
Shylock and Falstaff

by Flo Powell

When Dr. Vittum gave his Shakespeare 1 class a choice of one of three pairs of male characters for a critical essay, I chose Shylock and Falstaff. Shylock and Falstaff were grouped together because they both had been intended as comic characters. I took a personal interest in Shylock because, as a Jew myself, I found this reading of *The Merchant of Venice* very disturbing.

Twenty years ago when I encountered Shylock for the first time, I was, perhaps, too callow to respond adamantly to his character. This time I found that I was furious that he was portrayed as such a one-sided, wicked caricature. When I learned that Elizabethans had never really known any Jews, because the Jews had been expelled from England by Edward I in 1290, I was even more furious.

All of these emotions contributed to the writing of this paper. I had internalized the character of Shylock because he was a Jew and, therefore, a part of me. I wrote from that emotion. It was difficult, at first, to restrain myself from just venting. When Shylock was stripped of his livelihood and fortune and forced to convert to a belief system that he despised, I felt personally threatened. During our class discussions I was angry and subjective about all the characters in *The Merchant of Venice*, and when we passed on to another play, those feelings remained unresolved.

Most students, I think, find Shakespeare's characters difficult to relate to. The men and women he created seem to exist on the periphery of modern experience because the plays were written centuries ago. The more I identified with

Shylock, though, the more I understood what the playwright had done with all of his characters. To me, these characters became comments about either society as a whole or the human condition, and they were as relevant to modern society as they had been in the 16th and 17th centuries. With this as a starting point I came to see Falstaff as a “rite of passage” not just for Henry IV, but for all of us, and Shylock became more of a universal victim than a villain. His character exposed a very complex disparity between Christian ethic and practice. This distinction does not necessarily belong to Christianity exclusively, and my interpretation grew to include any superior group that makes itself a measure of the norm. For those unfortunates who are outside that group, and have suffered the label of “deformity,” there really is no justice, and Portia’s famous mercy speech takes on a new meaning.

To me, this is, in part, the genius of Shakespeare. He can convincingly gather up all that it means to be despised, or to be young and reckless, and place them into one characterization. When I realized this my anger abated. Shylock, as despicable as he may have been portrayed, spoke the truth. I think that if he had been any less ostracized or hated the audience might not have felt the full impact of his isolation.

During the two and a half years that I have been a full-time student at Plymouth State, I have written hundreds of pages for Dr. Vittum’s classes. At 47, I have a great deal to say, and he is always receptive. His assignments allow me to work out my own life through writing and literature, and I am very grateful for this. As a person who hopes one day to be a successful writer of literature, I welcome the challenge to deeply examine character, plot and technique. With his help, and the help of all of my professors, I often accomplish this goal.

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(a paper written for Dr. Vittum's Shakespeare 1 course)

The test of human realism that any character might display on stage is found in the reaction of the audience. The psychological and social complexity of all of Shakespeare's characterizations are two elements that insure his longevity. The mirror of ourselves that the playwright sets before us is often unexpected and disturbing, but it always provokes us to examine the nature of our own humanity.

Shylock and Falstaff are two such portrayals of human frailty. They are both slightly larger than life, but that enlargement elicits a response from audiences that is rarely indifferent.

The Jew, Shylock, was intended to be a comic figure, but, to modern audiences, may only be comic in the fact that he is a member of a despised race. He is also the villain of Venice, and the question of his villainy is the focal point of the play. His case against Antonio is never clear-cut because we can all feel the injustice that comes to a man who is stripped of everything meaningful in his life.

Shakespeare makes it clear from the beginning that Shylock has been denied any degree of dignity.

Signior Antonio, many a time and oft
In the Rialto you have rated me
About my moneys and my usances.
Still have I borne it with a patient shrug,
For suff'rance is the badge of all our tribe.
You call me misbeliever, cutthroat dog,
And spit upon my Jewish gaberdine,
And all for use of that which is mine own.

Well then, it now appears you need my help.
Go to then. You come to me and you say,
'Shylock, we would have moneys' — you say so,
You that did void your rheum upon my beard
And foot me as you spurn a stranger cur
Over your threshold! Moneys is your suit.
What should I say to you? Should I not say,
'Hath a dog money? Is it possible
A cur can lend three thousand ducats? Or
Shall I bend low, and in a bondman's key,
With bated breath and whisp'ring humbleness,
Say this:
'Fair sir, you spit on me on Wednesday last,
You spurned me such a day, another time
You call me dog; and for these courtesies
I'll lend you thus much moneys'? (I. iii. 102-124)

Antonio boldly responds that even if Shylock agrees to lend him the money he desires, the animosity between them will remain.

I am as like to call thee so again,
To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too.
If thou wilt lend this money, lend it not
As to thy friends... (I. iii. 128-132)

The audience is moved by Antonio's willingness to borrow money so that his friend can court Portia. We see him immediately as a good man, a loving man, who gallantly engages in the Christian ethic of charity. We are even more amazed at Antonio's willingness to risk his life to secure this loan. Throughout the play examples of Shylock's wickedness and Antonio's goodness abound, but Antonio's previous speech raises questions about his core of goodness.

Shylock is a social deviant in his Jewishness, ambition and greed. Shakespeare makes this evident, but, in some way, most of mankind is deviant from what society maintains as normal. Shylock experiences a deformity of spirit because he appears to have little or no capacity for love.

“Certainly the Jew is the very devil incarnation...” (II. ii. 24). If this is so, why are we moved to pity this devil Shylock? We can feel these feelings, even understand Shylock’s drive for revenge, because some part of ourselves identifies with and fears Shylock’s detestable nature. When the Jew rails:

...I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? —fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why revenge! The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.

(III. i. 51-63)

When Shylock asks “...Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions...?” our conscious, or subconscious, mind can easily substitute, “Hath not a cripple, black person, fat person, thin person, Moslem, etc., eyes?” Thus we pity the man we should hate, and, like him, we challenge Antonio’s Christian ethic. In this way we are all drawn into the Jew’s final crucible, and, when he loses all, including his identity, it is difficult to feel that he got what he deserved.

Superficially this play exhibits the moral that the drive for

revenge consumes and destroys itself. On a deeper level, though, it also examines Christian charity. Antonio gives it to Bassanio because, initially, it is easy to give to Bassanio. Antonio loves Bassanio. It is more difficult to give to Shylock, and the Christian society that Antonio moves in does not require that Antonio be charitable to a Jew. Antonio's, and society's, Christianity can be questioned even more deeply when we, as an audience, remember that Christ gave most to the despised and unclean, and that this charity has always been a tenet of the Church.

Antonio not only refuses to be charitable in any way towards Shylock, he gloats, just as Shylock might have gloated, to see the man in his final pathetic circumstance.

Nay, take my life and all! Pardon not that!
 You take my house when you do take the prop
 That doth sustain my house. You take my life
 When you do take the means whereby I live. (IV. i. 372-375)

This last scene poses the question whether revenge actually does destroy itself. As the tables turn, Antonio becomes the avenger and Shylock resumes his role as victim. Elizabethan audiences might have felt the satisfaction of the powerful Christian conformist over the disempowered Jewish nonconformist, but most modern audiences might find this victory tainted with bitterness.

Falstaff is also an affront to Christian morality because he embodies the call of the senses. He is rogue and repentant in *Henry IV, Part I*. In this play we can believe in Falstaff's sincerity, but in Part II he falls from grace completely.

The theme of Falstaff's relationship with Hal takes form in the first Act.

Indeed you come near me now, Hal; for we that
take purses go by the moon and the seven stars, and not by
Phoebus, he, that wand'ring knight so fair. And I
prithee, sweet wag, when thou art a king, as, God save
thy grace — majesty I should say, for grace thou wilt
have none — (I. ii. 12-16)

“...When thou art a king...” is the crux of Falstaff’s influence on Hal’s life in Part I and later in Part II, and Falstaff awaits his rightful rewards as a companion to a future king.

While Hal might serve as a bridge between the “low life” and the “royal life,” Falstaff serves as a bridge between Hal’s own unleashed sensuous pleasure and the demands of monarchy.

...There is a devil haunts thee in the likeness of an
old fat man; a tun of man is thy companion...
wherein [he is] villainous, but
in all things? wherein worthy, but in nothing?
(II. iv. 425-436)

Falstaff responds, “...If sugar and sack be a fault, God help the wicked! ...Banish plump Jack, and banish all the world” (II. iv. 447-455)!

The “devil” of Falstaff haunts us all. He is the pull of merriment and the sensuous, the desire to play, when we are steeped in responsibility. As a surrogate father to Hal, he is the man who is present mentally and physically, while the true father, the King, is involved with the affairs of state. The King fears for the future of his heir and his kingdom under the influence of Hal’s apparent weakness of character. Briefly, even Falstaff questions the penalty of all of this merriment.

...But I prithee,
sweet wag, shall there be gallows standing in England

when thou art king? and resolution thus fubbed as it is
with the rusty curb of old father antic the law? Do not
thou, when thou art king, hang a thief. (I. ii. 53-57)

At the end of Part I Falstaff establishes his goals for the future. "...I look to be either earl/ or duke, I can assure you" (V. iv. 139-140).

The Falstaff who greets us in the beginning of Part II is more the braggart and less endearing. It appears from the beginning of Act I scene ii that he is less in control as Hal approaches the throne. He becomes more representative of the senses, more inconstant, and more focused in his desire for the sweet life. The frailties apparent in Part I become even more glaring and grating in Part II. His irreverence increases. He is even less scrupulous in money matters and almost completely reprehensible in his dealings with people.

The doctor's message that Falstaff's page relates to him sums up his decline. "He said, sir, the water itself was a good healthy/ water; but, for the party that owed it, he might have/ moe diseases than he knew for" (I. ii. 3-5).

Instead of examining the "diseases" that he might suffer (which might be the impetus for some self-examination) he proclaims his wit and paints a vivid physical picture of the Falstaff we are to come to know in this play. "...I do here walk/ before thee like a sow that hath overwhelmed all her/ litter but one..." (I. ii. 10-12).

As his frame becomes larger, we begin to see more distinctly the waste of him. When the Chief Justice confronts him with his claim to youth,

...Have you not a moist eye? A dry hand? A
yellow cheek? A white beard? A decreasing leg? An
increasing belly? Is not your voice broken? Your wind
short? Your chin double? Your wit single? And every
part about you blasted with antiquity?... (I. ii. 171-175)

Falstaff answers, "...Well, I cannot last ever./ But it was always yet the trick of our English nation, if/ they have a good thing, to make it too common...(I. ii. 201-203). What Falstaff grieves as the fault of the "English nation" is his own vice. He, in fact, makes all good "common," and this eventually becomes less humorous and more of an insult to the morals necessary to a nation.

In the remaining acts Shakespeare begins to alienate Hal's and the audience's affection for Falstaff. The demands of the senses bring out a dishonest, nearly criminal, character. When Hal realizes what Falstaff represents in his own personality, he has no choice but to deny him.

...I have long dreamed of such a kind of man,
So surfeit-swelled, so old, and so profane,
But, being awaked, I do despise my dream...
Reply not to me with a fool-born jest.
Presume not that I am the thing I was.
For God doth know, so shall the world perceive,
That I have turned away my former self... (V. v. 50-59)

In Part II Falstaff and Hal meet only once, but Falstaff plays a greater part in this play than in the previous one. This adds to the effect of Hal's growth from youthful irresponsibility to the demands of the monarchy. This encounter serves to reunite, for the last time, the quick duet of wit that Hal and Falstaff encourage in one another. This meeting, though, is fleeting when Hal is reminded of his duties by Peto. "By heaven, Peto, I feel me much to blame./ So idly to profane the precious time..." (II. iv. 337-338). When Hal leaves, Falstaff remembers a time that once was, "Now comes the sweetest morsel of the night, and we must hence and leave it unpicked..." (II. iv. 343-344). This timely remark reminds

us that the richest core of us all is often the “sweetest morsel” of the impish and the unbridled. It is the call of the Id that becomes so buried by the demands of serious adult day-to-day living that it must remain “unpicked” eventually to die, unnoticed, on the branch.

Shylock and Falstaff are powerful literary personalities. They express a universal appeal with a host of human emotions. Centuries after their parts were written, Shylock and Falstaff still pull from audiences feelings that we all strive to hide behind an armor of modern technology. These emotions, though, are what validate our humanity, and separate the human artifice from the common machine.