
Gypsies, Jews, and *The Merchant of Venice*

Thomas McKendy

For many years *The Merchant of Venice* was as much a part of high-school education in North America as algebra, football, or the teaching of grammar. Recently, however, many teachers, parents, and others have had serious second thoughts about the play. They worry that Shakespeare's distorted presentation of Jews may create or reinforce stereotypes in immature minds and that these stereotypes may seem to be endorsed by the reputation of Shakespeare or the authority of the school and teacher. In 1986, for example, a series of incidents involving name-calling, anti-Semitic graffiti, and the throwing of coins at Jewish students led the Waterloo, Ontario, school board to withdraw the play from the ninth-grade curriculum. Writing in the *Toronto Globe and Mail*, Gunter Plaut (July 22, 1986, A7) and Michele Landsberg (July 26, 1986, A2) have argued convincingly that, granted the wealth of literature available for teaching, *The Merchant of Venice* should not be taught before grade eleven or twelve.

Even teachers of older students, however, need to think carefully about how to present the play. Although such students are presumably impervious to simple stereotypes, they often have much to learn about prejudice. A careful look at Shakespeare's prejudices and their roots can teach students not only about historical attitudes but about their own unacknowledged assumptions as well.

Many college students have already studied *The Merchant of Venice* in high school. Unfortunately, my students report that the issue of anti-Semitism in the play has been generally overshadowed in the classroom by questions of plot, character, irony, and the like. When the issue is raised at all, discussion usually focuses on Shylock's defense of his

humanity: "Hath not a Jew eyes? . . . If you prick us do we not bleed?" (III, i). As proof that Shakespeare was, in fact, a warm human being who repudiated the cruel behavior of his characters, this speech is usually considered sufficient—or, occasionally, insufficient. Such treatment neither acknowledges the seriousness of Shakespeare's distortions nor adequately explains how an otherwise humane and compassionate man could create such an odious misrepresentation. In general, students who have thought about the issue at all consider Shakespeare either a simple bigot or a kind of harmless antique, a quaint portrayer of attitudes no longer taken very seriously.

Of course, neither of these views deals with the actual complexities of history or of modern prejudice. One way of highlighting these complexities before students begin reading the play is to look at their own culture's attitudes towards gypsies.

Gypsies have a number of important similarities to Elizabethan Jews. Traditionally, they have no homeland, living as outsiders in most societies of the western world. Like the Jews, they were singled out for extermination by the Nazis, and hence prejudice against gypsies has been a source of immense suffering in the twentieth century—a fact virtually unknown among non-Jewish students. Moreover, Jews and Gentiles alike are likely to hold a fairly complex set of stereotypes about gypsies that have not been modified by discussion and consciousness-raising as some of their other prejudices may have been. For example, most of them use the verb "to gyp" (probably a derivative of "gypsy" according to the O.E.D. and Webster's Third) as a synonym for "to cheat," although most would be shocked by similar use of the verb "to



jew," a usage that is still common enough to be included in most unabridged dictionaries. Finally, the students' stereotypes of gypsies are usually not so strong or so emotionally rooted in their own experiences and fears as to inhibit self-examination.

In any case, before beginning to study *The Merchant of Venice*, students can be asked to jot down in five or ten minutes everything they know or have heard about gypsies.

Predictably, their "knowledge" includes a number of common stereotypes. In my students' eyes, gypsies are hot-tempered and carefree; they have large families and travel from place to place in caravans, cheating the unwary and stealing their children; gypsies wear loose-fitting clothes with lots of bracelets and earrings; they play the violin and read fortunes from crystal balls or cards; there is always a king.

Now few of my students are naive enough to believe that this set of descriptions presents an accurate view of what actual gypsies are like, although there are occasional claims of factual accuracy: "They sometimes steal babies. (That's true. It happened to my great-grandmother in Romania. I'm not joking!)" Most of the students acknowledge that their views are stereotypes, drawn largely from children's books, popular movies, and television commercials. Only a few are aware of ever having seen a gypsy, and virtually none have ever talked to gypsies. They do not

***The fact is that stereotypes
do not simply evaporate
once they are identified.***

know what language gypsies speak, what religion they practice, or what foods they eat.

The fact is, however, that stereotypes do not simply evaporate once they are identified. The images in our heads may affect our behavior and our attitudes even when we recognize that those images are inaccurate. I ask my students to imagine themselves or their friends writing a story or a television script in which one of the characters is a gypsy. It is possible, I suppose, that the gypsy character will be a neurosurgeon, a police chief, or an English teacher. But I doubt it. Similarly, if the script included a fortune teller, I suspect that that character would more likely be a gypsy than a German, an Australian, or a Japanese.



The point of all this, of course, is that my students' views of gypsies resemble in many ways the kinds of views Shakespeare probably had about Jews. He had most likely never seen nor spoken with a Jew. The few Jews living in England in his day probably were converts to Christianity and, therefore, like Jessica in the play, not "really" Jews. He would have known that Jews on the continent were often moneylenders, a profession closed to Christians because of religious laws against lending money at interest, and that these moneylenders were despised as usurers. Jews for Shakespeare, like gypsies for my students, were a somewhat exotic and largely unknown people. They were perhaps an abstraction to him, and as such he was probably no more hostile to them than my students are to gypsies.

None of this, however, precluded Shakespeare from including an offensive and degrading picture of a Jew when he needed a two-dimensional villain for his play. In fact, Shylock's Jewishness was particularly appropriate to Shakespeare's purposes because it served as a sort of shorthand for a cluster of notions about mercy and justice derived from the way Elizabethans interpreted the Bible. To the Elizabethans, a Jew was a sort of imperfect Christian who had embraced only half



of God's message, the Old Testament. The Old Testament, in turn, represented the covenant of justice, law, and vengeance rather than the new covenant of mercy, forgiveness, and love suggested by the Sermon on the Mount.

This Elizabethan perception of the Jews of the Old Testament sets up the major theme of *The Merchant of Venice*, the opposition of mercy and justice, as personified in the characters of Portia and Shylock. That Shylock is legalistic and unforgiving

***The Christian men
in The Merchant of Venice
do not embody Christian mercy
and forgiveness,
as Shylock well knows.***

is not central to the moral vision of the play; certainly no attempt is made to focus on his repentance or reform after the trial. That Antonio, Bassanio, and Gratiano are equally legalistic and unforgiving, however, is absolutely central. They ought to embody Christian values, but in fact they seem no more virtuous than young men usually are. Even Antonio, often praised for his friendship and generosity, in fact lends money only to his friends. Do not even tax collectors do the same?

Specifically, the Christian men in *The Merchant of Venice* do not embody Christian mercy and forgiveness, as Shylock well knows: "And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. . . . The villainy you teach me, I will execute" (III, i). At the trial, they accept Shylock's terms of reference, and when the law is on their side, they enforce the law. The Duke offers pardon but threatens to recant it unless Shylock accepts Antonio's conditions. Bassanio and Gratiano do not at all understand Portia's message about the quality of mercy until they, too, find themselves in need of love and forgiveness for their broken vows about the rings in Act V.

By making Shylock a Jew, Shakespeare is able to develop this theme efficiently and powerfully for his Elizabethan Christian audience in a way he could not do if Shylock belonged to some other despised group, perhaps the Irish or even the gypsies. Shakespeare does not have to develop Shylock's character in much detail, because he is able to use the stereotype of the vengeful Jew. Because the tension between law, justice, and revenge on the one hand and love, mercy, and forgiveness on the other is a central, if more subtle, theme in much of Shakespeare's mature work (*Measure for Measure*, *King Lear*, *The Tempest*, *The Winter's Tale*), this play is a particularly useful introduction to Shakespeare.

In teaching *The Merchant of Venice*, we must make clear that Shakespeare seems to have shared the prejudices of his time and culture, apparently without the reflection or self-examination that we would expect from any sensitive person in our time and culture. If our students realize that they, too, may harbor such unexamined biases, about gypsies for example, that realization may lead them to a greater understanding of the weaknesses of others—Shakespeare would have approved—and to a more sensitive awareness of their own shortcomings, even when not conscious or malicious.

Nevertheless, students must not be left to think that such biases and stereotypes, conscious or not, are trivial or tolerable (though they may be forgivable). In our own century, such casual stereotypes have almost certainly smoothed the way for more vicious prejudices, for the persecution and slaughter of Jews, gypsies, and others. Shakespeare was not a twentieth-century anti-Semite in period costume, but those of us who teach his plays must take responsibility for seeing that his message of mercy is neither misinterpreted as a rationale for anti-Semitism nor hidden from view by our guilt for our own quite different sins.

*Marianapolis College
Montreal, Quebec H3H 1W1*