Is Shylock the villain or the victim in The Merchant of Venice

Shylock is one of the main characters in The Merchant of Venice, but is the Jewish moneylender the villain or victim? Shylock is a Jew who lives in a city controlled by Christians, everything that Shylock values is detested by these Christians. They hate the fact that he's a moneylender, and they don’t trust him, because of his religion. (Hogan 3 5-8)

In the beginning, Shakespeare shows that Shylock is the villain as he is spoken about by Salarnio and Salerio when he was called a “dog” (Hogan 4 4-5). When Antonio asks Shylock for a favor we immediately see that Shylock has a villain mind, because he demands a pound of flesh if Antonio can’t pay it back in three years (Shakespeare 1.3 1-22). Why does Shylock wants a pound of flesh, he can’t do anything with it and he knows it will kill Antonio. When his daughter runs away with his jewelry, because Shylock has been a bad father and the daughter does not like the way Shylock talks about Christians (Amine 30 15-24). Shylock is malignant by the theft of his turquoise ring by Jessica, given to him by an old love. He said that he wanted her dead:

Shylock: I wish my daughter were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear! I wish she were in a coffin at my foot, and the ducats in her coffin! (Shakespeare 3.1 79-82)

This shows us that Shylock is dark minded and that money is more important to him than his own daughter. When Salerio has a conversation with Shylock, Shylock said some really interesting things. In the first part of the Shylock speech he talks about revenge.

Shylock: To bait fish with: if his flesh will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge. He has disgraced me, and cheated me of half a million coins; 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? (Shakespeare 3.1 46-51)

He plays in this part the victim, but is the villain. He does like Antonio is the worst and that he did everything right, actually he is the one who is the worst, because he is a Jew and in Judaism the sixth Commandment is:

Thou shalt not murder. (Hebrew Bible The Ten Commandments of god 6-7)

And he knows if he takes a pound of flesh Antonio would die. So, Shylock does something against his believe and that is way worse than what Antonio did. In the last part of the Shylock speech, you can see his dark side again:

And if you wrong us, will we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrongs a Christian, what is his supposed humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrongs a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villainy you teach me, I will act on, and it will be hard but I will be more vengeful than you have taught. (Shakespeare 3.1 58-65)

He will take revenge on Antonio and even worse than he can imagine. This is what a villain would do so here you can see the worst side of Shylock. Maybe you can understand Shylock, because he lost his daughter and a really important jewel, also he was mistreated by Antonio, but killing is never the right way to handle. In court you can see the “quality of mercy”, because when Shylock doesn’t show mercy to Antonio he has to pay for it:

Be assured, thou shall have justice more than thou desirist. In this scene we can see that having mercy is sometimes better than doing what you think that person deserves. (Hogan 4 17-21)

He is represented as a victim when he tells about how poorly treated he was and made us sympathize with him:

Shylock: You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog, And spit upon my Jewish clothing, And all for use of that which is my own. (Shakespeare 1.3 107-111)

Then Shylock talks about the anti-semitism that occurs a lot in his time:

I am a Jew. Has not a Jew eyes? Has 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 methods, 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? (Shakespeare 3.1 51-58)

Shylock is most of the time discriminated, because he is a Jew and that is exactly what makes him the victim rather then the villain. In the court scene we can also see the abuse of judicial power, because Shylock has already lost a lot: his daughter and a jewel of the woman he loved and now he has to give up everything he has left, His money and even his religion. I think it is too much for Shylock to change his religion in that part Shylock is the victim.

In my opinion this essay supports the claim that Shylock is a complex character and that he has a lot of emotional things on his mind so maybe that’s why he handled in a unacceptable way. Shylock is in the play most of the time represented as the villain, but has also a lot of parts where he is the victim.

Works cited

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