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FACULTY OF PHILOLOGY

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## СОДРЖИНА / CONTENTS

### IN MEMORIAM

Проф. д-р Марија Кусевска (1954 – 2024)

### *Јазик / Language*

**Александра Минкова, Билјана Ивановска**

ДЕОНТИЧКАТА И ЕПИСТЕМСКАТА ЗАСТАПЕНОСТ НА  
МОДАЛНИТЕ ГЛАГОЛИ ВО ГЕРМАНСКИОТ ЈАЗИК  
ВРЗ ПРИМЕРИ ОД СВЕТОТО ЕВАНГЕЛИЕ СПОРЕД МАТЕЈ

**Aleksandra Minkova, Biljana Ivanovska**

DEONTIC AND EPISTEMIC PREVALENCE OF MODAL VERBS  
IN GERMAN LANGUAGE BASED ON EXAMPLES FROM THE  
HOLY GOSPELS ACCORDING TO MATTHEW .....

13

**Меги Димова, Даринка Маролова, Драгана Кузмановска**

ФРАЗЕОЛОГИЗМИ СО КОМПОНЕНТАТА „ГЛАВА“ ВО  
ГЕРМАНСКИОТ И ВО МАКЕДОНСКИОТ ЈАЗИК И МОЖНИ  
МЕЃУСЕБНИ ЕКВИВАЛЕНТНИ РЕЛАЦИИ

**Megi Dimova, Darinka Marolova, Dragana Kuzmanovska**

PHRASEOLOGISMS WITH THE COMPONENT “HEAD“ IN  
GERMAN AND MACEDONIAN LANGUAGE AND POSSIBLE  
MUTUAL EQUIVALENT RELATIONS .....

31

**Катерина Харбова, Билјана Ивановска**

ПРЕДЛОЗИТЕ ЗА МЕСТО ВО ГЕРМАНСКИОТ ЈАЗИК И  
НИВНИТЕ ЕКВИВАЛЕНТИ НА МАКЕДОНСКИ ЈАЗИК ВО  
ДЕЛОТО „ПАРФЕМ“ ОД ПАТРИК ЗИСКИНД

**Katerina Harbova, Biljana Ivanovska**

PREPOSITIONS OF PLACE IN GERMAN LANGUAGE AND  
THEIR EQUIVALENTS IN MACEDONIAN LANGUAGE IN THE  
LITERARY WORK “PARFUM” BY PATRICK SÜSKIND .....

41

### *Книжевност / Literature*

**Krste Iliev, Natalija Pop Zarieva, Dragan Donev**

SHAKESPEARE’S SHYLOCK: AN AVARICIOUS VILLAIN, A VICTIM,  
OR A COMPLEX FUSION OF BOTH .....

55

**Симона Монавчева**

ЕРЕБ (EREBUS) ВО ЖИВОТОТ НА МЛАДИТЕ КАКО РЕЗУЛТАТ  
НА МАНИПУЛАЦИЈАТА СО ВЕШТАЧКАТА ИНТЕЛИГЕНЦИЈА

**Simona Monavcheva**

EREBUS IN THE LIVES OF YOUNG PEOPLE AS A RESULT OF  
MANIPULATION WITH ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE .....

65

### *Култура / Culture*

**Ana Velinova**

MUSEUM TYPOLOGY AND THE ASPECT OF PLACE .....

79

**SHAKESPEARE`S SHYLOCK: AN AVARICIOUS VILLAIN,  
A VICTIM, OR A COMPLEX FUSION OF BOTH****Krste Iliev<sup>1</sup>, Natalija Pop Zarieva<sup>2</sup>, Dragan Donev<sup>3</sup>**<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Philology, University "Goce Delcev"- Stip  
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**Abstract:** This paper aims to explore the evolving critical perspectives on Shylock, a character from W. Shakespeare's play "*The Merchant of Venice*", assessing whether he embodies the traits of an avaricious villain, a sympathetic victim, or a complex amalgamation of both. It includes a personal evaluation of Shylock's multifaceted character, drawing upon biblical passages that illuminate the sin of avarice, as well as insights from ancient and medieval sources such as Plutarch, Gregory of Nyssa, Evagrius, Dante Alighieri, and Renaissance thinkers like Martin Luther, Pierre de La Primadauye, and Thomas Wilson. Beyond examining Shylock's avaricious nature, the paper also investigates whether his character trajectory aligns with de La Primadauye's contemporary portrayal of an individual who begins as avaricious and subsequently becomes consumed by anger and revenge.

**Key words:** *avarice/pride, hatred, anger, revenge, downfall*

**Introduction**

Shylock's avarice, hate, anger and thirst for revenge has been acknowledged by a number of critics. H. N. Hudson who in "The Merchant of Venice from Shakespeare: His Life, Art, and Characters", names avarice among the things that stimulate his enmity: "Thus his religion, his patriotism, his avarice, his affection, all concur to stimulate his enmity; and his personal hate thus reinforced overcomes for once his greed, and he grows generous in the prosecution of his aim. The only reason he will vouchsafe for taking the pound of flesh is, "if it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge," (as cited in *Bloom's Shakespeare through the Ages: The Merchant of Venice*, p.98) and also by Hudson "As avarice was the passion in which he mainly lived, the Christian virtues that thwarted this naturally seemed to him the greatest of wrongs" (as cited in *Bloom's Shakespeare through the Ages: The Merchant of Venice*, p.96). Elmer Edgar Stoll in "Shylock" from *Shakespeare Studies: Historical and Comparative in Method*, stresses the fact that Shylock is a "sordid miser" (as cited in

*Bloom's Shakespeare through the Ages: The Merchant of Venice*, p.136), or in other word a greedy person. Other critics who view Shylock as avaricious include: W. H. Auden "When we learn that Jessica has spent fourscore ducats of her father's money in an evening and bought a monkey with her mother's ring, we cannot take this as a comic punishment for Shylock's sin of avarice" (as cited in *Bloom's Shakespeare through the Ages: The Merchant of Venice*, p.183); Charles Gildon: "The Character of the Jew is very well distinguish'd by Avarice, Malice implacable Revenge &c. But the Incidents that necessarily shew these Qualities are so very Romantic, so vastly out of Nature, that our Reason, our Understanding is everywhere shock'd; which abates extremely of the Pleasure the Pen of Shakespear might give us" (as cited in *Bloom's Shakespeare through the Ages: The Merchant of Venice*, p. 47); August Wilhelm Schlegel: "The desire to avenge the wrongs and indignities heaped upon his nation is, after avarice, his strongest spring of action" (as cited in *Bloom's Shakespeare through the Ages: The Merchant of Venice*, p. 54); Hermann Ulrici: "During these long years of ignominy, their firm endurance and strict adherence to their national religion, morals and law, had been degraded into conceit and stiff-neckedness—their acute intellect into subtlety and finesse, the inspired view of the prophet into superstition, the love of their inheritance (which in so far as it was united with devotion to the land which God had given them, was praiseworthy,) was corrupted into a sordid and loathsome avarice, and the sense of superiority which their separation from all other nations and kindred had engendered, had sunk into bitter and contemptuous hate, and, wherever possible, into unfeeling and cruel revenge of their persecutors," (as cited in *Bloom's Shakespeare through the Ages: The Merchant of Venice*, p.70); Heinrich Heine "Possibly Shakespeare thought it would please the public were he to represent a greedy were-wolf, a dread mythical creature thirsting for blood, thereby losing his daughter and his ducats, besides exciting general ridicule" (as cited in *Bloom's Shakespeare through the Ages: The Merchant of Venice*, p. 66); A.D. Nuttall states: "The Jew is wicked, unhappy, usurious, greedy, vengeful"(p.192); Georg Brandes "Avaricious though he be, money is nothing to him in comparison with revenge," (as cited in *Bloom's Shakespeare through the Ages: The Merchant of Venice*, p.117) and "His hatred of Antonio is far more intense than his love for his jewels; and it is this passionate hatred, not avarice, that makes him the monster he becomes"( as cited in *Bloom's Shakespeare through the Ages: The Merchant of Venice*, p.117)

Some of the critics however, such as L.A. Fiedler and Georg Brandes, point out Shylock's redeeming qualities. For example, L.A. Fiedler (as cited in *Bloom's Shakespeare through the Ages: The Merchant of Venice*, 2008) writes:

It took three generations of nineteenth-century romantic actors to make the Jew seem sympathetic as well as central, so that the poet Heine, sitting in the audience, could feel free to weep at his discomfiture. The final and irrevocable redemption of Shylock, however, was the inadvertent achievement of the greatest anti-Semite of all time, who did not appear until

the twentieth century was almost three decades old. Since Hitler's "final solution" to the terror which cues the uneasy laughter of *The Merchant of Venice*, it has seemed immoral to question the process by which Shylock has been converted from a false-nosed, red-wigged monster (his hair the color of Judas's), half spook and half clown, into a sympathetic victim.

("The Jew As Stranger; or 'These Be the Christian Husbands,'" from *The Stranger in Shakespeare*, p.186)

Georg Brandes (as cited in *Bloom's Shakespeare through the Ages: The Merchant of Venice*. 2008) is of similar opinion: "The central figure of the play, however, in the eyes of modern readers and spectators, is of course Shylock, though there can be no doubt that he appeared to Shakespeare's contemporaries a comic personage, and, since he makes his final exit before the last act, by no means the protagonist. In the humaner view of a later age, Shylock appears as a half-pathetic creation, a scapegoat, a victim; to the Elizabethan public, with his rapacity and his miserliness, his usury and his eagerness to dig for another the pit into which he himself falls, he seemed, not terrible, but ludicrous. (p.114)

### **Shylock the Avaricious Villain**

Shylock's behaviour in many ways dovetails with the depictions of usurer's behaviour described in the Bible, but also by ancient, medieval and renaissance scholars and books. One gets an insight into the avaricious nature of the Jewish usurer, Shylock, from his talk with Antonio, his lender. Shylock is extremely angry and envious at the fact that Antonio lends money without interest. In that way, Antonio hurts the avaricious nature of Shylock, because the latter due to pure economic reasons, would have likewise to lower his interest rates if he would like to have clients and be competitive on the market. This means that he would make lower profits. For Shylock, this is an anathema and so he expresses his anger and hatred towards Antonio:

I hate him for he is a Christian,  
But more for that in low simplicity  
He lends out money gratis and brings down  
The rate of usance here with us in Venice.  
.....  
Cursed be my tribe,  
I If I forgive him! (Act I, Scene 3, lines 363-73)

Shylock's hatred is so huge that he would lend the money, three thousand ducats to Antonio without interest, albeit on one condition sealed as a bond at a notary. The bond stipulates that if Antonio doesn't return the money in three months, that Shylock

would cut a piece of a pound of flesh from “what part of your body pleaseth me” (Act I, Scene 3, 479). It seems that Shylock’s intention is to punish or even murder Antonio, to exact revenge and to teach him a lesson, in case Antonio remains alive. If Antonio forfeits his bond, in the future, out of fear he would stay clear of Shylock occupation. If Antonio dies, Shylock would get rid of his direct competition.

Shylock’s God is not God from the New Testament as he is a Jew, but rather money. A passage in the Bible states: “No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon” (New King James Version, 1996, Matthew 6:24). Shylock serves only mammon, i.e., money, and by demanding a pound of flesh he is abiding to the Old Testament/ Tanakh saying: “Breach for breach, eye for eye, tooth for tooth: as he hath caused a blemish in a man, so shall it be done to him again” (New King James Version, 1996, Lev. 24:40). One possible reason for this is that Shylock feels that his flow of money and by extension his survival and above all well-being and the survival and well-being of his daughter, his flash and body, is threatened by Antonio. In Act IV, Scene 1, Shylock says: “You take my life/When you do take the means whereby I live” (lines 373-374). Shylock’s apparent reasoning is that, since Antonio with his actions is endangering his flesh and body, i.e., himself and Jessica his daughter, then by abiding to the Old Testament rule, he would also demand flesh for flesh.

As Pierre de La Primaudaye has stated, the order of occurrence of sins is pride, and by extension general avarice which according to Thomas Aquinas (*Summa Theologica*, 1981) is the same as pride, then followed by anger and revenge “Now as pride breedeth arrogancie, so en|uy, ill will, anger, rancour, and desire of reuenge, doe follow and accompany it” (1618, p.510). Shylock is among the characters in Shakespeare that also follows this pattern. After he has fallen into the trap of pride/avarice and anger it is expected that he will continue with revenge: “Salarino. Why, I am sure, if he forfeit, thou wilt not take/his flesh: what’s that good for? / Shylock. To bait fish withal: if it will feed nothing else, /it will feed my revenge. (Act III, Scene 1, line 46-49) Again, Shylock justifies his urge for revenge relying on the Old Testament. His reasoning is that if a Christian wronged by a Jew seeks revenge, why that shouldn’t be the case when the roles are reversed:

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 villany you/teach me, I will execute, and it shall go hard but I/ will better the instruction. (Act III, Scene 1, lines 62-66)

In addition to being proud/avaricious, angry and revengeful, Shylock is a miser. Dante Alighieri in his Divine Comedy places those who have committed the sin of greed in the Fourth circle of Hell. Among them are misers, hoarders and spendthrifts. Shylock is a miser, because although he is described as a rich person, he is starving his



poor servant Launcelot to the point where his ribs are visible prompting his servant to want to run away and find a new master:

I am famished in  
his service; you may tell every finger I have with  
my ribs. Father, I am glad you are come: give me  
your present to one Master Bassanio, who, indeed,  
gives rare new liveries: if I serve not him, I  
will run as far as God has any ground.

(Act II, Scene 2, lines 103- 106)

That usurers and men of miserly nature would let the whole world perish of hunger and thirst is attested by Martin Luther as cited by Marx:

Therefore, is there, on this earth, no greater enemy of man (after the devil) than a gripemoney, and usurer, for he wants to be God over all men. Turks, soldiers, and tyrants are also bad men, yet must they let the people live, and confess that they are bad, and enemies, and do, nay, must, now and then show pity to some. But a usurer and money-glutton, such a one would have the whole world perish of hunger and thirst, misery and want, so far as in him lies, so that he may have all to himself, and every one may receive from him as from a God, and be his serf for ever. To wear fine cloaks, golden chains, rings, to wipe his mouth, to be deemed and taken for a worthy, pious man .... Usury is a great huge monster, like a werewolf, who lays waste all, more than any Cacus, Gerion or Antus. And yet decks himself out, and would be thought pious, so that people may not see where the oxen have gone, that he drags backwards into his den. (Marx, 1887, p.428-29)

One can see from Luther's passage that usurers and greedy people want to present themselves as pious men. Shylock also wants to be seen as a pious man. In his conversation with Antonio, in order to justify his practice of usury, he cites a story from the Old Testament about Laban and Jacob's cunning action to justify charging interest, arguing that just as Jacob cleverly increased his flock using Laban's resources, he too is entitled to profit from his dealings. Antonio, however, doesn't agree dismissing Shylock's Biblical story by stating that "The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose" (Act I, Scene 3, line 107).

Shylock's daughter, like Lancelot, also doesn't like her father's avaricious and miserly nature. Jessica lives with her father, but in her opinion their home represents "hell" (Act II, Scene 3, line 2). She says to their servant Launcelot: "I am sorry thou wilt leave my father so: Our house is hell, and thou, a merry devil, Didst rob it of some taste of tediousness" (Act II, Scene 3, lines 1-3). Since Jessica's house is hell for her, as a result of lack of love, she decides to elope with a Christian and a friend

of Antonio, Lorenzo. Jessica says: "Farewell; and if my fortune be not crost, /I have a father, you a daughter, lost" (Act II, Scene 5, lines 57-58).

That Shylock cares more about his ducats than about his daughter is attested in Act II, Scene 8. Although the passage, Solanio's account on what Shylock uttered, contains the phrase "My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter" (line 15), which gives the false impression that he cares more about his daughter than about his ducats, they pale when compared to the phrases that follow. Here, Shylock puts the entire emphasis on his ducats and on devising ways how to get them back. That is by finding his thief, his daughter.

A sealed bag, two sealed bags of ducats, Of double ducats, stolen from me by my daughter! And jewels, two stones, two rich and precious stones, Stolen by my daughter! Justice! find the girl; She hath the stones upon her, and the ducats. (Act II, Scene 8, lines 18-23)

In her escape, Jessica also takes a casket from her home, a considerable sum of ducats as well as a turquoise ring, a present to Shylock from his late wife Leah. When Shylock hears about his daughter's flight he expresses his opinion that he loves more his riches than his daughter and that he prefers his riches even at the cost of seeing his daughter dead in a coffin: "I would my daughter were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear! Would she were hearsed at my foot, and the ducats in/ her coffin! (Act III, Scene 1, lines 87-90) This act of Shylock, according to Dante's definition of sin with regard to love, is both an act of perverted love (in this case love of money placed above of love of his daughter) or pride and an act of excessive love (too much emphasis on money as contrasted to care about his daughter) or avarice.

With regard to the tense relationship between an avaricious man and misers and their offspring and food, Newhauser cites Gregory of Nissa, who in his *Contra Usarius Oratio*, states the example of a usurer's behaviour: "Constrained by the passion, he was also miserly with his own expenditures [...] not setting the table with enough, never changing his clothes except out of necessity, not granting his children the bare minimum for carrying on life" (Newhauser, 2000, p.31).

The relationship between a wealthy and a miserly man, in this case Shylock and a son, or in this case his daughter Jessica, squandering his money by exchanging the stolen ring for a monkey, is vividly depicted by Plutarch in his essay "On the Love of Wealth" (*Moralia*, 2013). It is apposite to mention that squandering money, or being spendthrift is also a characteristic of avarice. Plutarch writes:

For having been taught to look up to nothing but wealth and to live for nothing but great possessions, they consider that their fathers' lives stand in the way of their own, and conceive that time steals from them whatever it adds to their fathers; years. Hence even when the father is still alive the son behind his back finds one way or another to steal some pleasure from the money and spends it as if he had no interest in it, giving it to friends and lavishing it on his appetites. (2013, p. 2593)

Dante Alighieri, in his *Divine Comedy*, also talks about a conflict between a miser like Shylock and a spendthrift like Jessica. Dante describes what happens in the Fourth Circle of Hell:

Here, too, I saw a nation of lost souls,  
far more than were above: they strained their chests  
against enormous weights, and with mad howls  
rolled them at one another. Then in haste  
they rolled them back, one party shouting out:  
“Why do you hoard?” and the other: “Why do you waste?”  
(*Inferno*, Canto VII, lines 25-30)

Shylock's avarice and the estrangement it caused to his daughter with regard to her flight and subsequent loss, can be compared to the Myth of Midas as written by Nathaniel Hawthorne in *A Wonder-Book for Girls and Boys* (1852). Namely after Midas saves Silenus, God Bacchus, out of gratitude, tells Midas that he will fulfil one wish for his service. Midas chooses that whatever he touches would be turned into gold. Bacchus grants Midas his wish. However, Midas's daughter comes to see him in order to seek comfort because the roses that Midas has touched have turned into gold. In order to comfort his daughter, Midas touched her and turned her also into gold. Both in the cases of Shylock and in the case of Midas, avarice and obsession with money leads to the loss of one's child.

Shylock also envies Antonio, and rejoices at his misfortunes. When he learns that one of Antonio's ships is wrecked, he rejoices, supposedly because he will get his revenge:

Tubal. Yes, other men have ill luck too: Antonio, as I  
heard in Genoa,—  
Shylock. What, what, what? ill luck, ill luck?  
Tubal. Hath an argosy cast away, coming from Tripolis.  
Shylock. I thank God, I thank God. Is't true, is't true?  
Tubal. I spoke with some of the sailors that escaped the wreck.  
Shylock. I thank thee, good Tubal: good news, good news!  
ha, ha! where? in Genoa?

(Act III, Scene I, lines 97-104)

Murder is one of the characteristics of avarice according to *Ancrene Wisse*. Shylock's rejoices at the fact that he will get revenge, and his intention is not to cut pound of flesh that one can live without, but the very spring of Antonio's essence, his heart, an act of murder: “Go, Tubal, fee/me an officer; bespeak him a fortnight before. I/will have the heart of him, if he forfeit; for, were/he out of Venice, I can make what merchandise I/will” (Act III, Scene 1, lines 124-127).

Shylock is resolved to exact his revenge even though he is offered double the sum by Bassanio, “Bassanio. For thy three thousand ducats here is six. /Shylock. What judgment shall I dread, doing/Were in six parts and every part a ducat, / I

would not draw them; I would have my bond “(Act IV, Scene 1, lines 85-88) and is offered even triple the sum by Portia: “Portia. Shylock, there’s thrice thy money offer’d thee.” (Act IV, Scene 1, line 224).

Shylock is insensible to mercy, which is another characteristic of the sin of avarice. Mercy is regarded as the contrary virtue of avarice and the quality that heals it. Chaucer, in the “Parson Tale”, names mercy as the remedial virtue:

Now shul ye understonde that the relevinge of avarice is misericorde and pitee, largely taken. And men mighten axe why that misericorde and pitee is relevinge of avarice. Certes, the avaricious man sheweth no pitee ne misericorde to the nedeful man, for he deliteth him in the kepinge of his tresor, and nat in the rescowinge ne relevinge of his evene Cristene.

(Mann, 2005, 757, 804-805)

The Duke openly asks Shylock: “How shalt thou hope for mercy, rendering none?” (Act IV, Scene 1, line 89). Shylock’s insensibility to mercy, forces Portia disguised as a lawyer named Balthazar, to deliver her speech on the quality of mercy. However, despite the speech, Shylock is adamant to fulfil his contract.

The perilous relationship between Shylock, the money-lender and Antonio, the debtor fits the description that Plutarch provides in an essay from *Moralia*, “That we Ought Not to Borrow”, Plutarch writes:

For debtors are slaves to all the men who ruin them, or rather not to them either (for what would be so terrible in that?), but to outrageous, barbarous, and savage slaves, like those who Plato says stand in Hades as fiery avengers and executioners over those who have been impious in life. For these money-lenders make the market-place a place of the damned for the wretched debtors; like vultures they devour and flay them, “entering into their entrails.”

(2013, p. 3081-82)

Although Plutarch used a metaphor to depict the actions of money-lenders toward debtors, i.e., “entering into their entrails,” Thomas Wilson in his “A Discourse Upon Usury” (1572) depicts a situation that is even more similar to the one described in *The Merchant of Venice*: “Septimus Florens reporteth if one man were a debtour to many, hys body was geeven unto them, to bee equally cut in peces, and whereas hee had not to paye in his purse, hys quartered body should paye for all.” (1925, p. 340)

In Act IV, Scene 1, as Shylock is about to cut his pound of flesh and exact his revenge, Shakespeare introduces a reversal in the action. Namely Portia, disguised as Balthasar, finds a fault in the bond. Unable to abide to the bond, Shylock, as he as an outsider, has attempted murder and has previously refused triple the sum, is stripped of his property and converted to Christianity in order to avoid being sentenced to death by the Duke. Shylock ends the play as a saddened and despondent man. In

Act IV, Scene 1, Shylock says: "Nay, take my life and all;" (line 390) and in his last speech "I pray you, give me leave to go from hence;/I am not well: send the deed after me, /And I will sign it" (Act IV, Scene 1,412-416). The link between avarice, wrath and sadness is attested by Evagrius, as cited by Newhauser: "The houses of the avaricious will be filled with the beasts of wrath, and the birds of sadness will rest in them" (2000, p.55).

### **Concluding remarks**

The character of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* is undeniably complex. While some critics argue for a sympathetic interpretation of Shylock, noting moments that highlight his human vulnerabilities—such as his poignant reflection on the Rialto, where he laments being spat upon and asserts, "For sufferance is the badge of all our tribe" (Act I, Scene 3, line 120) —this paper ultimately aligns with the prevailing critical perspective that portrays Shylock as primarily avaricious and vengeful. Shylock's intense focus on his wealth and his relentless pursuit of revenge overshadow his more redeeming qualities. His character largely embodies the archetype of the greedy and proud usurer, whose single-minded obsession with his money and desire for retribution leads to his downfall. This characterization aligns with the description of the vengeful individual as outlined by Francis Bacon in his essay "On Revenge" (Essays 1994), where he compares vindictive people to witches whose malevolent actions ultimately result in their own misfortune. Thus, while Shylock does exhibit traits that can evoke sympathy, his overall portrayal as a figure driven by greed and vengeance profoundly shapes his tragic fate.

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