



How Shylock is persecuted

Shylock's treatment at the hands of his fellow Venetians is typical of the intolerance suffered by Jews over the centuries. Throughout the play he endures constant verbal abuse:

evil soul	bloody creditor
villain with a smiling cheek	inhuman wretch
misbeliever	unfeeling man
goodly apple rotten at the heart	harsh Jew
cut-throat dog	O be thou damned, execrable dog
stranger cur	currish spirit
fiend	wolfish, bloody, starved and
devil	ravenous
faithless Jew	cruel devil
dog Jew	Beg that thou mayst have leave to
old carrion	hang thyself

Work in groups of four or five. One person sits, and the others surround her/him, calling out insults from the list above. If the person in role as Shylock closes her/his eyes or dares wear a blindfold, the intensity of this experience is heightened. Only use volunteers for the Shylock role and for no longer than thirty seconds. Afterwards, talk about how you felt in role as either Shylock or one of his accusers. Then consider the effect of such habitual abuse on Shylock.

The Merchant of Venice in performance

The Merchant of Venice seems to have been a popular play right from the time it was first performed in 1596 or 1597, although very little is known about productions in Shakespeare's time. Audiences who watched it probably had in their minds Christopher Marlowe's hugely successful *The Jew of Malta* and the trial and execution of Dr Lopez (see p. 187), the Jewish doctor who allegedly tried to poison Queen Elizabeth.

The play was virtually neglected throughout the seventeenth century, but in 1701 George Granville reworked the script as *The Jew of Venice*. He rewrote the play, removing most of the minor characters and promoting Shylock to the title role. He cut and rearranged scenes, adding his own lines and a spectacular banquet scene between Antonio, Bassanio and Shylock.

Granville's version thrived for forty years until Shakespeare's own play returned to the stage in 1741. Prior to that time Shylock was probably played as a comic stereotype, with a flaming red beard. But Charles Macklin's Shylock became a terrifying villain, determined on revenge. That conception became the norm until 1814 when Edmund Kean transformed the role.

Kean's Shylock was a sympathetic portrayal, picking up the complexity of his character and highlighting his intelligence, vulnerability and dignity; it set the benchmark for future productions. Although elaborate scenery and costumes were added in attempts to catch the authenticity of Venice and Belmont, it was Shylock who continued to dominate the play. Some productions cut Act 5 completely, ending the play with Shylock's defeat. At the end of the nineteenth century, Henry Irving won acclaim for his tragic portrayal of Shylock's inherent humanity and nobility.

In the twentieth century, theatrical attempts to realise the full complexity of Shakespeare's play were accelerated by the appalling treatment Hitler and the Nazis meted out to the Jews. The Nazis even used Shakespeare as part of their propaganda. In 1943, Baldur von Schirach, the Nazi governor of Vienna, ordered the local theatre to mount a production of *The Merchant of Venice*. The actor Werner Krauf played Shylock as 'loathsome, strange and amazingly horrible, crawling across the stage'. Of course, there is no justification in