Shylock the Jew

The question everybody asks about *The Merchant of Venice* is whether it is an anti-Semitic play. What do we think about Shakespeare’s representation of Shylock, the Jewish money-lender? Inevitably, since the Second World War, since the Holocaust, this is a question that is momentous, that is difficult, that must be handled with sensitivity – but the story’s a complicated one. Yes, it is true that the Jews had been expelled from England in the Middle Ages. However, it is also true that so-called ‘Marranos’ – semi-converted Jews – did live in London in Shakespeare’s time.

As we’ve seen throughout Europe, Jews were very significant in the process of capitalism through money-lending, through what was known as ‘usury’. Because of the Jews association with finance, one can understand why they were sometimes demonised. It was all too easy to take, as it were, the evil of money and apply it to the supposed evil of the Jews.

I’m surprised, though, as I read around the sources in Shakespeare’s time, read about what people were saying about Jews, that you get a surprisingly varied degree of response to them. Here in the library of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, I’ve pulled out a copy of a travel book. It’s by a man called George Sandys; he set off on a journey in the year 1610 while Shakespeare was busy writing his plays. He travelled across Europe and into the Middle East and went to the Holy Land.

There’s a section in the third book of Sandys’ travels called ‘Of The Jews’, and this is what he says – so he’s in the Holy Land, close to Jerusalem – “Here be also some Jews, yet inherit they no part of the land, but in their own country do live as aliens”. So it is the land of the Jews in the Bible, but, of course, in Shakespeare’s time, they do not own it. It is in the hands of the Ottoman Empire, and there’s been a long history of the Crusades. The battle between the Muslim world and the Christian world has left the Jews doubly-marginalized. They are aliens in their own land. That word ‘alien’ used for the outsider, the stranger.

“A people”, Sandys continues, “scattered throughout the whole world and hated by those amongst whom they live yet suffered as a necessary mischief subject to all wrongs and contumelies which they support with an invincible patience. Many of them have I seen abused, some of them beaten, yet never saw I Jew with an angry countenance. They can subject themselves under times unto whatsoever may advance their profit. In general, they are worldly wise and thrive wherever they set foot in.”

So it’s a very thoughtful, quite ambiguous attitude. He recognises the way in which the Jews have been wronged, have been abused, have been beaten, but he says they bear this with patience, and for all their ills, all their sense of alienation, they do thrive because of their skills at commerce.

There was a negative stereotypical image of Jews in the theatre in Shakespeare’s time – most noticeably in Christopher Marlowe’s play, *The Jew of Malta*, which was one of the most performed plays of the time. Shakespeare quotes from it, he certainly knows it. It’s a play that begins with an archetypal image of a rich Jew in his counting house. ‘Barabas’, he’s called, and he would have been portrayed in a very stereotypical, negative way.

In some ways, though, *The Merchant of Venice* is a response to *The Jew of Malta* that invites the London theatre audience to think of Jews more sympathetically, not simply to demonise them, to suggest that they are evil because it was the Jews who put Jesus Christ to death, but they are evil because they make money.
In his famous speech in the middle of the play, Shylock proposes that perhaps the way that he behaves, his villainy, his desire for revenge has been brought about by the way that he has been treated by the Christians. He says of Antonio, "He hath disgraced me, and hindered me half a million; laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated my enemies; and what’s his reason?"

Why have I been treated like this?, he asks, "I am a Jew". I've been treated thus simply because I am a Jew.

And then Shylock asks:

“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 prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? 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...”

The villainy you teach me, I will execute. The notion that behaviour might be culturally determined rather than inherent in a race – it’s a very powerful idea. It suggests that the character of Shylock as originally played on the Shakespearean stage was not the negative stereotype that Christopher Marlowe’s *Jew of Malta* was.