

The Hypocrisies of Fish

In Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock's exasperated monologue in 3.1.49-67, serves as a commentary upon the holes and hypocrisies of the Christian Venice at the time of the play. Through imagery, diction, and rhetorical strategy, Shylock's character functions as a mouthpiece to all of Venice, protesting against the discrimination and subversions inflicted on himself and the Jewish tribe.

The scene begins with Salarino asking Shylock, "Why, I am sure if he forfeit thou wilt not take his flesh. What's that good for?" Shylock replies at the beginning of his monologue, "To bait fish withal. If it feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge" (3.1.47-50). Immediately we see that Shylock is enraged and has been pushed to the line of fury, hence he refers to Antonio's flesh as fish bait. The irony in this image is the allusion to Christianity, because a fish is indeed the Christian symbol. Feeding a Christian's flesh to an animal symbolic of that same religion poses hypocrisy in itself. The metaphorical imagery is continued with references to physical body images, suggesting that Shylock attempts to humanize himself, after being the victim of dehumanization by the Christians. When Shylock says, "Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs..." (3.1.54-55), he equates himself to that of a Christian. By choosing eyes, hands, and organs, it is evident that Shakespeare chooses the life supply of a human, the necessary body parts to live in such a demanding world.

To extend from Shakespeare's theme of imagery, diction plays an immense role in revealing Christian hypocrisies. In the beginning of the speech, Shylock claims, "He

hath disgraced me and hindered me half a million; laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation..." (3.1.50-52). The use of the words "disgraced," "hindered," "mocked," and "scorned" all reflect immoral acts— an opposition to the Christian faith that is morally based on love, grace and mercy. The use of the word "nation" is also important to recognize, because its function in the middle of the sentence reveals that Shylock's entire tribe, the Jewish nation as a whole, has been scorned, not just him. In 3.1.59-61, when Shylock says "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?," Shakespeare's use of the words "prick," "tickle" and "poison" are interesting to note upon, as they are used in congruency with one another in a parallel construction. While this claim is used to equalize Jews in comparison with Christians, the interplay among these words is ironic. To prick is to inflict pain, resulting in blood, which is quite different from tickling which causes laughter, a euphoric feeling. Shakespeare then uses "poison" the worse of the two, which ultimately leads to death. It is paradoxical that Shakespeare would use the idea of tickling amongst two harmful meanings; however it serves as a function of shock value— going from pain to happiness and then to fatality suggests a rollercoaster of emotion, much like Shylock's experiences in life.

One of Shakespeare's most effective devices in this monologue is the use of rhetorical strategy and the way Shylock's voice is used to exploit himself as the victim. In the first ten lines, the word Christian is not mentioned at all, instead Shylock uses the pronoun "he," referring to Antonio, the elite Christian, in addition to using "I" and "me"— "He hath disgraced me...And what's his reason? I am a Jew" (3.1.50-54). However, in 3.1.59, the voice changes, and Shylock goes from the singular to the plural,

using “we,” representative of the entire Jewish tribe. Shylock states, “And if you wrong us shall we not revenge?” (3.1.61-62). The term “Christian” is also used here, addressing all those who attest to Christianity— “If a Christian wrong a Jew...” (3.1.64). The function of this strategy gives Shylock a voice to all of Venice, not simply Salarino. This rhetorical device brings on an emergence of emotion, as Shylock goes from using himself as the example of a subverted Jewish individual, to his entire Jewish nation.

To further Shakespeare’s rhetorical strategies, his use of rhetorical questions serve as thought-provoking implications regarding the Christians’ derogation of the Jews. By posing these questions in a rhetorical manner, Shakespeare universalizes the speech, ultimately addressing the audience. Shylock claims, “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” (3.1.64-67).

Shakespeare’s repetition of the word “revenge” constantly reminds the audience that Shylock is reacting to a cruel affliction done previously, and most importantly firstly, to him and his tribe. These last few sentences of the monologue are full of despair, as we see Shylock’s rage overflowing in his desire for an even greater vengeance, claiming “I will better the instruction” (3.1.67). It is evident that Shylock is driven to the point of insanity, where he furiously has the need to “feed” his revenge (3.1.49). However, given in 3.1.63-64, it is the Christian’s “example” of revenge that Shylock says he will follow— denoting another hole in the supposedly forgiving and merciful Christian religion.

With all of this said, it is evident that Shakespeare reveals the faults and hypocrisies of the Christian religion through Shylock’s character. The images, word

choice and rhetorical techniques combined, present a fierce argument and deconstruction of Christianity. The monologue itself inevitably pulls at the heartstrings of audience members, for Shakespeare portrays Shylock's character as a sufferer and a victim, even in spite of his revenge.

Work Cited

Shakespeare, William. *The Merchant of Venice*. Ed. A. R. Braunmuller, New York:
Penguin Books, 1959.