». (28). It is true that the words "black" and "darkness" show negative connotations as to morals in this play and many others in the Renaissance, but it is also true that they have nothing to do with race but with the atavic fear of darkness and night common to all humans whence the negative connotations spring.

³ I have used the text of the Arden edition, second series, edited by John Russell Brown (1955, London, Routledge, 1989) for all the references to and quotations from the play.

long-standing myth about Jews that crucified and later devoured tender, innocent Christian children. Yet at the same time, Shylock is also the much-maligned Jew, a victim of society, of people such as Antonio, Gratiano, Solanio and Salerio who despise, hate and insult him on account of his race, religion and customs. He is a wronged character who deserves our sympathy, a figure that harbours an understandable but also alarming wish for revenge.¹

Thus, Shylock is also a malcontent, that is, an archetypical character who has been mistreated by society, or, in some cases, at least thinks he has been wronged or deserves better and therefore bears a grudge against the existing order which he is intent on subverting by achieving his personal revenge on the very person who slighted or hurt him in some way.

In this respect, Shylock is akin to not only Marlowe's Barabas, but also other Shakespearean characters like Don John, Iago and Edmund as well as John Webster's Bosola and Middleton and Rowley's De Flores, Marston's Malevole, even Milton's Satan. As Shylock is a Jew, an alien, who must bear prejudice and upon whom heaps of abuse are piled, he is the perfect embodiment of the malcontent. The bond with Antonio allows him the great opportunity to satisfy his desires for revenge and social subversion.

We first know his intentions in his aside in I. iii 36-47 in which he reveals the reasons why he hates Antonio, but we can also think that Shylock is already considering the possibility of revenge earlier in the same scene when Bassanio entreats him to lend Antonio the money he needs. To me, Shylock's "Antonio is a good man" implies that Antonio is a good man indeed, but not in the usual moral sense, but in a private sense that only Shylock can understand: Antonio is a suitable man for his vengeful purposes. On the one hand, Shylock wants to take revenge on Antonio because he bears a personal grudge against him as he is his rival in the money-lending business and he has often spat and spurned him in public; on the other, Shylock also chooses Antonio as a scapegoat to assuage both his personal resentment and the collective rancour of other Jews for the prejudice and discrimination they are subject to. That is why in the justification of revenge he delivers to Salerio and Solanio in III. i, the "Hath not a Jew eyes?" speech, a remarkable rhetoric piece, he starts personalising, referring to his own predicament by identifying the reason why Antonio insults him: "I am a Jew", then speaks about the more and abstract "a Jew" and continues with the plural "we" and "us" in contraposition with the general "you", just to revert to "a Jew" in contraposition with "a Christian" and finally the first person singular pronoun "I" in a two-way progression from the particular to the general and back again (the italics are mine):

... he hath disgrac'd *me*, and hind' red *me* half a million, laugh'd at *my* losses, mock'd at *my* gains, scorned *my* nation, thwarted *my* bargains, cooled *my* friends, heated *mine* enemies, -and what's his reason? *I* am a Jew. Hath not *a Jew* eyes? hath not *a Jew* hands, organs, dimen- sions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as *a Christian* is? - 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 *we* are like *you* in the rest, *we* will resemble *you* in that. If *a Jew* wrong *a Christian*, what is his humility? revenge! If *a Christian* wrong *a Jew*, what should his sufferance be by

¹ The earliest story that tells about the ritual murder of Christian children perpetrated by Jews is the martyrdom of St. William of Norwich (1144). A short account of this tale is included in *The Peterborough Chronicle*, see *A Book of Middle English*, ed. by J. A. Burrow and T. Turville-Petre (Oxford, Blackwell, 1992) 73-78, ll. 74-82. Another well-known martyrdom of a Christian children at the hands of Jews is that of St. Hugh of Lincoln, to which, as Burrow and Turville-Petre point out, Chaucer refers in his *The Prioress's Tale*, see *The Canterbury Tales*, vii, 684-86. (I must acknowledge here the help of my dear colleague Dr. Isabel de la Cruz, who helped me locate the *The Peterborough Chronicle* text illustrating this legend). E. E. Stoll also points to the presence of this legend in John Day's play *The Three English Brothers* (1607). Stoll, in "Shylock" reprinted in abridged form in *Shakespeare: The Merchant of Venice*. Ed. by John Wilders, Casebooks Series (London, Macmillan, 1969) 47-58, quotes in a footnote on page 53 the following words uttered by the Jew Zarith: "Now by my soule 'twould my sprits much refresh / To tast a banquet all of Christian's flesh" (page 54); "Sweet gold, sweete Jewell! but the sweetest part / Of a Jewes feast is a Christian's heart" (page 60).

Christian example? - why revenge! The villainy *you* teach *me* I will execute, and it shall go hard but *I* will better the instruction. (III. i, 47-66)

In this speech, his figure rises to an almost heroic stature as he becomes the representative and revenger of his people. He is almost comparable to Satan in the first book of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Thus, the constant references to Shylock as a devil may have been prompted not only by racist prejudice or as a part of the characterization of Shylock as an evil, twisted figure with great rhetorical powers who can even "cite Scripture for his purpose" (I. i, 93), but also as an indication of his being a malcontent.¹

Just once, there is a reversal in the rôles of Christians and Jews. The Jew was, as a rule, subject to prejudice, discrimination, persecution and mass-murder in pogroms as the scapegoat of Christian societies whenever they faced problems such as the failure of crops or the affliction of plague. In Shakespeare's play, Shylock becomes the would-be victimizer, not the victim. This inversion of rôles, which is again reversed at the end of the play, is a result of the combination of the theme of revenge, actually an illustration of the biblical Talion Law, of course, justified to some extent, and a peculiar rendering of the world-upside-down *topos* which was no doubt, quite shocking if not "subversive" for Elizabethan times.

Besides, with his insistence on his bond, Shylock not only cherishes his personal revenge on Antonio, but also the disruption of Venetian law and order. If he has not one thing he will try to achieve the other:

And by our holy Sabbath have I sworn
To have the due and forfeit of my bond, -
If you deny it, let the danger light
Upon your charter and your city's freedom. (IV. i, 36-39)

The pound of flesh which I demand of him
Is dearly bought, 'tis mine and I will have it:
If you deny me, fie upon your law!
There is no force in the decrees of Venice.
I stand for judgment, - answer, shall I have it? (IV. i, 99-103)

Of course Shylock is bound to fail, but the main reason why he fails is not that he is a Jew, but because he is a malcontent, because he supposes a threat to society and he is a double-dealer, a revenger. Malcontents and revengers, whatever their race, are always punished in Elizabethan and Jacobean plays. In *The Merchant of Venice*, a comedy after all, Shylock suffers his downfall, but this does not cost him his life.²

Shylock is also the archetypal father of Greek New Comedy and Roman *fabula palliata*. That is another reason why he suffers deceit and derision in this play, why his plans are utterly thwarted.

He is just another ring in the long chain of fooled fathers in comedies inspired by the New Comedy example. As Robert S. Miola points out:

¹ John Marston links Malevole with Lucifer in *The Malcontent*: "This Malevole is one of the most prodigious affections that ever conversed with nature; a man, or rather a monster; more discontent than Lucifer when he was thrust out of the presence." (I. ii, 17-20). The connection between malcontentedness and the Devil is manifest in Iago. On the other hand, as it has often been pointed out, both Shylock and Iago may be a derivation of the Vice of the old Morality plays.

² However, Jonathan Miller's 1970 production for The National Theatre Company, with Laurence Olivier as Shylock, showed an added epilogue at the end of the play in which Jessica received a letter presumably telling her about the death of her father while the Kaddish, the Jewish funeral song, was sung off-stage. (This production is available on video in its TV version: *The Merchant of Venice*, ATV, 1974, Renaissance Classics, Polygram Video, 1992, VHS PAL 083 394 3).

the New Comedic agelast enriches Shakespeare's portrayal of Shylock; there is even a suggested *locus classicus*, Euclio in *Aulularia*, who futilely attempts to lock up Phaedria and who suffers comic distress over the loss of ducats and daughter.
(10)

It is possible to add to Miola's remark that Shylock corresponds to the *senex* archetype in as much as he is also undone by an *adulescens*, or two, rather. In classical New Comedy, the usual plot presents a young man or *adulescens* who intends to marry the old man's daughter. The old man or *senex* opposes the match but at the end of the play he must yield to the desires of the couple. Later, in the Renaissance plays written in the New Comedy tradition, the *adulescens* becomes the Prodigal as a result of the influence of the Parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke: 15 which also deals with the relationship between a father and his off-spring.

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare complicates things a bit and doubles the amount of prodigals that fool Shylock by following and combining both classical example and Renaissance tradition in an ingenious way.

The relationship between Lorenzo and Jessica derives from classical New Comedy. The change that Shakespeare introduces is that Shylock ignores what is going on between his daughter and the Christian, he only finds out when it is too late, once they have eloped and stolen a large amount of his money and jewels. Shylock, of course, opposes and hates the very idea of the match, but circumstances force him to accept their love and even provide for them after he loses the trial.

Lorenzo and Jessica's affair is "an unthrift love" as Lorenzo defines it in V. i, 16. Lorenzo is a prodigal although he is not called that in the play and he makes Jessica a new convert to Christianity and also prodigality. Soon they waste what they steal from Shylock and become improvident, that is why Lorenzo, on hearing Nerissa's news about Shylock's deed of gift, compares the document to "manna in the way / of starved people" (V. i, 294-5).

Bassanio is, nonetheless, the clearest example of the prodigal figure in *The Merchant of Venice*. Bassanio defines himself as such in I. i, 129 and Shylock tells Jessica the young man is "The prodigal Christian" in II. v, 5 when he is about to go to have supper with him. It is Bassanio's prodigality what gets Antonio into trouble, for it is for Bassanio's sake that Antonio accepts the bond with Shylock. Therefore, it is Bassanio the prodigal that sets in motion a chain of events that end up in Shylock's ruin. Therefore, Shylock is undone, however indirectly and unintentionally, by another prodigal.

Actually, we can think that there is a third prodigal involved in Shylock's downfall since the Jew also refers to Antonio as: "a bankrupt, a prodigal, who dare scarce show his head on the Rialto" (III. i, 39-40). However, I doubt that Antonio can be considered an *adulescens* for he seems to be older than Bassanio and a paternal figure for him.

Last and by no means least in the analysis of Shylock as a New Comedy *senex* comes the importance of his very name. Shylock is a denotative name and the use of denotative names for characters was another characteristic of New Comedy and *fabulla palliata*. I believe that Shylock is a compound that joins the words "shy" and "lock" in a name that is in consonance with the fact that he is a usurer and a miser and he insists so much that Jessica locks the house and closes the casements for fear of masquers in II. v. In this respect, it is possible that the name implies a pun with "shycock", an obscure slang word that the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as "a wary or cowardly person; also 'One who keeps within doors for fear of bailiffs' (Grose *Dict. Vulgar T.*, 1785)".

The last two facets of Shylock, his being a usurer and a miser are closely related to those of his Jewishness and being a New Comedy father, that is why we might be tempted to think that they are secondary. It is true that usury was an inherent part of the Jew archetype and prejudice against Jews and miserliness is already present in Plautus's *Aulularia* as Euclio becomes obsessed with keeping the money he has found all to himself, nevertheless, I think we must consider these as separate facets in their own right because they are important traits that complement, link, and also clash with the other three facets of Shylock. Shylock's usury and miserliness link the archetype of the Jew with that of the New Comedy *senex* and they are the very aspects that make Shylock a

despicable character. The question is whether these facets are closer to the former archetype or the latter.

This brings my discussion of Shylock's character to the point in which I have to deal with how these facets are combined in the play. This is precisely what we have to observe and analyse once we know the different aspects that conform Shylock: we must study how Shakespeare uses the five facets to guide and prompt the responses of his audience.

If we consider the scenes in which Shylock appears, we will see they follow a four-part pattern which is indeed the development of Shylock's "tragedy". In I. iii, we first meet Shylock and find out that he is a Jew, a usurer and he plans revenge in the fashion of a malcontent. This is the protasis, so to speak, of his downfall. In III. i, we find the core or epitasis where all the five facets are concentrated and counterbalanced in a very short time. III. iii is the catastasis, the climactic point at which Shylock reveals the other characters his true nature as a cruel, relentless, unmerciful usurer and malcontent. Finally, in IV. i, we witness the resolution or catastrophe in which Shylock gets his punishment as a usurer, miser, malcontent, and unmerciful man at the hands of not so merciful Christians who fail to carry out what they preach.

To me, as regards to the combination of Shylock's facets, the most important part of this four-step pattern, of all the play, I dare say, is III. i, for here we find a masterpiece in the manipulation of characters to elicit different emotions and ideas in an audience, the best example of what Shakespeare does with Shylock, the key to grasp what his intentions were on creating this character.

The scene opens with Solanio and Salerio talking about the loss of one of Antonio's ships. Shylock joins them and Salerio starts mocking and teasing him about the loss of his daughter and the irrational conditions of the bond. From line forty-six, Shylock undergoes a rapid succession of emotions and moods in response to what the other characters say. Shakespeare focuses on a single facet of Shylock at a time and he does so to prompt our reactions to each particular aspect of the character.

Thus, Shylock, in the "Hath not a Jew eyes?" speech justifies the conditions of the bond, his desire for revenge with one of the best rhetoric pieces written in drama. Shylock portrays himself as a victim, as the discriminated and wronged Jew. He speaks about himself first, but then he makes the point extensive to all Jews and he sounds, as I said before, as a hero that will set things to rights between Christians and Jews. Shylock underlines the common humanity of Christians and Jews in a series of questions which Salerio and the audience cannot answer otherwise than by saying yes to all of them but for the last one. We agree with what Shylock says up to line fifty-nine. From line fifty-one to line fifty-nine, Shakespeare makes us feel sympathy for Shylock. This is the facet of Shylock as the ill-treated Jew. However, from line sixty we find a twist in his argumentation, he brings revenge to the foreground. Now we have mixed feelings as our sympathy for Shylock clashes with our rejection of his desire for revenge which is morally unjustifiable, a "villainy" as Shylock himself says in line sixty-five. Here the facet of Shylock-the-victimized-Jew is next to and overlaps with Shylock-the-malcontent creating a paradox similar to that which considers what was first, the egg or the hen?

In the conversation held by Tubal and Shylock, Shakespeare uses the latter's facets of miser and malcontent. We see that Shylock cares more for the money and jewels that Jessica has stolen and the money that the search for her costs him than for what may have happened to her. Actually, Shylock would rather see her dead at his feet than lose that fortune. When we hear Shylock's words, we, of course, censure him, we reject and despise him because he is such an uncaring, unnatural father, such a vile miser. His Jewishness is now farther in the background.

When Tubal alternates information on Antonio's bad luck and Jessica's wild expenses, we see that Shylock reacts in two different ways alternating his miser and malcontent facets depending on what he hears. Of course, Shakespeare uses Shylock's moods and the energy he shows in them to produce a comic effect, so that we find Shylock not only despicable but also laughable.

However, at the end of the scene, Shakespeare changes his portrayal of Shylock quite radically. He briefly introduces a new perspective in the character of Shylock which is not fully

developed in the play in order to counter-balance the negative aspects he has insisted upon. This new perspective is that of Shylock as a loving husband. Shylock is really hurt when he hears that Jessica stole and sold for a trifle the ring that his late wife Leah gave him as a present when he was a bachelor. We realize that the ring had a tremendous sentimental value for him, an indication that he also has feelings after all, that he is also a fellow human-being. The extent to which Shylock is hurt is evident in the last lines he utters in this scene. He still thinks of carrying out his revenge, but we can perceive that his mind is troubled by something else, certainly the memories of his long-lost wife which have been stirred in his memory by the news of the loss of his turquoise. We can appreciate this in the deflation of the linguistic energy he displayed in previous lines. In these last lines, Shylock repeats words and makes long pauses. The rhythm of his speech is slower. These are signs that his thinking is not as clear as in the rest of the scene. He sounds absent-minded, pensive, hurt, if not defeated.

Then, bearing in mind this scene, it is quite clear and evident what Shakespeare does with Shylock. He focuses on each of his facets in succession to make him show different aspects of himself which, at the same time, provoke diverse, even contradictory reactions in his audience. Shakespeare's manipulation of Shylock is so fast and superb that we hardly realize that Shakespeare also manipulates us as an audience. The rapid juxtaposition of Shylock's facets confuses us completely. Shakespeare knew very well what he was doing when he decided to join in one character the archetypes of the Jew, the malcontent, the New Comedy father, the usurer and the miser. He knew that their coalescence would certainly create tensions not also within Shylock himself, but also in the way the spectators would react to what they heard and saw. Just as Shylock is a rounder character because of this combination of facets, our response to the play is also more complex.¹

Then, how does this affect the issue of anti-semitism in the play? Well, in fact, the answer is quite simple, all we have to do is to be aware of Shakespeare's manipulation of both Shylock and us, the audience, and see that in fact we have to consider each facet individually, only thus we will realize that Shylock is not despicable or laughable because he is a Jew, but because he is a malcontent, a miser and a usurer. As a Jew he is a fellow human being and deserves our sympathy, as an old man whose feelings are hurt he is also worth our commiseration and pity. Therefore, we must be discerning spectators and readers and avoid being misled by appearances, a theme which is precisely underlined in *The Merchant of Venice*, we must not think that Shylock is just the embodiment of the archetypal Jew as the expression of anti-semitism, for he is not.

I would like to finish my intervention with a few words by way of a (tongue-in-cheek) disclaimer. In this paper I have referred to Shylock as a five-faceted character, I hope this metaphor of mine will not be misconstrued as a racist observation, let me assure you that it is not a cryptic criticism or jibe against Amsterdam or New York Jewish diamond dealers. In fact, I think it has more to do with my own appreciation and valuation of the play and Shylock in particular as jewels in the Shakespearean canon and gallery of characters respectively.

WORKS CITED

¹ It is also possible to consider Shylock as the embodiment of the Old Law, the Old Testament, as opposed to the New Law of the Gospels of the Venetian Christians. This would be a sixth facet. His insistence on carrying out what he thinks, his sticking to the letter of the bond contrasts, quite paradoxically, with the Christians who fail to practise what they say, they fail to follow their principles and prove to be more machiavellian than Shylock, who is wronged again, thus gaining in part our sympathy. For a good discussion of the trial scene and the darker side of the Christians' behaviour see A. D. Moody, *Shakespeare: Merchant of Venice*, Studies in English Literature, 21 (London, Edward Arnold, 1964) 38-44.

- Andrews, John F. 1993: Afterword. *The Merchant of Venice* by William Shakespeare. Ed. by John F. Andrews. London, Dent. 202-19.
- Burrow, J. A. and T. Turville-Petre, eds. 1992: *The Peterborough Chronicle*. > *A Book of Middle English*. Oxford, Blackwell. 73-8, ll. 74-82.
- Chaucer, Geoffrey (1958) 1984: *The Prioress's Tale*. > *The Canterbury Tales*. Ed. by A. C. Cawley. Everyman's Library. London, Dent. 182-191.
- Loomba, Ania 1994: The Color of Patriarchy: Critical Difference, Cultural Difference, and Renaissance Drama. > *Women, "Race", and Writing in the Early Modern Period*. Ed. by Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker. London: Routledge, 17-34.
- Marston, John (1604) 1967: *The Malcontent*. Ed. by Bernard Harris. New Mermaids Series. London, Ernest Benn / New York, W. W. Norton.
- Miola, Robert S. 1994: *Shakespeare and Classical Comedy. The Influence of Plautus and Terence*. Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- Moody, A. D. 1964: *Shakespeare: Merchant of Venice*. Studies in English Literature 21. London, Edward Arnold.
- Plautus, Titus Maccius 1916: *Aulularia, or The Pot of Gold*. > *Plautus*. 3 vols. Trans. by P. Nixon. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press / London, William Heinemann, rptd. 1979, vol. I, 231-323.
- Shakespeare, William (1974) 1992: *The Merchant of Venice*. ATV, Renaissance Classics, Polygram Video. VHS PAL 083 394 3.
- Shakespeare, William 1955: *The Merchant of Venice*. Ed. by John Russell Brown. The Arden Shakespeare, 2nd Series. London, Routledge, rptd. 1989.
- Stoll, E. E. (1927) 1969: Shylock. > *Shakespeare: The Merchant of Venice*. Ed. by John Wilders. Casebook Series. London, Macmillan.

* * *