

## The Satirical Theme of The Merchant of Venice

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### Abstract

Many critics in the past agreed that *The Merchant of Venice* has the theme of praising the sublime friendship and satirizing the deceitful image of Shylock. However, if we consider its theme with the historical background, we can find out that the play actually has a satirical theme towards the Christians.

### Keywords

The Merchant of Venice, satire, discrimination.

### 1. Introduction

*The Merchant of Venice*, written in 1596, is one of the most popular plays by William Shakespeare, the most outstanding English playwright during the Renaissance. The main plot of the story is about the conflict between the Venetian merchant Antonio and the Jewish usurer Shylock. The subplots are about Portia choosing her husband according to her father's will, and about Shylock's daughter Jessica running away with Lorenzo. For a long time, most critics think that through these interrelated conflicts, the play criticizes the greedy, cruel, usurer Shylock. It praises the generous and selfless friendship between Antonio and Bassanio, praises the sincere love between the couples, and praises the clever and faithful heroine Portia. It represents the victory of humanism ideals. But in my opinion, the theme of this play lies in satire. It satirizes the hypocritical Christian and satirizes their persecution and racial discrimination towards the Jew. In the following passage, I will analyze the theme from 4 aspects.

### 2. Historical Background

*The Merchant of Venice* was written during the Renaissance. During Renaissance, the European emerging bourgeoisie fought against feudalism and called for developing capitalism. This was bound to cause conflicts between them and feudalism. In essence, the Renaissance was an embodiment of political reform in the ideological field. The core concept of the Renaissance was humanism, which was a strong ideological weapon for the bourgeoisie in the process of fighting against feudalism. People fought against everything that hindered their individual development. They believed that human beings are the center of the universe, and they believed in people's power, which became the main idea of humanism. Humanism called for equal human rights and it was against the oppression of divinity and feudalism, which was a positive social consciousness.

However, viewing from another angle, we can actually find out that at that time, Britain was at the height of anti-Semitism. Judaism was considered as "heresy", while the Jewish people were considered as an evil race which were spurned and condemned by god. They were pagans and they were discriminated and oppressed by the Christians. During that time, the Jewish people were forbidden to own their land by law, and their property was often confiscated without justification. In working places, they were always "the first to be dismissed and the last to be hired". Many types of jobs were off-limits to the Jewish people. What's more, they were always taxed twice or several times more than other citizens. As a result, they had to make a living by usury. From these aspects, we can see that whether it is in political and economic status or it is

in religious status, the Jewish people were much inferior to other citizens. Therefore, although it seems that the play praises the merciful and friendly Christian, it is actually satirizing them. In the details of the play, we can have a clearer understanding of these issues.

### 3. A Satire Towards the Hypocrisy of the Christians

To begin with, although Antonio and his friends claimed that they believe in Christianity and they treat people with equality and kindness, in fact this is only a selective treatment. For those who did not believe in Christianity, they would attack them in a group, curse and threaten them without mercy. When it comes to the trial scene, neither the Duke nor Bassanio were willing to obey the bound. They demanded that Shylock should be merciful. When Portia came out in disguise, she firstly pretended to agree with Shylock's request and promised that the penalty would be righteous to him. Yet she added that it would be very dangerous for Antonio and she made a speech as follows:

The quality of mercy is not strained,  
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven  
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:  
It blesseth him that gives, and him that takes.  
(MV, 4.1.180-183)

In fact, although those Christians kept calling for "mercy", they had not put it into practice. When Shylock was "defeated", he asked "the judge" whether he could get his principle back. What did Portia do? Far from being merciful, she not only denied his request but punished him even harsher. Gratiano even wanted to hang him to death. The Duke, who pretended to be sympathetic, told Shylock that if he could confess and behave humbly, he would only be fined. Antonio, the representative of these "merciful Christians" in the play, said:

So please my lord the Duke and all the court  
To quit the fine for one half of his goods,  
I am content, so he will let me have  
The other half in use, to render it  
Upon his death unto the gentleman  
That lately stole his daughter.  
Two things provided more: that for this favour  
He presently become a Christian;  
The other, that he do record a gift,  
Here in the court, of all he dies possessed  
Unto his son Lorenzo and his daughter.  
(MV, 4.1.376-386)

These words are quite hypocritical. Antonio not only avoided the punishment but forced Shylock to convert to Christianity and got half of his property.

Another example that shows the hypocrisy of the Christians is that their love was based on money and hierarchy. Portia is a rich heiress and she is famous for her beauty and virtue. Yet of course, "a rich heiress" is most attracting. Although Bassanio is a lord, he spent money like water and he was in large amount of debt. However, Nerissa praised him as "the best deserving

a fair lady” and Portia agreed. As we all know, Bassanio spoke his mind directly that he was also interested in Portia’s fortune. Moreover, Portia must choose her husband according to her father’s will, no matter who the man is. This is ridiculous. Therefore, these details can show the hypocrisy and irrationality of the Christians.

#### 4. A Satire Towards Oppression and Racial Discrimination

Under that historical background, we can infer that Antonio’s fortune might actually come from the overseas colonies. Yet he cursed Shylock furiously for that he lends money at usury without morality. He also took some unfair competition means and strategies to tear Shylock down. There is no justice for Shylock. Although we can see from the play that Antonio is kind-hearted and elegant to his friends, yet from Shylock’s point of view, Antonio spit on him and kicked him in public. In the Christians’ eyes, Jewish people were worse than dogs. In Act 4, Scene 1, when the Duke said: “How shalt thou hope for mercy, rendering none?” (MV, 4.1.88), Shylock answered: “What judgement shall I dread, doing no wrong?” (MV, 4.1.89). It is his right to perform the bound, yet the Christians regarded him as a devil. All his sufferings were because that he was a Jew. He suffered a lot, and his hatred came from those unfair humiliations, oppression and discrimination. As Shylock said: “He hath disgraced me.....scorned my nation.....what’s his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?” (MV, 3.1.43-47). These series of recrimination made those listeners speechless. From these words, Shakespeare truly showed his humanism: human beings are equal in essence, no matter what race he is and what religion he believes. These viewpoints show the writer’s satire towards oppression and racial discrimination.

#### 5. A Satire Towards the Inequality in Law and Human Rights

Shylock couldn’t have imagined that Antonio and his friends would find out the loopholes of the bound and take advantage of the law. To help his friend, Antonio borrowed 3000 ducats from Shylock. According to the bound, the money must be paid within 3 months. If Antonio fails to do so, Shylock has the right to cut off a pound of flesh from him. However, as the play shows, Shylock not only failed to get his money back, he also failed to punish Antonio. He was even sentenced to be a pagan who threatens the life of people in Venice. Because of this, Shylock lost his property. Half of his property was confiscate to the state and the other half was given to Antonio. It was Portia and the other people of the same party who made all this. With her intelligence, Portia firstly asked Shylock to be merciful. When Shylock refused to do so, she turned to focus on modifying “a pound of flesh”. She said:

This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood.  
The words expressly are ‘a pound of flesh’.  
Take then thy bond, take thou thy pound of flesh,  
But in the cutting it, if thou dost shed  
One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods  
Are by the laws of Venice confiscate  
Unto the state of Venice.  
(MV, 4.1.302-308)

These words made Shylock speechless. In my opinion, what she said was sophisticated. It is not reasonable. Moreover, when Shylock changed his mind, Portia said that he could get nothing else but his bound. She made the situation for Shylock even worse by saying that any foreigner

who attempts to seek the life of a citizen will be punished severely. This is not a fair trial for Shylock. He struggled with all his might to revenge; to get rid of the humiliation he had received with what he thought to be “a legal and fair way”. However, as a foreigner, a pagan, he was bound to fail. These details show the satire towards the inequality in law and human rights.

## 6. Conclusion

Through these analyses of the details, we can see it clearly that the Christians are hypocritical. They claim to be merciful, yet they are cruel and inhuman to other races and religions that are different from theirs. It is a valid fact that they defrauded Shylock's property; their prejudice and discrimination towards the Jew is obvious. Therefore, as far as I am concerned, the theme of this play may not be “praising the Christians” as traditionally thought. It lies in the satire towards the Christians, towards the law system and hierarchy that formed by the Christians. It also satirizes their oppression and discrimination towards other races. Shakespeare depicted the sufferings of the Jewish people vividly, which shows his brilliance as the master of plays.

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