

ST. JOSEPH'S COLLEGE (AUTONOMOUS), BANGALORE - 27
I SEMESTER BA/BSW/BSc MID SEMESTER TEST - AUGUST 2018
ADDITIONAL ENGLISH—AE114 12.8.2018

Time: 1 Hour

Max. Marks: 30

INSTRUCTIONS

This paper consists of THREE printed sides

You are allowed to use a dictionary

Stick to the word limit and number your answers correctly.

You WILL lose marks for lifting from the passage.

I. Read the following extracts from an online British Library article by Aviva Dautch titled 'A Jewish Reading of *The Merchant of Venice*' published on 15th March 2016.

From Antonio spitting on Shylock's 'Jewish gabardine' to the moneylender's famous speech, 'If you prick us, do we not bleed?': Dr Aviya Dautch responds to The Merchant of Venice as a Jewish reader.

Twenty years ago, studying *The Merchant of Venice* at school, I was delighted when my English teacher picked me to perform Shylock. It took me a while to realise that this gender-blind casting (admittedly, it was an all girls' school) was racially specific, owing nothing to my skill as an actress but rather to the fact that I was one of only a handful of Jewish students in my year. During the trial scene, the instructions were to lick my lips in anticipation at the blood I was about to spill and generally make Shylock as malevolent as possible until we booed him like a pantomime villain. Portia, cross-dressing legal eagle, became our feminist heroine. When Jessica abandoned her father and stole his jewels, the entire class cheered and then, obedient daughters, went home to our parents.

The Merchant of Venice is termed a comedy since it ends in marriage rather than death. Good triumphs over evil ('mercy' represented by Christian Portia being good; 'usury' represented by the Jewish moneylender Shylock being evil) and everyone who matters lives happily ever after. According to my teacher, this was Shakespeare's authorial intention, how it was played and received in Elizabethan England, and so this is what we were taught in late 20th-century Manchester. But my family's attitude to the play was the opposite – 'that horrible, anti-Semitic play' they called it, the slights Shylock endured comparable to those many of our friends and relatives had experienced a few decades earlier in Second World War Europe, his forced conversion tragic, too painful to watch in the face of what they'd been through. For my community, the play's most positive aspect was Shylock's 'dignified' response to those tormenting him: 'Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?' (3.1.59–60) became a battle cry against all harms done, the shadows of the Holocaust still so close.

Each of these perspectives is appealing in its certainty, but as an adult what I find most attractive about the play, why I return to it again and again despite its unsettling nature, is the nuanced writing that allows such contrasting interpretations to co-exist as valid readings. To view Shylock as hero or villain is reductive, just as I believe describing Shakespeare as anti- or philo-Semitic is redundant. While a contemporaneous audience might have applauded what they saw as a play of binaries – greed/generosity, revenge/mercy – with all the negative qualities represented by the figure of the moneylender, it seems to me that Shakespeare is doing something far more sophisticated.

Attitudes to Jewishness

To understand this fully, it's essential to consider the play in the context of the time in which it was written and think about early modern cultural attitudes towards Jewishness. Shakespeare's literary contemporaries, such as the poet John Donne, clearly believed the anti-Semitic propaganda around them and contributed to it themselves. Donne, who was Dean of St Paul's Cathedral, gave a sermon in 1624 perpetuating the Blood Libel. This is the entirely unsubstantiated anti-Semitic lie that Jews ritually murdered Christians to drink their blood and achieve salvation, first spread in the Middle Ages and the cause of several attacks of mob violence against Jewish communities. Donne's perspective is absolutely standard for the time in which he was writing.

Christopher Marlowe's theatrical depiction of Jewishness in *The Jew of Malta*, performed regularly in the early 1590s, is an obvious influence on the composition of *The Merchant of Venice*, which is usually dated between 1596 and 1598. In 1594 Queen Elizabeth's doctor, Roderigo López, a Portuguese Jew, was accused of attempting to poison his mistress and put on trial for treason. Racial propaganda was a major element in his conviction and his execution was celebrated throughout the country. Exploiting López's notoriety, *The Jew of Malta* was revived at the Rose Theatre and enjoyed a successful run. Although Marlowe may have intended his play to be a satire of the political classes, its Elizabethan producers capitalised on its crude anti-Semitic stereotypes. Marlowe's Jew, Barabas, has few redeeming qualities. He is more vulgarly and less compassionately drawn than Shakespeare's moneylender, greedy, murderous and a traitor who turns on both the Maltese and the Turks. While, like Shakespeare, Marlowe has his Jewish character express his resentment at his poor treatment by Christian characters, there is no doubt where the audience's sympathies are intended to lie. With such entrenched anti-Semitism evident in Elizabethan and Jacobean society, it is interesting that, in contrast to Marlowe and Donne, Shakespeare seems to suggest that *if the Jew is a monster, it is because the Christian population around him have treated him as such.*

Shylock and Christian Values

'Antonio, who treats Bassanio with love and generosity, is neither loving nor generous towards the Jew. The treatment Shylock has endured at his hands is brutal and reductive. Read in 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 sinister resonance. If Antonio's motivation is religious – a hatred of lending money at interest which is forbidden by the New Testament – where is his obedience to other Christian injunctions such as 'Love your neighbour as yourself'?

All this is even more telling because, like Shylock, Antonio is an ambiguous figure, his friendship with Bassanio layered with homoerotic undertones. The quality of their relationship seems different from that between the men around them and Solano says of Antonio's feelings towards Bassanio, 'I think he loves the world only for him' (2.8.50). Many directors characterise him as overtly gay, frustrated by unrequited desire. However explicitly Shakespeare intended this to be understood, Antonio stands out as a figure alone. While we might hope that those on the margins will support each other and find strength by standing together, often they turn on one another as here Antonio turns on Shylock.

Portia is equally selective in her application of Christian values towards others. With her 'quality of mercy is not strained' speech in Act 4, she lectures Shylock, that mercy is, *twice blest; / it blesseth him that gives and him that takes* (4.1.184–86). When Shylock's desire for revenge is couched as justice, the Hebrew Bible's *Lex Talionis*, an eye for an eye, a pound of flesh for a debt of three thousand ducats, she cautions him against it:

Therefore, Jew,

Though justice be thy plea, consider this,

That, in the course of justice, none of us

Should see salvation: we do pray for mercy... (4.1.197–200)

Untempered by mercy, unmitigated justice can be the source of decidedly un-Christian and painful consequences that lead to the opposite of salvation. Yet none of the Christian characters show mercy towards Shylock, not even Portia, but rather rejoice in his downfall – to them, his loss of his money, his daughter and his identity seem just reward for his dealings with Antonio. Shylock is resistant to his daughter marrying out of his faith, but no more so than contemporaneous Christian characters would be if their daughters did so. He is a family man: both too controlling and passionately committed. He loves his late wife Leah and is broken when Jessica deserts him. He is overfond of his wealth, angry and vengeful; he is also a shrewd businessman, resentful at how badly he is treated by Antonio and his friends. He is not merely a caricature but a fully rounded human who deserves to be seen as such. At the heart of the play is his cry 'If you prick us, do we not bleed?' (3.1.64), which leads to 'if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?' (3.1.66–67). When he admonishes 'the villainy you teach me, I will execute' (3.1.71–72), it is a statement chillingly resonant centuries later, telling those who have persecuted him that, if he has murderous intentions, it is because Antonio and company have radicalised him. Does this make him a hero? Absolutely not. Does it make him understandable? Absolutely.

Answer the following question in about 150 words.

(15 marks)

1. Do you agree with the view that Shakespeare is doing something far more sophisticated as put forth by Aviva Dautch in the above article? Give reasons for your answer.

II. Answer ANY ONE of the following questions in about 200 words. (15 marks)

1. Comment on Sancho's character in the readings of '*Don Quixote*' prescribed in the syllabus?

2. Identify instances of chivalry in '*Le Morte D'Arthur*' and comment on them?