

Shylock's Ethical Choice of “a Pound of Flesh” and Racial Identity Reconstruction in *The Merchant of Venice*

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Abstract *The Merchant of Venice* focuses on the issue of racial identity reconstruction through the contract of “a pound of flesh”, intertwining with economic, legal, and religious concerns associated with that identity. The development of the emerging capitalist economy in Venetian society prompted Shylock to become a usurer. Shylock's ethical identity as a usurer enables him to leverage the power of money to reinforce his interdependent relationship with Christians, striving for a place and means of survival within Venetian society. However, economic and religious conflicts between Jews, represented by Shylock, and Christians have led to deep-seated animosities. Therefore, in order to avenge Antonio and, by extension, to retaliate against the entire Christian society, Shylock insists on claiming a pound of Antonio's flesh under the guise of honoring the contract and the law. The “pound of flesh” choice essentially symbolizes the commodification and objectification of individuals against the backdrop of capitalist emergence and social transformation, while also representing Shylock's efforts and attempts to reshape his personal and racial identity.

Keywords *The Merchant of Venice*; Shylock; ethical choices; a pound of flesh; identity reconstruction

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Introduction

Written around 1596-1597, *The Merchant of Venice* is a controversial comedy from Shakespeare's early days. For a long time, the play has become a hot spot in the study of Shakespeare's plays because of its rich economic, political and cultural

connotations, semantic fuzziness and contradictions. The play's multiple themes are highly summarized by James Shapiro, who argues that the play is not only a play about religious rituals and racial significance, but also a play about "usury, marriage, homosexuality, tolerance, trade, cross-dressing" (121). Although the play deals with multiple themes, this paper argues that the play mainly explores issues of ethical choices and identity reconstruction.

From the late sixteenth century to the early seventeenth century, British society was in a period of political, economic, and cultural transformation, gradually transitioning from a society based on class and status to a society more dependent on money and property. This transformation means a change in social and moral norms. In a society with constantly changing economy and culture, people's social status and hierarchical concepts have also been challenged by the development of the emerging capitalist economy. Identity is constrained by economic forces and increasingly becomes an inseparable whole from each other. In the context of this societal transformation, the issue of identity reconstruction influenced by economic and religious factors becomes a focal point in *The Merchant of Venice*. As Avraham Oz remarks, "The question of identity looms constant through the major tensions, conflicts, and crises informing *The Merchant of Venice*" (94-95). This article intends to place *The Merchant of Venice* in the historical context of the rise of emerging capitalism, using the "pound of flesh" contract as the main clue to analyze the close relationship between economy, law, and identity in depth, in order to elucidate the identity anxiety that was prevalent in early modern British society and its underlying economic and religious reasons.

Shylock's Ethical Identity and the "Pound of Flesh" Contract

Shylock possesses a dual ethical identity as both a moneylender and a Jew. As a Jew living in a Christian society, he is marginalized due to the "devilish" image that comes with his racial identity. However, the development of the emerging capitalist economy in Venetian society provides Shylock with a space for survival, prompting him to become a usurer. Economic status determines identity status. Shylock, with the support of money, is able to establish himself and maintain his place within Venetian society.

Shylock's Jewish ethical identity makes him an otherness in Venetian society. According to Jeremy Hawthorn, "To characterize a person, group, or institution as 'other' is to place them outside the system of normality or Convention to which one belongs oneself" (249). Shylock's "otherness" in Venetian society is primarily cultural, specifically derived from his ethnic and religious identity—his Jewish

identity. As a Jew living in a Venetian society dominated by Christians, Shylock is inevitably constrained and marginalized by social traditional norms and mainstream ideology. It should be noted that although Shakespeare set his play in Venice, the ethical, political, and economic order of life in the text alludes to the English society of the Renaissance. Jews were rarely seen in Elizabethan England (they did not return to England until Cromwell's reign, after being expelled by Edward I in 1290). But Jewish identity carries historical and cultural imprints. The Jewish image of the "big-nosed, red-winged monster" has long been popular:

The Jew of medieval myth was not just a devil in some abstract or generalized sense. His devilishness could take ail to specific forms. He was a poisoner, as we have seen, and a sorcerer, he was accused of committing ritual murder, crucifying children and desecrating the Host. (Gross 17)

As a Jew, Shylock is also seen as a symbol of evil, and his servant Launcelot comments on him: "The Jew is the very devil incarnation" (2.2.25).¹ Shylock's social identity as a Jew and the "devil" image that came with that identity determines that he will not be accepted by the mainstream society in Venice and will inevitably be discriminated against and rejected by Christians. This can be seen in his indictment of Antonio, "He hates our sacred nation, and he rails (even there where merchants most do congregate)" (1.3.46-47). Paradoxically, Shylock's identity as a Jew both subjects him to discrimination and exclusion by Christians and positions him as an indispensable figure in Venetian society, as his Jewish identity enables him to assume another social role—that of a usurer.

The development of emerging capitalism in Venetian society, along with his Jewish identity determines Shylock's another ethical identity—usurer. Venice is a capitalist society dominated by the emerging bourgeoisie. In this commercially or production-based society, money lending is an inevitable commercial activity essential to the development of the capitalist economy and serves as an important force in the rise of emerging capitalism. Although the practice of interest-bearing loans has existed since ancient times, the issue of the legitimacy of interest has always been controversial. In 1571, the English Parliament finally legislated the interest rate and made a clear distinction between legitimate interest and usury.

1 The number of acts, sessions and lines indicated after the citation are based on Ann Thompson, David Scott Kastan & Richard Proudfoot, ed., *The Arden Shakespeare Completed Works* (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2011). The following citations are only marked with page numbers and will not be explained individually.

Therefore, from the legal perspective, when the loan interest rate exceeds the maximum interest rate allowed by law, it is considered usury; From the moral standpoint, Usury is an immoral economic behavior in which usurers take advantage of others' predicament to gain profits; From a Christian point of view, lending with interest is condemned as an immoral, even evil act, because usury contradicts the Christian doctrine of "By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread" (Genesis 3:19). Therefore, for Antonio and other Christians, usury is not a desirable economic behavior, while lending money without interest is an ethical choice. However, from the economic point of view, usury is the inevitable product of the commercialization trend of the Renaissance era and the development of the new capitalist economy. The social and economic development of Venice is also inseparable from the existence of loan capital. In this ethical and economic context, for Shylock, there are two other reasons for choosing usury: On the one hand, as a member of the marginalized Jewish community living in a Christian society, Shylock is unable to compete with the Venetian merchants who are protected by political, economic, and legal means. On the other hand, the Old Testament, which is central to Judaism, does not prohibit Jews from lending at interest to non-Jews. Therefore, the Jewish community, represented by Shylock, naturally becomes the usurers in Venetian society, "it is not so much the Jews who chose the usury business as the usury business chose the Jews" (Li Jiang 114). The ethical identity of usurers determines the significant role of Jewish characters like Shylock in the socio-economic development of Venice and their inseparable relationship with Christian merchants like Antonio.

Shylock's social status as a usurer enabled him to leverage the power of money to strengthen the interdependent relationship with Christians and to vie for his status and space for survival within Venetian society. For Shylock, a Jew who makes a living as a usurer, money is not only a means to maintain his personal livelihood, but also an important resource for maintaining his ethical identity and ensuring his social standing. When Antonio guarantees a loan for Bassanio from Shylock, despite the animosities between them, Shylock still decides to grant his request. Shylock's decision to lend to Antonio is based on the following three points: First, Shylock seeks to ease the conflict between Jews and Christians by lending money to Antonio; Second, he wishes to demonstrate the generosity and kindness of the Jews, as Shylock states, "I would be friends with you, and have your love, Forget the shames that you have stain'd me with" (1.3.137-138); Third, by lending money to assist Antonio, Shylock can help the Christians — Bassanio needs financial support to court Portia — while also showcasing his importance as a moneylender

in Venetian society. This serves to uphold his identity as a usurer and fight for his status and rights as an alien in Christian society. Therefore, Shylock signs a loan contract with Antonio, stipulating that if Antonio fails to repay the loan on time, he must “have his fair flesh, to be cut off and taken in what part of his body” (1.3.149-150). By having Antonio sign this contract, Shylock intends to demonstrate that he is not the profit-driven, malicious person depicted by Christians, but rather someone willing to extend a helping hand and provide assistance in critical moments. For Shylock, the contract clause regarding a pound of flesh penalty is merely his jest, as a pound of flesh from a person holds no value for him and he only wishes to show that he genuinely wants to assist them. Shylock states: “A pound of man’s flesh taken from a man, is not so estimable, profitable neither as flesh or muttons, beefs, or goats, —I say to buy his favor, I extend his friendship” (1.3.164-167). In fact, this “pound of flesh” contract serves as an important bargaining chip for Shylock against the Christians. It intensifies the conflicts and tensions within the drama, promotes the development of the following plot, and foreshadows Shylock’s revenge and racial identity reconstruction.

“A Pound of Flesh” Choice and the Name of the Law

When Antonio’s merchant ship encounters misfortune at sea and cannot repay the loan on time, Shylock ostensibly uses the law as a weapon to assert his rights, insisting on taking a pound of Antonio’s flesh in the name of upholding the contract. In reality, his true intention is to take this opportunity to end Antonio’s life as an act of revenge, thereby achieving the goal of retaliating against the entire Christian society and reconstructing of his racial identity. Little does he realize that the law itself is an expression of the ideology of the ruling class and elite. Taking a pound of Antonio’s flesh, while appearing to be Shylock’s freedom protected by law, also becomes the basis for the law to punish him.

The elopement of his daughter Jessica with the Christian Lorenzo is the catalyst that prompts Shylock to demand a pound of flesh. For Shylock, his daughter is his own flesh and blood, a part of himself. Her marriage to a Christian and conversion to Christianity represents a betrayal of their race and religion. As Shylock says, “My own flesh and blood to rebel” (3.1.31), the elopement of his daughter with a Christian is a profound humiliation and injury to him. Graham Midgley argues that Jessica’s flight is the key moment that ignites Shylock’s desire for revenge. He points out that “because of Jessica’s escape, everything Shylock values—his ethnic pride, the dignity of family life, and the sanctity of the bonds between family and ethnicity—has been undermined” (198). The flight of his daughter Jessica prompts

the eruption of long-suppressed religious and racial hatred within him. Shylock's attention thus begins to shift from his personal interests to the suffering of the Jewish race. At this moment, what Shylock desires more than anything is the power to control Antonio's fate and the superior position over the Christians, rather than wealth. Therefore, Shylock vows to take a pound of flesh from Antonio, declaring, "To bait fish withal,—if it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge;" (3.1.49-50) He insists on abiding by the law and strictly fulfilling the stipulations of the contract—to take a pound of flesh from Antonio as punishment.

Shylock's demand to claim a pound of flesh according to the contract ostensibly adheres to the laws of Venetian society, seeking to assert his rightful claim. In reality, he wields the law as a weapon of vengeance against Antonio and the entire Christian society. Shylock is fully aware that "the foundation of law in Venetian society lies in the economy" (Bloom 14). Venice is a commercial city, and its prosperity and economic development require the law to embody objectivity and stability, upholding fundamental principles such as free competition, the supremacy of rights, and the freedom of contracts, while equally protecting individual rights. Therefore, when Salarino seeks the duke's intervention to alter the law to protect Antonio, Antonio bluntly stated, "The duke cannot deny the course of law: for the commodity that strangers have with us in Venice, if it be denied, will much impeach the justice of the state, since that the trade and profit of the city consisteth of all nations" (3.3.26-31). Subsequently, when Shylock and Antonio stand trial, Shylock invokes the positive development of Venice's economy to insist on the enforcement of the punishment, exercising his right to claim a pound of flesh from Antonio. He threatens the duke: "If you deny it, let the danger light upon your charter and your city's freedom!" (4.1.38-39) Shylock is convinced that his right to claim a pound of flesh will be protected by the law, not because Venetian society inherently understands that individual rights are the basis of legal legitimacy, but because of its economic development and policies. Therefore, Shylock has no doubt that the law will protect his ownership of a pound of flesh on Antonio. In fact, For Shylock, the pound of flesh represents both the dignity and social status of the Jewish community and the life of Antonio. His choice to claim a pound of flesh signifies his struggle for and defense of the dignity and status of the Jewish people, while also symbolizing his desire to take Antonio's life. Furthermore, the ownership of a pound of flesh symbolizes Shylock's control over Antonio. The choice to take a pound of flesh signifies Shylock's assertion of power over Christians at this moment. Ironically, while the law grants Shylock the right to claim a pound of flesh under the contract, it also serves as the basis for his legal punishment.

Shylock wields the law as a weapon, insisting on claiming a pound of flesh from Antonio, unaware that the law is a product of ideology. Ideology represents the values that govern society and reflects the interests and aspirations of specific groups (Hodge 12). The laws of Venetian society inevitably represent the interests of its Christian subjects. Shylock's choice to claim a pound of flesh exposes his purpose of killing Antonio and retaliating against the Christian society, which contradicts Christian interests and will therefore not receive legal support. Instead, it becomes the basis for legal sanctions and punishment against him. When Shylock insists on enforcing the punishment that threatens Antonio's life, Portia, disguised as a lawyer, turns Shylock's own weapon against him. She counters his strict adherence to the literal text of the law by pointing out, "This bond doth give thee here not jot of blood, The words expressly are 'a pound of flesh' [...] Therefore prepare thee to cut off the flesh, — Shed thou no blood, nor cut thou less nor more but just a pound of flesh" (4.1.304-324). She then cites a law favorable to Christians, which states:

If it be proved against an alien,
That by direct, or indirect attempts
He seek the life of any citizen,
The party 'gainst the which he doth contrive,
Shall seize one half his goods, the other half
Comes to the privy coffer of the state,
And the offender's life lies in the mercy
Of the Duke only, 'gainst all other voice. (4.1.347-354)

Obviously, this law safeguards the interests of Christians and upholds their rights. Rights are defined as "the qualification of a specific subject to make demands concerning a specific object that relate to their own interests or will" (Feng, 130). In essence, rights ultimately reduce to a form of "qualification" (Feng 130). The law cited by Portia applies to Christians, not to Jews. As a Jew, Shylock is excluded from the protections of this law. He has neither the right nor the entitlement to impose the punishment of claiming a pound of flesh from Antonio. On the contrary, Shylock's choice to claim a pound of flesh exposes his murderous intent and vengeful purpose, making him the target of the law's punishment.

The Ethical Essence of "Pound of Flesh" Choice and the Reconstruction of Racial Identity

Shylock seeks to leverage the law's fairness and justice to ensure his right to a

pound of flesh from Antonio, which effectively commodifies Antonio, thereby securing ownership over his body and life. This is part of Shylock's aim to assert dominance in Venetian society, reconstruct his own identity, and redefine his Jewish identity. Therefore, the choice of the "pound of flesh" reflects the ethical nature of people's attempts to reshape their identities through the power of money amid the backdrop of emerging capitalist economic development and social transformation.

The choice of the "pound of flesh" essentially represents the objectification and commodification of individuals against the backdrop of the rise of capitalism and social transformation. As a moneylender, Shylock refuses compensation equivalent to multiple times the principal amount and insists instead on ownership of a pound of flesh, essentially commercializing Antonio and using the purchasing power of money to exercise control over his body and life. By doing that, he aims at transferring the Jews from a long-standing position of being subjugated and oppressed to a dominant position of having the power of life and death over Christians. For Shylock, the pound of flesh is less a penalty for a defaulted loan than a high-priced commodity. The pound of flesh is essentially a metonym for Antonio's life and value. Scott notes that "Shylock's claim to the pound of flesh from Antonio effectively transforms the loan transaction into a commercial purchase" (290). Therefore, Antonio becomes a commodity with exchange value. Ironically, despite Bassanio's strong emphasis on the unique value of Antonio's life, which cannot be measured and exchanged in money, his actions contradict this and he attempts to "buy" Antonio back from Shylock. He first offers twice the total amount for Antonio's life, then offers "ten times the amount" (4.1.207). Ultimately, he even proposes to exchange "his own life, his wife, and the entire world" (4.1.280) for Antonio's life. However, Bassanio is unable to persuade Shylock to relinquish control over Antonio's life. Instead, the way he seeks to preserve Antonio's life through monetary means further reinforces the perception of Antonio and humanity itself as potential commodities.

Shylock emphasizes that the pound of flesh on Antonio is his own property, purchased with his own money. The concept of private property in capitalism originates from slavery. Shylock extends the notion of slavery in Venice to his claim of ownership over Antonio's body,

You have among you many a purchas'd slave
Which (like your asses, and your dogs and mules)
You use in abject and in slavish parts,
Because you bought them,

[...]

The pound of flesh which I demand of him

Is dearly bought, 'tis mine and I will have. (4.1. 90-100)

Shylock changed the ethical identity of himself and Antonio by comparing his ownership of Antonio's flesh to the ownership that a slave master has over a slave. Antonio becomes the slave purchased by Shylock, "The slave was a slave not because he was the object of property, but because he could not be the subject of property" (Patterson 28). As a slave of Shylock, Antonio loses control of his own life and freedom. And Shylock is no longer a marginalized group in a disadvantageous position, but a slave owner who occupies a dominant position. As Bailey puts it, Shylock reinterprets his identity and place in Venetian society "not by ethnicity or religion, but by what he owns" (18). What Shylock possesses—the "pound of flesh" on Antonio, not only represents Antonio's life but also symbolizes the desired equal social identity and rights of the Jewish community.

Moreover, the ethical choice of a "pound of flesh" is Shylock's violent accusation against the denial of humanity faced by Jews and a means of seeking racial identity recognition. Shylock asserts the humanity of the Jewish people, delivering a harsh condemnation of the injustices and inhumane treatment they have long endured:

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 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. (3. 1. 54-67)

Shylock's vehement accusation aims to emphasize that Jews, like Christians, are also flesh-and-blood beings with emotions and desires. When Jews are treated

unjustly and subjected to humiliation, they also experience the desire for revenge. Desire is a fundamental physiological requirement and psychological activity that arises from instinct and is driven by human instincts or motivations. And Shylock's desire for revenge essentially stems from the ethical identity of the Jewish race, which has long been regarded as "non-human" (such as Antonio calling him a dog, Launcelot regarding him as a devil, etc.) and from their marginalized position of exclusion and humiliation. The choice of the "pound of flesh" is a concentrated manifestation of Shylock's vengeful desire arising from the long-standing injustices faced by the Jewish people. Through the execution of his revenge, Shylock intends to achieve two main objectives: firstly, through revenge to warn everyone that Jews and Christians are both human beings, a combination of human and animal factors¹. When they suffer injustice and abuse, they also develop a desire for revenge, driven by free will². Therefore, in order to maintain order and harmony in Venetian society, Jews should be treated equally; Secondly, killing Antonio would serve as a deterrent, establishing the authority of the Jewish race, upholding the dignity of the Jewish community, and elevating their status within Venetian society.

Although Shylock's ethical choice of "pound of flesh" fundamentally aims to reshape his self and racial identity, he does not recognize the essence of humanity from an ethical perspective, nor does he ethically resolve the issue of human identity. Because solving the issue of human identity ethically requires "not only distinguishing humans from beasts in essence, but also confirming human identity from values such as responsibility, obligation, and morality" (Nie 263). The ethical choice of "a pound of flesh", although in line with the laws of Venetian society, does not conform to ethical morality. Shylock's insistence on taking one pound of flesh on Antonio is essentially no different from that of a beast. Although Shylock's choice of "a pound of flesh" is not truly enacted, it is precisely the choice and persistence in taking the pound of flesh that prevent him from ethical confirmation of his identity as a human being, let alone reshaping the ethical identity of the Jewish race and elevating the social status of the Jewish people. On the contrary, driven by the irrational will of revenge, Shylock is punished by Venetian law for

1 "Human factor" is the ethical consciousness of a person, embodied by the human head, and its manifestation is in the form of rational will. "Animal factor" is the remnant of animal instincts in humans during the process of evolution, and its outward manifestation is in the form of natural will and free will. See Nie Zhenzhao. *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism*. Beijing: Peking UP, 2014: 38-39.

2 ² "Free will" refers to the unconstrained will of a person and is the outward manifestation of human desires. See Nie Zhenzhao. *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism*. Beijing: Peking UP, 2014: 42, 282.

attempting to kill Christians. Punishment does not destroy his body but rather deals a blow to his spirit. Forced to convert to Christianity, Shylock not only fails to reshape his self and racial identity, but his racial identity has instead disintegrated and been deprived. As a result, the social identity and status of Shylock and the Jewish race were further marginalized.

Conclusion

Literature not only needs to point to texts and history but also to life and humanity itself, thereby fulfilling its moral teaching function. *The Merchant of Venice* introduces attention to ethical identity and the essence of humanity through the “pound of flesh” contract. A person’s ethical identity determines their ethical choices, while those choices reflect his essence and have a significant impact on the shaping of his identity. As the initiator and executor of the “pound of flesh” contract, the choice Shylock makes to claim the flesh reflects his beastly nature. He is unable to ethically confirm his identity as a human being, let alone reshape his racial identity. At the end of the play, Shylock’s response to being forced to convert to Christianity is, “I am content” (4.1.392), suggesting that the conflict between race and religion seems to be alleviated. However, the underlying issues of self-positioning and identity anxiety beneath Shylock’s new identity remain unresolved. It is precisely these unresolved issues, along with the audience’s multifaceted interpretations and paradoxical reflections on these questions, as well as the play’s open-ended conclusion that imbue the drama with tension and leave considerable room for interpretation.

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