



Rethinking the Image of Shylock

--Also on the "antagonist" in Shakespeare's comedies

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Abstract Shylock in Shakespeare's comedy "The Merchant of Venice" is rich in character traits, and the history of his acceptance in China has gone through a process from "sympathy" to "criticism" to "praise" to "mixed evaluation". "This is because the stereotype of Shylock as an "antagonist" is easily influenced by the historical context and personal discourse of the recipient. However, the stereotype of Shylock as an "antagonist" still has its own significance in the light of the significance of many "antagonists" in Shakespeare's comedies and his motivation.

Keywords: Shylock's image; antagonist; Shakespearean comedy; The Merchant of Venice

1 Introduction

Shylock, known as one of the world's four miserly men, is originally from Shakespeare's comedy *The Merchant of Venice*. The famous American literary critic Harold Bloom, in *The Western Canon*, holds Shakespeare as the peak of the Western canon, and his works are of maternal significance to later generations [1]. According to the traditional study of Shylock's image, he is mean, cruel, greedy and indifferent, and according to Marx's analysis of the medieval capital form in *Capital*, Shylock is a typical usurious capitalist. Shylock" means "shame-locked" - "unashamed", and thus is often defined as "antagonist".

But in fact, Shylock has not always been an "antagonist" in China, and there is a question of a twist in the evaluation history. What exactly is the reason for this? No one has done a systematic study on this. In this paper, we will explore the reliability of the definition of "antagonist" and the significance of such "antagonist" in the context of Shakespeare's comedies as a whole, starting from the textual analysis and reception history of Shylock's image.

2 Shylock in Multiple Meanings

2.1 Shylock as an Antagonist

Shylock in the "Flesh Cutting" Incident: The Evil Miser. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock's image is undoubtedly evil, in contrast to Antonio. He is narrow-minded and believes that Antonio lends money to people without charging interest affects his income from loan sharks, so he takes revenge on the other side. He half-jokingly signs a cruel contract with Antonio and subsequently reveals his sinister nature. This anticlimactic image is especially shown in the confrontation in court.

Shylock: "Cut that pound of flesh from that bankrupt fellow."

Graciano: "Ruthless Jew, you are not sharpening your knife on the mouth of your shoe, you are sharpening this knife on the mouth of your heart; no iron, not even the executioner's steel knife, is half as sharp as your venomous heart. Can no plea move thee? "

Shylock: "No, no matter how politely you say it, it is useless[2]."

Shylock knows that asking Antonio for a high interest rate is tantamount to a "cut", and that his predicament will not "move" him, in Graciano's words, "a venomous heart". This highlights the evil face of Shylock's interest first and ignore human feelings.

"Avenger" Image. Shylock's creed in life is "I will do what you teach me to do," and he uses violence to fight against violence and evil to fight against evil, in this sense he is an evil avenger. He firmly believes in his own power, claiming that "there is no power in the language of man to change me, I rely on my own power to stay here". He is proud and arrogant, proud of his fairness, vigilance and foresight. By taking revenge on others through a pound of flesh, "revenge" became his way of life, from which he could affirm his own value.

Hypocritical Religious Believers. Shylock despised Christians and resented their prejudice against the Jewish people. He was also hypocritical, and in expressing his devotion to his religion, making money was obviously more important.

2.2 The Sympathetic Shylock

The Curse of the Jew As An Economic Actor. Shylock's birth was Jewish, and he was bullied by Christianity and the world in England at that time.

In sixteenth-century Europe, Jews were discriminated against, even in Venice, which was known as the most prosperous and free city. According to the law, Jews could only live in old factories with walls, or in the partitioned areas of the city, and after sunset, Christians were required to lock the gates of the Jewish quarter and keep watch over them. During the day, any Jew who wanted to go out had to wear a red hat to identify himself as a Jew. Jews were forbidden to own any private property, so they

had to make a living as usurers, lending money and charging interest, which was against Christian law [3].

In the original text, Shakespeare describes the hardship of the Jews as above, explaining their difficult life in terms of their living conditions, inhuman treatment, and specialization with discriminatory labels, respectively. At the same time, Shakespeare points out that the usury of the Jews is not due to their "evil" nature, but to the objective situation that "Jews are forbidden to own any private property", but the Christian Church has thus labeled them as anti-clerical. Throughout history, Jews were often forbidden to do certain businesses or own land, and were restricted in many aspects of their lives and discriminated against by others, so they had few opportunities to make money. They were not allowed to engage in small businesses or even get rich by lending money, thus giving the impression that they were making money from the debts or misfortunes of others. However, Shakespeare saw the Jews surviving in the cracks and injected rational sympathy when he concretely and objectively showed the dilemma of their lives.

The Plight of the Jews As Members of Society. In addition to Antonio and other Christians who often abused him, Shylock lost his wife and daughter. As a Jewish single father, he must face the anti-Jewish world alone. Although Shakespeare shows between the lines how weary the people of his time were of Shylock and the Jewish community as a whole. The Christians in Venice are happy to lend him money, but refuse to accept him as part of Venetian society. The dialogue in Act I, Scene III revolves around Antonio's contempt and sarcasm toward Shylock, a Jew who, in the eyes of the Venetians, is a heretic. In a community that made Christianity its bishop, Shylock was scorned by the Christians around him because of his humble background and his loan sharking business practices.

2.3 The Praised Shylock

Strictly speaking, Shylock is a "round character". In the text, Shylock also has some overlooked characteristics: intelligence, bravery, perseverance, and nationalism.

In the first scene, Shylock's heart is like this.

Ah, no, no, no, no; when I say he is a good man, I mean to say he is a man of stature. But his property is still some problems ship is just a few boards nailed up things, sailors are just some flesh and blood, there are dry rats on the shore, there are water rats in the water, there are land robbers, there are also sea robbers, and the wind and waves and rocks all kinds of dangers [4].

Sherlock deeply sympathizes with the sailors and speaks for the underclass from the standpoint of the oppressed. He understands the oppression of the underclass and the pain of working and living in discomfort everywhere, because he himself exists as a member of the oppressed and weak people and class. But he dares to speak out for the bottom, which fully highlights his compassionate heart and brave man posture.

3 The "Discovery" of Shylock's Image in China

The Merchant of Venice has been accepted in China for one hundred years. During this period, the image of Shylock has undergone a great transformation in the history of Chinese reception. Specifically, it has undergone the following processes.

3.1 The Period of The New Cultural Movement (1917-1949): "Sympathy" Under the National Discourse

Represented by Liang Shiqiu's article "The Meaning of The Merchant of Venice" in the 1930s, Shylock was the object of sympathy. This is because the researchers at that time viewed Shylock in the discourse of a weak nation-state, and the history of acceptance and evaluation reflected a national discourse with empathy. "These two important modern discourses were founded on the position of China's weak national sovereignty at that time. Thus, in the analysis of Shylock's image, Chinese critics interpreted it more from the standpoint of "national discourse", seeing the history of the suffering of the Jewish nation, which was similar to the oppressed, bullied, and colonized modern China at that time, and thus created national empathy for Shylock's image, focusing on "sympathy".

3.2 Socialist Construction Period (1949-1966): "Criticism" Under the Class Discourse

The "critical sympathy theory" put forward by Bian Zhilin in 1964 in "The Development of Shakespeare's Dramatic Creation" (Literary Review, No. 4, 1964) is the representative, and this view has since become the mainstream of Chinese academia.[5]

First of all, at this stage, "criticism" appeared for the first time in the history of Shylock's image evaluation. Bian Zhilin clearly pointed out that Shylock was a usurer, loved money like his life, had a vicious character, and had a full bourgeois character. His commentary on Shylock stood on the class discourse, which conformed to the mainstream discourse of class struggle as the platform at the early stage of socialist construction in China at that time. The Chinese literary scene at the early stage of socialist construction took Mao Zedong's "Speech at the Yan'an Literary and Art Symposium" in 1942 as the standard, and put forward the standard of "serving the workers, peasants and soldiers, serving socialism" in contemporary literature. In such a historical context, Shylock's ugly image was gradually classicized.

But at the same time, the "sympathy theory" put forward during the New Culture Movement still existed, because China still had not got rid of its identity as a weak nation, and was deeply sympathetic to the same oppressed nation. Therefore, the history of the evaluation of Shylock's image shows a dichotomy.

3.3 The period of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976): A Collective Dissonance under the Political Silence

During the period of the Cultural Revolution, due to the change in the external state policy and the internal literary policy, the study of foreign literature came to a standstill, and the study of English literature or Shakespeare belonged to "internal publications" and was not open to the public. The extreme "integration" of politics and the "hegemony" of literature resulted in the absence of the history of Shylock's evaluation.

3.4 The "New Period" of the 1980s (1977-1989): "Critical Sympathy" under the Humanist Discourse

In 1985, a subtle change occurred in the history of Shylock's evaluation, that is, the "negative theory" emerged, but it did not receive much attention from the academic community. Scholars such as Fang Shi proposed that Shylock should not be denied evil because of his identity as an oppressed people, but defined as a tragic figure. Fang Shi's position is to view the image of Shylock in the context of human feelings and humanity, which were highly debated in the 1980s, and therefore he focuses on the usurious merchant side of Shylock's identity. The critique of this position is based on the "evil of human nature", which is very different from the critique of the "class position" of the "Seventeen Years", but the result is the same.

The year 1988 is the most crucial year in the history of the evaluation of Shylock's image, marked by Shun Li's "Review of Shylock" (Journal of Shangluo Teachers College, No. 1, 1988). The essay made a conclusion completely opposite to that of Fang Shi. According to Sunli, Shylock is a multi-faceted figure who is at the same time a greedy exploiter, a cruel avenger, a strong defender of human rights, and a just and persecuted fighter. He affirms Shylock's exaltation of human rights in the context of the mainstream discourse of the 1980s - the "humanitarian quest" - which is in line with the concern for humanitarianism in the "new era" of China[6].

However, the "comprehensive" view pointed out by Sun Li's article, on the other hand, actually foreshadows the emergence of a postmodern evaluation that dissolves the essence and becomes a precursor of the evaluation history of the 1990s and the new century.

3.5 The 1990s (1990-1999): The "Bottom Theory" under the Economic Discourse

Following the "comprehensive" evaluation of the 1980s, in the 1990s, when "commodity fetishism" was the mainstream, the circulation of Shylock's image continued the discourse of the previous period.

Yang Ye's "Also on Shylock" (Journal of Zeroing Teacher's College, No. 1, 1990) illustrates that Shylock is a collection of contradictions from the perspective of the humiliation of Jews, the root of revenge, the human feelings of father and daughter, and the shameful phenomenon of exposing inhumanity in court[7]. In Wang Shuwen's

"Also on Shylock: The Many Faces of Shakespeare's Character" (Journal of Jingzhou Teachers College, No. 4, 1990), after quoting Heine's comments on Shylock's "respectable character" and "righteous revenge," the author praises Shylock's performance in court. After quoting Heine's assessment of Shylock's "honorable character" and "righteous revenge," the commentator praises Shylock's performance in court. He argues that Shylock showed his defiance of power by standing up to the people and defying the powerful[8]. Li Lin's "A New Theory of Shylock's Image" (Journal of Gu Yuan Teachers College, No. 5, 1997) repositioned the diversity of Shylock's image in terms of financial commerce, national self-esteem, and legal consciousness, while he paid attention to the basic issue of "Shylock has children's feelings" as a human being[9].

In the context of consumerism in the 1990s, critics such as Wang Shuwen and Li Lin saw the confrontation between Shylock's small power as an individual human being and the torrent of the times. The revolutionary romanticism, heroism, and idealism of the past were stripped away by the reality of the consumerist environment, so that in the 1990s, among the "loss of sensationalism in literature" and the "return of realism," Shylock's image became a The image of Shylock became an "individual at the bottom", more concerned with his struggle for survival as an "ordinary man".

3.6 The New Century (2000-present): The "Interpretive Dilemma" under the Postmodern Discourse

Zhu Xiaoling proposed Shylock's "double personality" in "A Double Personality of a Usurer: The Image of Shylock in The Merchant of Venice" (Gouyuan Shidian Journal, Social Science Edition, No. 2, 2002)[10]. Ou Huayen devoted an article to explore the diversity of Shylock's character, and the commentators ranged from "greedy and vicious", "scheming", "vengeful", "eloquent", and "defending dignity". "The five aspects of Shylock's character have been discussed in the article "On the Diverse Combinations of Shylock's Character"[11] (Journal of Shaoyang College, No. 2, 2005). But while researchers try to maintain the comprehensiveness of the study, they tend to fall into a kind of "agnosticism" that is complicated and varied. This reflects one of the most important problems in the new century literature, namely, the problem of "decentering, truthlessness, and essence" in the postmodern discourse. Thus, in the cultural field of the new century, the image of Shylock is easily caught in an "interpretive dilemma".

Through the above history of Shylock's acceptance in China in the past hundred years, it can be seen that the entry points of academic acceptance of Shylock's image were extremely different in different times. The consciousness of the problem of acceptance has changed according to the political context, economic problems, social environment, and literary status of China itself.

4 What is the "Antagonist" and Why is it "Antagonist"?

Combining the textual analysis of Shylock's image in the first part and the acceptance of Shylock in Chinese context in the second part, the image of Shylock changes according to the interpretation angle of the text and the context of the time, that is to say, the reference of the literary image itself is not definite and unchanging. However, the stereotype of Shylock in China and the West has always been that of the "negative character". Is such a stereotype reasonable? What is the "negative character" and why is it "negative" is the question we want to discuss.

4.1 The Origin of the Stereotype of Shylock As the "Negative" Character

In the history of world literary criticism, Shylock has always appeared as the "negative character". Although there are many levels of character connotations in Shylock, why do critics still steadfastly reject Shylock in any era? There are several main reasons.

Firstly, from the methodological point of view, it is related to the method of socio-historical criticism adopted by the critics. Scholars who insist on the "negative theory" mainly look at class theory, human nature theory, and socio-historical development. On the issue of "economy-class", Shylock was a usurious exploiter of the old style, and he belonged to the backward feudal class in terms of class attributes, while his opponent Antonio belonged to the emerging bourgeoisie, representing the factors of social productivity progress, in contrast to Shylock, who represented the old forces. In Marx's materialistic view of history, this force is an obstacle to the process of social development, and therefore Shylock is defined as the "antagonist" and subjected to negation, which is a conceptual problem.

Secondly, another way of judging the "negation theory" is to focus on the bias of Shylock's dominant character. Among them, "money greed" and "national revenge" are the focus of controversy. If greed and stinginess are the characteristics of Shylock throughout his life, then Shylock is condemnable; if national revenge is the dominant character, then Shylock is worthy of sympathy and affirmation.

In conclusion, it can be concluded that the image of Shylock as a "negative character" in the history of evaluation is related to the critic's method of criticism, which is subjective and conjectural. Therefore, is such a "negative" stereotype reasonable? What are the factors that influence "negative"?

4.2 Criteria for Judging Negative Characters

The "negative character" belongs to a classical type of artistic creation, but its definition is generally placed in a certain context or network of relationships.

First of all, the "negative character" is a relative concept, as opposed to the "positive character". Generally speaking, they have an evil appearance, character and ideology, and their behavior is against the moral and legal norms agreed upon by society, representing "unjust" and "non-progressive" forces. In the universal evaluation system, they are classified as "antagonist" as a regressive force. For

example, in Shakespeare's writing, Shylock's appearance is absent, but Shakespeare focuses on Shylock's evil and inhumane behavior through his language. Such descriptions of words and actions are precisely the outward signs of the "antagonist".

Secondly, the concept of "antagonist" is also a fluid one. Not only the characters themselves in the text have growth variables, may be from "positive" to "negative", or vice versa; but also for the text itself, the text of the target group of readers to participate in different, according to the reader's individual environment, the context of the times and different. Because the "antagonist" is essentially a value judgment, readers must be involved in creating it. Specifically in the case of Shylock, the discovery of Shylock's image in modern Chinese literature has flowed with the changing historical contexts, presenting a pluralistic image.

Again, the "antagonist" is a narrowly personalized concept. As a type of character, "negative/positive" characters are different from "flat/round" characters, which depend on individual emotional orientation and moral judgment and are not universal. Moreover, the "negative-positive" dichotomy is not absolutely valid, because the "gray character/middle character" in the middle is the norm in daily life experience. This, then, makes the evaluation very difficult. According to Forster's division, Shylock must belong to the "round character", in which many contradictory characters and experiences are gathered. However, for personalized reading, each reader sees and interprets Shylock in his own "expectation threshold".

Therefore, the definition of "antagonist" involves a kind of relational mapping. The "antagonist" is not an isolated concept from the beginning to the end, but is placed in a complex network of intertwined relationships. The judgment of a character as good or bad must be closely related to the relationship with the surrounding people, the judgment of the surrounding things, the conflict and the difference of behavioral choices, that is to say, it must form a dialogue with the Other/other in order to exist.

4.3 Is the "Antagonist" Stereotype Reasonable?

Based on the above analysis of the concept of "antagonist", it is concluded that "antagonist" itself is an indeterminate concept, that is, "antagonist" is a fluid concept or a comparative concept in a network of relations. The historical characterization of the "antagonist" must become a meaningless conclusion, and Shylock's stereotype of the "antagonist" must fall into an oxymoron. In other words, from a socio-historical analysis, the setting of the "antagonist" is linked to various contextual elements, and the deconstruction of the "antagonist" does mean that it is precisely this link that opens up a very rich interpretative space for the analysis of Shylock's characterization. It is precisely because of this that Shylock becomes a flesh-and-blood, historically controversial literary figure.

This is not to say, however, that Shylock's image is gnostic. In the textual sense, the other antagonists in Shakespeare's comedies represented by Shylock, such as Faustaf in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, have been the laughing stock of the audience from the very beginning, but he does not have the shining points that Shylock has, such as the justice under the national feud, the voice for the weak and the fatherly nature of guarding his daughter, etc. Faustaf is a purely "ugly" man. "He

is a representative of the old aristocracy of the English feudal class, a symbol of the sum of feudal legacy. Therefore, in terms of socio-historical analysis, he is a purely "old" person, that is, a purely "negative" person, at which point the role of socio-historical context will fail, and the meaning of the text will rise as the dominant factor.

Returning to Shakespeare's motives, that is, to the historical context in which he created his works, we can see that Shakespeare lived in a time when the new bourgeois liberal and democratic forces were playing against the old feudal and aristocratic forces. Referring to Shakespeare's plays of the same period, we can see that the meaning he wanted to express for society through his literary creation was to sort out and reveal the contradictions between the two classes. In his theatrical concept and expression, he needed to clearly shape certain plot conflicts and class struggles: one is the exaggerated and exaggerated style of writing like Faustus, which is extremely scandalous to the old aristocracy; the other is like Shylock, which constructs a pair of contradictory power contradictions in the real conflict. These two kinds of "antagonists" are written to reveal the motive of historical progress: the corrupt and ugly character of the old class is the stumbling block of historical development and should be criticized. That is to say, in the original textual sense of Shakespeare's creation, Shylock's "antagonist" is actually reasonable.

5 Conclusions

The commentary of Shylock's image in China have evolved over a century of history and have presented a very rich thematic connotation, and it is in the context of socio-historical analysis that his "negative image" stereotype has been deeply questioned by later generations. From the essence of the concept of "antithesis", "antithesis" does not seem to be a definite term with exact connotation and extension, but this does not mean that we are "uncognizable" of Shylock's image. However, in the analysis and interpretation of textual details, we see the possibility of a rich interpretation of Shylock's image by means of socio-historical analysis. Although the image of the character can be extended through history, the specific connotation of the character can be evaluated exactly from the motivation of the writer at the beginning of his creation. In other words, the creation of the antagonist in Shakespeare's comedies, represented by Shylock, is fundamentally different from the historical evaluation of later generations, but this does not prevent the existence of the stereotype of Shylock as the "antagonist".

So, how was the creation of a large number of "antagonists" in Shakespeare's comedies, their typological and conceptual significance, transcended and influenced by later evaluations? Or does the same problem exist in the "antagonists" in Shakespeare's tragedies and plays? This will be the subject of the author's subsequent research.

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