



Excerpt From

“Comedy As A Temporal Art”

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Abstract

This essay examines comedy as a temporal genre based on the contemporaneous cultural norms at its creation. As a genre inherently linked with its cultural moment, comedy often unconsciously creates a moral objective which has the potential to become its oppositional genre, tragedy, once the comedy’s underlying moral objective is no longer applicable to a different society or time period. Through a close reading of three Shakespearean comedies and their twenty-first century adaptations, this thesis will examine initially the ways that these original comedies are often interpreted as tragic in a modern context and then, how the adaptations adapt the Shakespearean narrative to conform with the shift in cultural norms. Utilizing Henri Bergson’s theory of comedy as a tool to correct those transgressing society’s norms as well as Northrop Frye’s understanding of comedy as establishing a favorable society, this thesis will demonstrate the ways that comedy becomes a tool that unconsciously reifies certain cultural expectations implicit within the comedy’s comedic content. In the examination of Shakespeare’s comedies with a modern context, it becomes clear that the cultural expectations that were upheld in his original text are outdated and often considered tragic today due to the shift in societal expectations. Ultimately, this thesis establishes the way in which comedy is a temporal art form that is based upon the unconscious desire of society to correct transgressions against the societal norms as demonstrated in the necessity to adapt comedy throughout time.

3.0. The Comedic Evolution To Tragedy

Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* is a clear example of a comedy that becomes a tragedy once the cultural norms at its basis have shifted. As a comedy with the unconscious goal to correct transgressions against Elizabethan England's Christianity-based society, Shylock is a character originally intended as an obsessive, comedic villain but becomes a sympathetic, tragic hero with a modern reading. Howard Jacobson's novel adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice*, *Shylock Is My Name*, is able to remain a comedy because Jacobson subverts the original humor of Shakespeare's play in a novel about the transgressive act of anti-Semitism, creating a comedy that upholds the moral standards of a modern society.

3.1. *Merchant of Venice's* Relation to Societal Norms

In this section, the thesis will address the ways in which Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* reflects the underlying anti-Semitism of Shakespeare's England. The text demonstrates the perspective that Judaism is a transgression against the Christian society, a cultural norm that is subconsciously upheld during this comedic narrative. However, the the unconscious cultural acceptance of anti-Semitism has shifted for modern audiences, therefore necessitating adaptation in modern productions of *The Merchant of Venice*.

3.1.1. Anti-Semitism As A Cultural Norm

Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* acts as an example of how society's norms permeate comedy, unconsciously influencing the foundation of the comedy as it demonstrates behavior that necessitates correcting according to its contemporaneous society. This is most clearly demonstrated in the anti-Semitism present in Shakespeare's writing which is reflective of the anti-Semitism that was present in his society. While it cannot be said that William Shakespeare himself was anti-Semitic, it can be argued that the anti-Semitism present in his society created an unconscious bias influencing his writing. This presence of anti-Semitism cannot be denied upon an examination of the time period. It is even commonly assumed that *The Merchant of Venice* and Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* were partially inspired by the

execution of Queen Elizabeth's doctor Roderigo Lopez, a Portuguese doctor of Jewish descent. Her doctor was accused of treason in 1594 after supposedly attempting to poison the queen.¹ Reportedly, "racial propaganda was a major element in his conviction and his execution was celebrated throughout the country" which led to an increase of anti-Semitic sentiments in England² despite the fact that no Jewish people lived in England at the time. In 1290, King Edward I passed the Edict of Expulsion which banished Jewish people from England altogether and this ban was not lifted until 1656,³ roughly 50 years after Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant Of Venice*. While the law forbid any Jewish person's presence in England, this did not stop the rampant stereotypes against Jewish people. This excess of stereotypes was perhaps exacerbated by the fact that few, if any, people in England at the time would have met a Jewish person including Shakespeare himself. Such false stereotypes as "that Jews ritually murdered Christians to drink their blood and achieve salvation"⁴ demonstrate the incredible cruelty that Jews were perceived to exhibit. Anti-Semitism was clearly present in Shakespeare's England, not only demonstrated in the stereotypes that were commonly held but in the legally upheld anti-Semitism which even disavowed Jews from entering the country.

3.1.2. *The Merchant of Venice* As An Anti-Semitic Play

The anti-Semitism within *The Merchant of Venice* is deeply embedded throughout the plot of this Shakespearian comedy. While the Jewish moneylender Shylock is the most infamous character from Shakespeare's play, he is not the titular character. Instead, the plot follows Antonio, a wealthy Venetian merchant who agrees to let his friend Bassanio borrow money on his credit so that Bassanio may court the heiress Portia. Since Antonio's own money is invested

¹ Richard H. Popkin, "A Jewish Merchant of Venice," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 40, no. 3 (1989), 329.

² Aviva Dautch, "A Jewish Reading Of 'The Merchant of Venice'," British Library, March 15, 2016, <https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/a-jewish-reading-of-the-merchant-of-venice>.

³ The British Library, "The Expulsion of Jews From England," The British Library Board, <https://www.bl.uk/learning/timeline/item103483.html>.

⁴ Dautch.

in ships already at sea, Bassanio turns to the Jewish Shylock for the money while providing Antonio as the guarantor, resulting in the peculiar agreement that Shylock would not require interest but instead a pound of Antonio's flesh was promised in the event that the money was not paid back. After Antonio's ships are reported lost at sea and Shylock's daughter elopes with one of Antonio's friends, Shylock demands his payment in the form of Antonio's flesh. After the winning of Portia's hand in marriage, Bassanio hurries home to help Antonio escape the barbarous threats of Shylock but it is his wife Portia disguised as a lawyer who cunningly outsmarts Shylock, arguing that the bond allows him a pound of flesh but in exacting it, he must not spill any of Antonio's blood. Unable to complete this, Shylock is forced by Antonio to convert to Christianity. In the final act, the romantic plot is resolved with the reconciling of all the romantic couples who forgive each other for any wrongdoing and celebrate the safe return of Antonio's ships.

The plot of *The Merchant of Venice* is rife with Jewish stereotypes revealing the influence of the underlying anti-Semitism that was accepted and legally-sanctioned in Shakespeare's England. Shylock, especially, is characterized as inherently evil due to this religion, as the Christian characters describe Shylock as "the Jew is the very devil incarnation"⁵ and as "an inhuman wretch / Incapable of pity, void and empty / From any dram of mercy."⁶ Even from the title published in the first quarto, the prejudice against Shylock is distinctly clear: "*The Merchant of Venice: the extreme crueltie of Shylocke, the Jew towards the sayd Merchant, in the cutting a just pound of his flesh.*"⁷ Although Shylock's revenge is recognized as legally "just" in the title, Shylock is also centered as cruel and bloodthirsty within the titled introduction to the play. It is not solely Shylock who is stereotyped within Shakespeare's text but his daughter Jessica as well. It was a common narrative in Shakespeare's time to portray Jewish woman as desperate to leave

⁵ William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, Barbara Mowat, Paul Werstine, Michael Poston, Rebecca Niles eds (Washington, DC: Folger Shakespeare Library), 2.2.25-26

⁶ Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, 4.1.4-6.

⁷ Michael Shapiro, "Literary Sources and Theatrical Interpretations of Shylock" in *Wrestling with Shylock: Jewish Responses to The Merchant of Venice*, ed. Edna Nahshon and Michael Shapiro (New York: NY: Cambridge University Press), pp. 3-32, 14.

their families to become Christian,⁸ which is the exact storyline that Shakespeare's daughter follows. She becomes an example of the power and appeal of Christianity as she dramatically laments being born Jewish, "alack, what heinous sin is it in me / To be ashamed to be my father's child! / But though I am a daughter to his blood, / I am not to his manners. O Lorenzo, / If thou keep promise / I shall end this strife, / Become a Christian and thy loving wife."⁹ Although familial bonds are important, Shakespeare here utilizes Jessica to demonstrate that Christianity warrants a higher allegiance. Although not as outwardly cruel in its categorization, the portrayal of Jessica still aligns with Jewish stereotypes as she is shown to be ashamed of her Jewishness, similarly equating it with unfavorable behavior and manners like those of her stereotyped father. While it cannot be determined whether Shakespeare himself was anti-Semitic, his text demonstrates an undercurrent of anti-Semitism that was nevertheless present in his society which unconsciously demands the correction of Judaism in the world of *The Merchant of Venice's* narrative.

Shakespeare presents a dichotomy within *The Merchant of Venice* where the Jews are portrayed as greedy and cruel while the Christians are portrayed as morally upstanding and magnanimous. This dichotomy presents the clear opposition of good and evil which falls along the religious lines of Christianity versus Judaism. Shylock's obsession with revenge and his love of money are presented in stark contrast to the generous and merciful Antonio who represents the ideals of Christianity. Antonio even remarks on their difference while he is facing imminent death, "my patience to his [Shylock's] fury, and [I, Antonio] am armed / To suffer a quietness of spirit / The very tyranny and rage of his."¹⁰ Antonio is portrayed as quiet and courageous in the face of Shylock's bloodthirsty need for revenge. Continuously, the Christian characters are attributed with the ideals of mercy and generosity that Shylock is portrayed as lacking. It is only when the Christian characters interpret Shylock as acting favorably, they equate this with him representing Christian behavior. For instance, when Shylock agrees to lend Antonio and Bassanio

⁸ Efraim Sicher, *The Jew's Daughter: A Cultural History of a Conversion Narrative* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2019).

⁹ Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, 2.3.16-21.

¹⁰ Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, 4.1.12-14.

money without interest, Antonio interprets this as an act of Christian kindness, saying “The Hebrew will turn Christian; he grows kind.”¹¹ However, the same act initially interpreted as an act of Christian kindness is later viewed as representative of the standard cruelty and trickery that Jewish people were stereotypically perceived to exhibit. By creating this contrast between Christianity and Judaism, Shakespeare further humanizes his Christian characters while demonizing his Jewish ones.

3.1.3. Modern Readings Address The Anti-Semitism

In a modern society, the undercurrent of anti-Semitism within Shakespeare’s comedy is not as socially acceptable in a world with a greater awareness of the discrimination against Jewish people. As Aviva Dautch writes in her article, “A Jewish Reading of *The Merchant of Venice*,” “Read in the light of Nazi caricatures of Jews as animals, or Hitler’s description of Untermenschen, the ‘sub-human,’ Antonio’s casual abuse of Shylock as a ‘dog’ has a sinister resonance.”¹² For many today, it is impossible to read *The Merchant of Venice* with the same indifference as Shakespeare’s contemporaneous audience members would have, as they could exclusively base their perspective on Judaism on the egregious stereotypes prevalent at the time. Instead, a modern reading of Shakespeare’s comedy cannot ignore the violent history that Jewish people have experienced, leading many modern audiences to sympathize with Shakespeare’s comedic villain. According to University of Maryland professor Michele Osherow in an interview cited in the Smithsonian magazine, “many critics think sympathetic readings of Shylock are a post-Holocaust invention. For them, contemporary audiences only read Shylock sympathetically because reading him in any other way, in light of the horrors of the Holocaust, would reflect poorly on the reader.”¹³ While it is undeniable that anti-Semitism is still present in

¹¹ Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, 1.3.191.

¹² Dautch.

¹³ Brandon Ambrosino, “Four Hundred Years Later, Scholars Still Debate Whether Shakespeare’s ‘Merchant of Venice’ Is Anti-Semitic,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, Smithsonian Institution, April 21, 2016, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/why-scholars-still-debate-whether-or-not-shakespeares-merchant-venice-anti-semitic-180958867/>.

the world today, its legal support by state institutions has certainly diminished in places like the United States and England where *The Merchant of Venice* is often produced or adapted.

With these cultural shifts in mind, modern productions or adaptations of Shakespeare's original text must evolve the perceived problematic content due to the audience's shifted norms. As Shapiro writes, "Shylock continues to evolve, as the production of *The Merchant of Venice* continue to reflect the social and political development of the world outside the playhouse."¹⁴ In a modern reading of *The Merchant of Venice*, the anti-Semitism can no longer be considered an unconscious cultural norm addressed in Shakespeare's play but becomes increasingly explicit as it becomes increasingly outdated, ultimately necessitating adaptation in modern productions.

3.2. Elements of Comedy and Their Relation To The Tragic

In this section, the thesis will address the original elements of comedy within Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and how they can be interpreted as tragic today due to the shift in the modern society's acceptance of anti-Semitism. Furthermore, Howard Jacobson's novel adaptation, *Shylock is My Name* will be examined as a demonstration of how comedy can be adapted to conform with new cultural norms in order to remain a comedy as was originally intended.

3.2.1 Shylock's Evolution From Comic Villain To Tragic Hero

Despite the negative connotation *The Merchant of Venice* has today, it was originally written as a comedy. Brandon Ambrosino addresses this in article in the Smithsonian magazine, writing "there's little argument that he [Shylock] was initially written as a comic figure, with Shakespeare's original title being *The Comical History of the Merchant of Venice*."¹⁵ The structure of the play confirms what Shakespeare's original title states because *The Merchant of Venice* structurally conforms with the comedic creation of a new society after the defeat of Shylock. As Dautch confirms, the play "is termed a comedy since it ends in marriage rather than

¹⁴ Shapiro, 32.

¹⁵ Ambrosino.

death. Good triumphs over evil ('mercy' represented by Christian Portia being good, 'usury' represented by the Jewish moneylender being evil) and everyone who matters lives happily ever after."¹⁶ As the comedic villain, Shylock does not appear in the narrative after the trial in the fourth act. Once he is defeated, the comedic plot line is allowed to continue, uninterrupted by the chaotic world order that Shylock had introduced. The narrative ends as a comedy in the reunion of the various couples as the comedic denouement dispels any of the potential for tragedy that existed previously within *The Merchant of Venice*.

When performed as originally intended, Shakespeare's Shylock provides a clear example of a comedic blocking character, which requires the audience indifference to Shylock's situation in order for the comedy to effectively direct the corrective force of laughter to them. The anti-Semitism within Shakespeare's text - as a reflection of his original audience's societal norms - allowed the original production to view Shylock as a character undeserving of the audience's sympathy. Throughout the text, the characters continuously dehumanize Shylock by describing him as a devil or inhuman. The most evident aspect of his dehumanization can be seen in the numerous animal metaphors that are used to describe him. During the course of the play, Shylock is described as a "cutthroat dog,"¹⁷ a "damned, inexorable dog,"¹⁸ and that his "desires / Are wolfish, bloody, starved, and ravenous"¹⁹ Since Shakespeare's audience would have been primed to distrust the Jewish moneylender because of the stereotypes they prescribed to, the other characters' descriptions of Shylock would have reinforced for them Shylock's inhumanity. Due to his dehumanized status in their eyes, Shakespeare's audience would have found it difficult to sympathize with the bloodthirsty and cruel Shylock, allowing him to be interpreted as a comedic blocking character.

¹⁶ Dautch.

¹⁷ Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, 1.3.121.

¹⁸ Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, 4.1.130

¹⁹ Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, 4.1.139-140.

According to Frye, a comedic blocking character “is obsessed with his humor, and his function in the play is primarily to repeat his obsession”²⁰ implying an imbalance within his bodily humors which leads to the comedic blocking character’s obsessive nature. This repetitive and all-consuming obsession can be seen in Shylock’s need for revenge. The other characters in *The Merchant of Venice* cannot comprehend the logic behind Shylock’s behavior with his obsession for revenge overcoming the greed that they previously associated with him. As his own daughter Jessica reports, “When I was with him, I have heard him swear / To Tubal and to Chus, his countrymen, / That he would rather have Antonio’s flesh / Than twenty times the value of the sum / That he did owe him.”²¹ Instead of receiving exorbitant wealth, Shylock maintains that he would rather cut a pound of flesh from his enemy, an inconsistency from his earlier characterization that demonstrates his obsessive nature as a comedic blocking character. Shylock himself admits to this imbalance within his bodily humors and his mental state, saying “You’ll ask me why I rather choose to have / A weight of carrion flesh than to receive / Three thousand ducats. I’ll not answer that, / But say it is my humor.”²² Shylock recognizes the lack of logic in his own actions and desires, however he continues to demand the bond of Antonio’s flesh. As a comedic blocking figure, his need for revenge overtakes his other character traits. Shylock therefore becomes a “truly comic figure. A Bergsonian character who has relinquished his freedom to become the plaything of the technical law. This is the obsessive, ridiculous nature described by Frye in his explanation of a comedic blocking character.”²³ If solely examining Shakespeare’s original text, Shylock is a bloodthirsty comedic blocking character who ignores everything but his need for revenge.

However, while the text implicates Shylock as a comedic blocking character, a modern reading of Shylock is more akin to Aristotle’s definition of a tragic hero. With an audience’s sympathetic interpretation of *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock becomes a tragic hero who is

²⁰ Frye, 168.

²¹ Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, 3.2.296-300.

²² Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, 4.1.41-44.

²³ Marshall Walker, "Shakespeare's Comedy (or Much Ado About Bergson)" *Interpretations* 3, no. 1 (1971), 5.

deeply flawed but deserves the audience's pity due to the unmerited suffering that he faces and the impossible circumstances he is subjected to. While Shylock cannot be said to present a morally good character, Aristotle argues that tragedy should not exhibit morally clear characters. He writes that "nor again should the downfall of the utter villain be exhibited. A plot of this kind would, doubtless, satisfy the moral sense, but it would inspire neither pity nor fear,"²⁴ demanding that the audience sympathize with the tragic hero despite their potential flaws. With a sympathetic viewpoint of Shylock, he becomes not an inherently evil character due to his religion but one who is frustrated by the discrimination and prejudice he has been subjected to. Sider argues that "we [the audience] are invited to feel sympathy for Antonio's antagonist also, he causes grief, but he endures much in Jessica's elopement and theft and in Antonio's abuse... He is no motiveless villain; there is wrong on both sides."²⁵ While Shylock attempts an egregious act of violence, it comes after many years of abuse at the hands of the Christian characters and the recent loss of his daughter. In this light, Shylock is not exclusively an evil character obsessed with revenge but a grieving father who reacts poorly in the aftermath of his daughter's betrayal.

While Shakespeare's text itself generally dehumanizes Shylock, there are moments where his humanity becomes apparent, albeit in subtle ways that are highlighted in modern productions and adaptations. While the Christian characters report Shylock's rampage after Jessica's theft was primarily focused on the loss of fortune, Shylock himself exhibits grief over the loss of a precious object saying "Out upon her [Jessica]! Though torturest me, Tubal. It was my turquoise. I had it of Leah [Shylock's late wife] when I was a bachelor. I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys."²⁶ Instead of placing his primary concern on the loss of fortune, he is most upset by the theft of a precious object from his beloved, late wife. These concerns are in direct opposition to Shylock's reading as a comedic blocking character because in the revelation of his humanity, it dispels the notion that he is a character driven by obsession. Instead, this humanity demonstrates a secondary potential reading of Shylock as a flawed character dealing

²⁴ Aristotle, 37

²⁵ John Wm. Sider, "The Serious Elements of Shakespeare's Comedies," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (1973), 3.

²⁶ Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, 3.1.119-122.

with tragic circumstances. This reading is furthered by the complicated morality that Shylock presents which aligns with Aristotle's definition of a tragic hero as a "character between these two extremes, that of a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty."²⁷ Shylock is not a morally upstanding character but rather he is a complex character who experiences hardships and strongly reacts to them. He is a deeply flawed character but not a character undeserving of pity. With a closer examination of the text, a further motivation beyond an obsessive need for revenge can be seen with Shylock's actions, contributing to the reading of Shylock as a tragic hero.

Furthermore, Shylock as a tragic hero supports the interpretation of *The Merchant of Venice* as a tragedy in accordance with Aristotle's theory of the genre. Within the original text, there is ample opportunity for Shylock to evoke the pity of the audience if they are inclined to sympathize with him, as a society less based on anti-Semitism would be. Aristotle makes the argument that tragedy evokes pity and fear, summarizing that "pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves."²⁸ In a society that does not legally perpetuate anti-Semitism as a cultural standard, the discrimination that Shylock experiences would be considered unmerited misfortune and therefore places Shylock as a character that deserves the audience's pity. Additionally, Shylock justifies for the audience that he is deserving of their pity because he is a person just like any Christian. In his iconic speech, Shylock says, "I am a Jew. Hath not / a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, / senses, affections, passions?...If you prick us, do we not / bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you / poison us, do we not die?"²⁹ Shylock speaks to his humanity, an appeal that he is deserving of the same respect as any Christian despite their differences in religion. In the evocation of pity and sympathy from a modern audience not prone to Shakespeare's original audience's comedic indifference, Shylock becomes a clear example of a tragic hero. This sympathetic reading of

²⁷ Aristotle, 37.

²⁸ Aristotle, 37.

²⁹ Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, 3.1.57-65.

Shylock serves to justify a modern reading of *The Merchant of Venice* as a tragedy, demonstrating the temporality of the original comedy.

While modern productions of Shakespeare's original *The Merchant of Venice* represent Shylock as an increasingly sympathetic and tragic character, modern adaptations of the original text also highlight the tragic heroic nature of Shylock, such as in Howard Jacobson's novel adaptation, *Shylock Is My Name*. Instead of following the Christian merchant, Jacobson's adaptation casts the Jewish characters as the protagonists of his tale. Jewish art dealer Simon Strulovitch does not know how to deal with his daughter Beatrice's betrayal after she runs off with a non-Jewish football player, one notorious for giving a Nazi salute. He turns to trusted friend, Shylock who has similarly garnered his daughter's rejection and is still grieving from the death of his wife. Meanwhile, Beatrice finds herself cavorting with the wealthy heiress Plurabelle, a woman who devises her own tests of loyalty to her would-be suitors and D'Anton, a modern wealthy Antonio. Eventually Shylock and Strulovitch threaten lawsuits after the disappearance of his underage daughter with the older football player, after Strulovitch made it apparent that the only way Beatrice's newfound love, Gratan Howsome, would win his respect is by symbolically becoming Jewish with an adult circumcision which D'Anton agrees to take Gratan's place through. After a large party which appears more as a trial, D'Anton disappears for his circumcision. However, everyone is later informed by a doctor that D'Anton was circumcised as a child and therefore, the procedure was unnecessary. Strulovitch may have been fooled but in the end, Beatrice returns from her fling with Gratan, creating a bittersweet ending where Strulovitch's pride has been hurt but the proper order of the world is reestablished.

In *Shylock Is My Name*, Jacobson further heightens Shylock and Strulovitch as tragic figures by detailing the unmerited discrimination they have received due to their faith. Within the novel, Shylock and Strulovitch comment on the effect of comedy when utilized against them: "they used to spit on me, now they tell me Jewish jokes." "Good jokes?" "Not the way they tell them." "But kindly meant presumably." "Tell me a joke that's kindly meant."³⁰ Jacobson's characters recognize the sinister underlying intention that comedy and its corrective humor has.

³⁰ Howard Jacobson, *Shylock Is My Name: the Merchant of Venice Retold (Hogarth Shakespeare)*, (London: Vintage Publishing, 2016), 82

This is utilized in Jacobson's narrative to explain why these sympathetic characters can demand such chaotic things as the circumcision of their daughter's boyfriend. Even Shakespeare begins to recognize the effects of living in an anti-Semitic environment for his Jewish characters, as his Shylock states "the villainy you teach me I / will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the / instruction."³¹ The villainy of the Christian character's anti-Semitism is reflected back to them in Shylock's need for revenge, a need for revenge that seems to emerge from the mistreatment he has received. Jacobson's characters further illustrate the link, stating "Well, if villainy was all the Gentiles saw, villainy would be what he'd show them more of."³² Shylock and Strulovitch recognize their behavior as potentially wrong and "villainous" but they explain it as a reaction to the mistreatment that they have received, further humanizing them despite their potentially morally questionable behavior. Shakespeare hints at the effect of Shylock's mistreatment but Jacobson further highlights the effects of living in an anti-Semitic society, asking the audience to understand and sympathize with the tragedy of the situation, even if they morally disagree with the actions of Strulovitch and Shylock.

Jacobson even further justifies the obsessive tendencies of his Jewish characters in order to differentiate them from the comedic blocking character that Shylock becomes within Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. Instead of the simplistic, obsessive Shylock who would do anything for money or revenge, Jacobson represents two morally complex characters whose flaws are justified within the text. While Jacobson's Strulovitch is presented as a wealthy figure, he is not portrayed as obsessed with his wealth as Shylock was in the Shakespearean text. Whereas Shakespeare's Shylock is comedically obsessed with his money, even stating that "I did dream of money bags tonight,"³³ Jacobson's characters' need for money is explained in a sympathetic manner. Strulovitch explains his accumulated wealth, that "to avoid falling into the hands of the state was reason in itself for making money. One worked and earned in order to not

³¹ Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, 3.1.70-72.

³² Jacobson, 182.

³³ Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, 2.5.19.

die disgracefully.”³⁴ Instead of an incessant greed for money, Strulovitch’s need for financial stability is based in a practical need to take care of oneself and the people that he loves. As a man whose wife lives disabled in his home after a severe stroke, this need for financial security and dignity in the face of illness is not a theoretical for Strulovitch but an ever-present situation in his life. Jacobson represents Strulovitch as a loving husband who has earned money for the sake of preserving his wife’s dignity, even in the face of her severe illness.. The added complexity and justification of the potentially obsessive comedic blocking nature from Shakespeare’s original text creates further sympathy for the protagonists in *Shylock Is My Name*, further highlighting the tragic elements of their life and removing them from the need for corrective humor. By creating two sympathetic characters in Strulovitch and Shylock, Jacobson has redirected the humor of Shakespeare’s original and removes his Jewish characters from the potential to serve as obsessive comedic blocking characters.

3.2.2. Jacobson’s Comedic Response To Anti-Semitism

Whereas Shakespeare’s work unconsciously focused on correcting those who had transgressed the Christian society, Jacobson’s comedy subverts and redirects the corrective power of the original comedy. Howard Jacobson’s adaptation recognizes the anti-Semitism present in Shakespeare’s text but refocuses the humor on the anti-Semitic characters, a more appropriate subject for many modern audiences. The main Christian characters within Jacobson’s narrative portray shocking levels of anti-Semitism. In her anger at Strulovitch, Plurabelle states “I don’t want that hook-nose — I assume he has a hook nose...banging on my doors,”³⁵ using stereotypes about Jewish people’s appearance to insult him. Often, this rampant anti-Semitism is greeted with humor on the part of Shylock and Strulovitch. One instance is when Gratan Howsome is attempting to garner Strulovitch’s favor, trying to assure Strulovitch that he has no prejudices against Jewish people. Upon asking Gratan why people would think that, Gratan answers “‘Because I gave a Nazi salute,’ ‘So easy to be misconstrued,’ said Strulovitch with a

³⁴ Jacobson, 59-60.

³⁵ Jacobson, 284.

sigh.”³⁶ The reader cannot help but laugh at the absurdity of Gratian and Strulovitch’s sarcasm, implying the seemingly obvious: that a Nazi salute is not an easily misconstrued symbol, one with a history of anti-Semitic meaning. However, it is not just the specific instances of anti-Semitism perpetuated by Christian characters that Jacobson’s protagonists ridicule but rather the concept of anti-Semitism. Shylock tells Strulovitch a joke they are both familiar with in a way that a Christian man had told it to him. “Strulovitch laughed. It was one of his favorite jokes, but he wouldn’t have got it if he hadn’t known it already. He had never heard it told so badly....Maybe that was Shylock’s point. Telling it how they told it.”³⁷ As Shylock and Strulovitch laugh at the absurd butchering of the joke, the reader is given permission to laugh alongside them. Jacobson’s Jewish protagonists ridicule the Christian characters’ anti-Semitism, allowing the audience to laugh at the absurdity of those who perpetuate anti-Semitic beliefs, a moral transgression that Jacobson is consciously attempting to correct from Shakespeare’s original. Whereas the Christian characters within Shakespeare’s original *The Merchant of Venice* were portrayed as pillars of moral integrity, Jacobson creates absurd and unsympathetic characters who deserve to be laughed at for their anti-Semitism.

In order to direct the humor at the Christian characters, Jacobson must first ensure that the audience will not sympathize with those characters by interpreting their situations as tragic as opposed to comedically indifferent to them. Jacobson accomplished this transformation by making the Christian characters absurd and unlikeable. In Jacobson’s version, Shakespeare’s original symbol of Christian mercy Portia is transformed into the comedically grandiose “Anna Livia Plurabelle Cleopatra A Thing Of Beauty Is A Joy Forever Christine,”³⁸ a name which highlights Plurabelle’s absurdly over-dramatic personality. Additionally, the originally generous and selfless Christian Antonio is transformed into D’Anton, a man who is dedicated to helping his friends but is depressed by his own wealth. In one conversation between Plurabelle and D’Anton where they discuss their ever-present sadness, D’Anton muses “But are we

³⁶ Jacobson, 177.

³⁷ Jacobson, 46.

³⁸ Jacobson, 36.

advantaged?...For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.”³⁹ D’Anton and Plurabelle’s access to wealth and their questioning of this privilege distances them from an audience who presumably do not have access to the same amounts of exorbitant wealth. Whereas the Christian characters within Shakespeare’s *The Merchant Of Venice* are celebrated for demonstrating Christian ideals, Jacobson’s Christian characters do not evoke the same emotional response, instead becoming absurd and unsympathetic characters that the audience are indifferent to.

3.2.3. *The Merchant of Venice*’s Comedic To Tragic Structure

Another indicator that *The Merchant of Venice* was originally interpreted as a comedy in its original form is because Shylock is included in the final society through his reluctant conversion to Christianity. As Northrop Frye writes on this genre convention, “the tendency of comedy is to include as many people in its final society: the blocking characters are more often reconciled or converted than simply repudiated.”⁴⁰ With Antonio’s request at the end of trial that Shylock “presently become a Christian,”⁴¹ Shylock is converted to become a member of the dominant society that the comedy restores at the end of the play, a society based upon Christianity and Christian ideals. Shylock is not rejected from this society despite his perceived flaws because once he is forced to convert to Christianity, he conforms with the cultural norms that he was previously transgressing. Shylock is therefore considered rehabilitated through the force of comedy to conform with the demands of the comedy’s society, which reflected the dominance of Christianity in Shakespeare’s England.

However, this forced conversion must be considered a positive outcome by the audience in order for the audience to recognize the author’s intended comedic ending as a restoration of order. While this conversion would have originally symbolized Shylock’s inclusion in the final

³⁹ Jacobson, 46.

⁴⁰ Frye, 165.

⁴¹ Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, 4.1.403.

society, many modern societies uphold the concept of religious freedom such as the U.K and the U.S. Therefore, Shylock's forced conversion would be interpreted as a tragic act of exclusion from his chosen society, Judaism. Shapiro explains how Shylock is actually excluded from the structure of the play itself, "Shylock as the comic villain in a romantic comedy, appears in only five of the play's nineteen scenes, and his dramatic function is to prevent the union of the lovers."⁴² Shylock's structural purpose is to chaotically overturn the order of the world when he gains power at the loss of Antonio's ships, a reversal of Antonio and Shylock's prescribed place in society. This chaos presents itself in the impending execution of Antonio while paying his pound of flesh and in the disruption of the loving couples who are only able to reconvene after the threat of Shylock is diminished in the fifth act. However, whereas Shakespeare's original audience could have read Shylock's conversion and disappearance as an act of inclusion in the final society, the aggressive rather than redemptive aspects of the forced conversion are more present in societies with ideals about religious freedom.

This tragic interpretation of Shylock's position is made explicitly clear in modern productions of *The Merchant of Venice*. In the British National Theater's 1970 production, Shylock collapses upon hearing his mandated conversion. As Perret describes, "we see the image of a frozen scream, which when Shylock leaves the room will thaw into a keening that ceases to sound human long before it fades away...Life goes on, but haunted by the Jew's torment."⁴³ Without altering the text, the National Theater's production highlights the horror that Shylock would have felt at the loss of his faith through the visceral keening that demanded the audience's sympathy. It is not the only production to highlight the horror of the forced conversion for a modern audience. In Jonathan Munby's production at the Globe Theater, Shylock's conversion is physically staged at the end of the fifth act, not allowing the comedy to have the traditional 'happy ending' in the distress of Shylock at his conversion and an openly weeping Jessica

⁴² Shapiro, 5.

⁴³ Marion D. Perret, "Shakespeare and Anti-Semitism: Two Television Versions of 'The Merchant of Venice,'" *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 16, no. 1/2 (1983), 151

onstage after learning of the event through a letter.⁴⁴ With these modern productions highlighting the tragic exclusion from Shylock's chosen society, it is difficult for a modern audience to perceive the state of the world at the comedy's conclusion as the proper state of affairs. This shift in cultural perspective allows the original *The Merchant of Venice* to be interpreted by a more progressive audience as a tragic play despite its original intention as a comedy.

Jacobson's Shylock even comments within *Shylock Is My Name* on this potentially tragic act of exclusion from Shakespeare's original text, "There's no Act Six. For me there wasn't even an Act Five. But at least no resolution means no final rejection. Anything could be. There's no knowing."⁴⁵ At best, Shylock's exclusion from Shakespeare's fifth act allows for an ambiguous ending, an ambiguity that Jacobson rectifies within his adaptation to provide the traditional happy ending for his Jewish protagonists. Although Strulovitch realizes that he has been outsmarted and fooled by D'Anton, he also accomplishes his primary goal which is the return of his daughter. As Strulovitch ends the narrative, "it was enough she [Beatrice] was here. It was everything she was here."⁴⁶ Strulovitch also recognizes the moral implications of his actions during the course of the play, saying that "no one had acted with principle. He [Strulovitch] had lost, that was all that differentiated him from D'Anton. Winning - the prize a bloodied D'Anton - would not have made him the better man."⁴⁷ Unlike Shakespeare's Shylock, a happy ending is granted to Strulovitch in the return of his daughter as well as an opportunity to reflect on his potentially violent intentions during the course of the narrative. The correct order of the world is restored at the end of *Shylock Is My Name* with the recognition that the chaotic society during the narrative is not favorable for any of the characters, including the character who initially overturned it with the demand for Gratian or D'Anton's circumcision.

An additional way to view this switch from inclusion to exclusion is to examine it from the lens of the tragic structure. When the focus of *The Merchant of Venice* is shifted from the

⁴⁴ Jonathan Munby, *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare's Globe Theater, 2015.

⁴⁵ Jacobson, 86.

⁴⁶ Jacobson, 397.

⁴⁷ Jacobson, 395.

protagonist Antonio to the comedic villain Shylock, the narrative can be read as reflective of a tragic reversal of fate, a genre convention of tragedy according to Aristotle. As Aristotle describes it, “reversal of the Situation is a change by which the action veers round to its opposite, subject always to our rule of probability or necessity.”⁴⁸ Shylock experiences a great shift in situation, beginning the narrative as one of the lowest characters in the comedy’s society with little power, an outcast due to his religion and profession. However, when the previously powerful Antonio loses his finances, Shylock becomes the most powerful character in the play who is granted the opportunity to determine life or death for the protagonist. Ultimately, Shylock once again loses the power that he has gained in the chaotic center of the narrative with the loss of his religion, a core pillar of his identity. The circumstances that Shakespeare’s audience would have read as comedic inclusion could also be interpreted as a tragic reversal of Situation dependent on the audience’s aptitude for sympathy towards Shylock.

While this reversal of Shylock’s situation can be interpreted as tragic within Shakespeare’s *The Merchant Of Venice*, the tragic interpretation of Shylock’s situation is increasingly apparent in Jacobson’s *Shylock Is My Name*. Aristotle writes that it is not just a reversal of Situation that creates a tragedy, but that “recognition combined with Reversal will produce either pity or fear; and actions producing these effects are those which, by our definition, Tragedy represents.”⁴⁹ The tragic hero therefore must have a recognition or “a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate between the person destined by the poet for good or bad fortune.”⁵⁰ Unlike many comedic characters who often exist in ignorance, the tragic characters often exclusively realize the tragic nature of their fate in this recognition. As Christoph Menke writes, that tragedy occurs “not as a consequence of this lack of knowledge, but as a consequence of the acquisition and ultimate excess of knowledge: as a consequence of his knowing too much about himself - more, at least, than he is able to bear.”⁵¹ Jacobson’s

⁴⁸ Aristotle, 33.

⁴⁹ Aristotle, 34.

⁵⁰ Aristotle, 33.

⁵¹ Menke, 8.

Strulovitch accomplishes this tragic recognition in the awareness that the final chapter brings. When it becomes apparent that D'Anton cannot be circumcised to fulfill the demands of the deal because, as doctor writes, "the patient is already circumcised,"⁵² Strulovitch must come to terms with the fact that he has been outsmarted. Instead of the bloodthirsty revenge that he seeks, Strulovitch becomes a joke to the Christian characters, a fate that he has been avoiding throughout the rest of the novel. Jacobson writes that Strulovitch "didn't have the patience - with the events or with himself - to track back over the subterfuge that had made a fool of him."⁵³ With the knowledge that Strulovitch has been outsmarted, Jacobson's character has the tragic recognition that alters his sense of self in comparison to the characters that he had previously thought to outsmart. Ultimately, Strulovitch's situation cannot be interpreted as completely tragic due to the return of his daughter but Jacobson does further the tragic elements within *Shylock Is My Name* to provoke further sympathy and pity for his characters that were originally vilified in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*.

3.3. *The Merchant of Venice* and Its Tragedy

While Shakespeare originally wrote *The Merchant of Venice* as a comedy, its original text can easily be interrupted as a tragedy today due to the traditionally temporal nature of comedy. As demonstrated, *The Merchant of Venice* reflected the underlying anti-Semitism that was present in Shakespeare's England. This underlying cultural norm influences Shakespeare's original comedy in its unconscious message to correct those refusing to conform with the Christian societal structures that were in place. This subtle messaging in Shakespeare's original text becomes increasingly apparent and problematic with the shifting cultural norms. The anti-Semitism that was underlying within Shakespeare's England becomes glaringly conscious in modern societies more accepting of a multitude of religions and less likely to legally condone religious discrimination. With this switch in cultural acceptance, a modern reading of *The Merchant of Venice* can be interpreted as tragic if the audience's understanding of Shylock is in

⁵² Jacobson, 394.

⁵³ Jacobson, 395.

direct contrast to Shakespeare's original intention as a comedic blocking character undeserving of the audience's pity. Once the automatic indifference for Shylock's situation is removed, the proximity of tragic and comedic structures allows Shylock to be reinterpreted as a tragic figure. As Frye writes, "*The Merchant of Venice* seems almost an experiment in coming as close as possible to upsetting the comedic balance. If the dramatic role of Shylock is ever so slightly exaggerated...the play becomes the tragedy of the Jew of Venice with a comic epilogue."⁵⁴ Once the anti-Semitism that served as the justification for the laughter aimed at Shylock is removed, the audience will be able to empathize with the tragic situation of a man who has been stolen from, discriminated against, abandoned by his daughter, and forced to convert to a different religion. Instead of an obsessive comedic character, Shylock has the opportunity to become a tragic figure for a modern audience as modern productions of Shakespeare's original text demonstrate. Shapiro confirms that "mainstream versions of the play often presented it [*The Merchant of Venice*] in a more solemn mode, often as the tragedy of Shylock."⁵⁵ Shakespeare's original comedy *The Merchant of Venice* demonstrates perfectly the temporality of comedy in its basis on shifting cultural norms. Once these cultural norms have shifted to accept the original transgressions portrayed in the comedy, the comedy will be read as a tragedy in a demonstration of comedy's temporality.

This temporality of the comedic genre is further demonstrated by the necessity of modern adaptations to restructure and redirect the comedic content from the original in order to conform with more current societal norms. Howard Jacobson's comedy, *Shylock Is My Name*, adapts the elements of Shakespeare's original comedy while also highlighting some of the inherently tragic elements in order to make his two Jewish protagonists more sympathetic, despite their morally questionable actions. Jacobson heightens the audience's ability to sympathize with Shylock and Strulovitch by justifying their obsessive tendencies as a reaction to the anti-Semitism that they have suffered and their desire to protect their family. With their understandable motives, Shylock and Strulovitch are no longer the comedic villains from *The Merchant of Venice* but become morally questionable comedic protagonists who utilize humor to survive the anti-Semitism that

⁵⁴ Frye, 165.

⁵⁵ Shapiro, 26.

the Christian characters direct towards them. In this way, Jacobson redirects the comedy of the original to show the transgression against modern societal norms that anti-Semitism presents, demonstrating the necessary restructuring of outdated comedies due to the genre's temporality.

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