

PERSONALITY OF SHAKESPEARE

SEEN THROUGH SHYLOCK IN *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE*

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This play is characterized by the skilful harmony of tragedy, comedy and romance, done freely without any slavish adherence to the traditional style and form. It will go without saying that as to the material of the play those of other writers are made use of and dramatized into the rich lyrical expression. The nucleus of this play lies in the victory of love over hatred, the love represented by Portia and a merchant of Venice, who is ready to give up even his life for Bassanio, and the hatred by a Jew.

In this play the most striking characters are Portia and Shylock. Here, however, we must remember the fine role Jessica does in making Shylock's devilishness more conspicuous by contrast. As he is covetous, she is generous; as he is anti-Christian, she is pro-Christian, as he blames his suffering on being a Jew she blames hers, much more honestly on Shylock's having made their house a hell.

It is true the bright character of Portia contributes to making up the prevailing atmosphere of this play, but there is no denying that the chief atmosphere of tension is created by Shylock, who is ridiculed and hated by people and who himself hates them. I find far more interest in Shylock than Portia who represents Love.

In this essay I would like to examine the attitude of Shakespeare toward Shylock, because I am inclined to think that Shylock's character is based on that of Shakespeare's. To investigate into

many traits of Shakespeare and find out how his own character influenced the portrayal of Shylock is my intention.

The question whether Shylock is intended as a mere object of ridicule or is made to awaken pity may be rightly answered by "yes" in either case. Which of the above two, however, makes a deeper impression upon us, the audience, is not easily decided. Such factors as the characters and social status of the audience or the readers play a great part in deciding the question.

As to that the following historical facts must be observed :

- (1) Christians hated Jews as stubborn infidels.
- (2) Many usurers are found among Jews.
- (3) Usury had been considered as a vice, as unjust enrichment, by Europeans since the middle ages till the sixteenth century.
- (4) Jews were prohibited by law to enter England from the end of the thirteenth century to the middle of the seventeenth.

When dramatists dramatize, not to say novelists, it is natural that they should take into consideration the prevailing passion of the citizens, making clever use of them in their works. Shakespeare is not an exception. It is a matter of course, we might say, that he took up the hatred of common citizens against Jews considering the above historical facts. Here it may not be useless to see more minutely how the above items are made use of in the composition of the play. The items of (1) and (4) namely "racial prejudice" is taken up to brand Shylock a villain on two historical condemnations as both an unbeliever and a usurer. "A Jew", however, is not so mistreated as we expect. In addressing Shylock Antonio uses a term of respect "sir" (I. iii. 80). Bassanio gives Shylock an earnest invitation to supper. Next the items (2) and (3) namely "being a usurer" seems to be an axis on which the drama turns.

Shylock offers the rationalization of usury as well-won thrift, and he hates Antonio

for he is a Christian,

But more for that in low simplicity

He lends out money gratis and brings down

The rate of usance here with us in Venice. (I. iii. 43—46)

Such being the case, it is natural that the drama goes on revealing Shakespeare's antipathy against Shylock in the following facts:

- (1) Good and kind gentlemen such as Antonio and Bassanio regard Shylock as bad and cruel.
- (2) Salanio is previously made use of to prevent the audience from pitying Shylock whatever he may say. (II. viii. 12—22)
- (3) Against Shylock's complaint Antonio's rejoinder is given as

I am as like to call thee so again,
To spit on thee again... (I. iii. 131—132)
- (4) Shylock willingly goes to sup with the Christians after having told Bassanio he would not "smell pork" nor "eat of the habitation which your prophet the Nazarite conjured the devil into." (I. iii. 35)
- (5) Shylock names the synagogue, the place reserved for holy worship, as the place to plot his vengeance.
- (6) Again Antonio's remark, "The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose." (I. iii. 99)

As mentioned above many lines show that Shakespeare intended Shylock to be laughed at, ridiculed and above all criticized. W. D. Smith says, "To the dramatist Shylock was above all a hypocrite who concealed his innate evil behind the mask of a religion he himself did not believe in." (W. D. Smith: *Shakespeare's Shylock* in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. XV, No. 3)

Although every circumstance goes against Shylock, we cannot help sympathizing with him. This sympathy may partly come from our idea about racial prejudice in the present age, but there are some other reasons. The loss of his dear daughter Jessica by her elopement, to the father's shame, with Lorenzo who is regarded as worthless among Antonio's friends, and the deprivation of his great fortune, his only support by law, greatly go to make us have a great pity on him. How great the damage was and how miserable and lonely he

was are seen in the following short but bitter words.

I pray you, give me leave to go from hence ;
 I am not well : send the deed after me,
 And I will sign it. (IV. i. 394—397)

On the modern stage in England Shylock is frequently played as a tragic hero of the race always oppressed and always suffering, which part Henry Irving did.

As a dramatist, Shakespeare portrayed Shylock, who is stony-hearted, revengeful, plotting cruelty. As a man, he suggested the delicate feeling of the oppressed. The speech showing the feeling of Shylock when he was asked to lend money by the very person who had insulted and abused him and Shylock's sorrowful cry beginning with "Hath not a Jew eyes?" (III. i. 61) meaning he is also a human being, surely come from the true character of Shakespeare, I dare say.

Here arises the question whether Shakespeare's personality can be found in his works. Such critics as Robert Browning and Sir Sidney Lee say that in Shakespeare's works, not only in dramas but also in sonnets, he is strictly objective and it is impossible to know his personality from them. Against this Emerson insists as follows in his *Shakespeare ; Or, The Poet*, "Shakespeare is the only biographer of Shakespeare ;...with Shakespeare for biographer, instead of Aubrey and Rowe, we have really the information which is material...We have his recorded convictions on those questions which knock for answer at every heart...so far from Shakespeare's being the least known, he is the one person, in all modern history, known to us." Some consideration must be made as to these two opinions quite contradictory to each other. However strictly objective Shakespeare may be, he could not portray such a great variety of characters in his dramas without revealing some of his tastes and personality. Concerning this Sen Gupta states that Shakespeare does not appear on the stage as the first person and accordingly objective ; but in the world of imagination the thoughts and passions woven into his works are Shakespeare's own and naturally subjective. And the next suggestion

by Dr. J. D. Wigod is, I believe, very instructive. "Shakespeare's characters seem to be more alive than many people we know. It is because Shakespeare informs them with his own life—which is both active, speculative inquiring into the nature of things and dynamic sympathetic imagination and something more what I would call his representation of intense yearning for the ideal (soul). This is the inner man." Thus I am not so ready to admit Emerson's view that Shakespeare's works are his only biography. My view is that Shakespeare's personality can be seen to some extent from his works, but in trying to find out his personality we must be cautious, as Dr. Bradley says, of giving too free play to the exposure of the self of the author and attempt to look for some expressions which seem reliable, leaving the others to the impression of us readers. Of course in that case there remains the question how far we can rely upon our impressions.

It seems to me that what reveals Shakespeare's personality in this play is Portia's speech on mercy (IV. i. 184—204). As seen in *Measure for Measure* (II. ii. 109) and *Tempest* (V. i. 20—32) Shakespeare is a man who is generous, hates mercilessness, and thinks mercy of more value than justice. As a dramatist he makes a villain Shylock, it is true, but as a man he has a pity in his heart and is induced to show mercy to this malicious Jew. This may be the reason why we also have a pity on Shylock though he is a villain. The strain on the side of the audience coming from the miserable fate of Shylock may be said to be alleviated by this celebration of humanity of Shakespeare.

When we speak of Shakespeare's personality we naturally think of Ben Jonson's "Gentle Shakespeare." I want to say that in this play too, "gentle Shakespeare" shows his face. It must be remembered that the word *gentle* has a very wide and deep meaning.

It may be concluded that in this play Mercy has a prominence among Shakespeare's Characters. It may be added that a glimpse of humanity hidden behind the clouds of cruelty is suggested.