



The Merchant of Venice Jews in Literature

Jews were almost universally portrayed in an unfavorable light in literature before and during Shakespeare's time. Read the following excerpts from works of literature and then answer the questions that follow each excerpt. How are these portrayals of Jews similar or different to those in *The Merchant of Venice*? Note that Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* served as a source for *The Merchant of Venice*.

The Jew of Malta, Christopher Marlowe, c. 1589, 1590

Act 1, scene 2 (Ferneze is the governor of Malta, and Barabas is a wealthy Jewish merchant.)

FERNEZE: . . . Hebrews, now come near.
From the Emperor of Turkey is arriv'd
Great Selim Calymath, his highness' son,
To levy of us ten years' tribute¹ past: . . .
And therefore are we to request your aid.

BARABAS: Alas, my lord, we are no soldiers!
And what's our aid against so great a prince?

FIRST KNIGHT: Tut, Jew, we know thou art no soldier:
Thou art a merchant and a money'd man,
And 'tis thy money, Barabas, we seek.

BARABAS: How, my lord! my money!

FERNEZE: Thine and the rest;
For, to be short, amongst you't must be had. . . .

BARABAS: Are strangers² with your tribute to be tax'd?

SECOND KNIGHT: Have strangers leave with us to get their wealth?
Then let them with us contribute.

BARABAS: How! equally?

FERNEZE: No, Jew, like infidels;
For through our sufferance of your hateful lives,
Who stand accursed in the sight of heaven,
These taxes and afflictions are befall'n,
And therefore thus we are determined.—
Read there the articles of our decrees.

OFFICER: [reads] FIRST, THE TRIBUTE-MONEY OF THE TURKS SHALL ALL BE LEVIED AMONGST THE JEWS, AND EACH OF THEM TO PAY ONE HALF OF HIS ESTATE. . . .

SECONDLY, HE THAT DENIES TO PAY, SHALL STRAIGHT-BECOME A CHRISTIAN. . . .

LASTLY, HE THAT DENIES THIS, SHALL ABSOLUTELY LOSE ALL HE HAS.

THREE JEWS: O my lord, we will give half! . . .

FERNEZE: Why, Barabas, wilt thou be christened?

BARABAS: No, governor, I will be no convertite³.

FERNEZE: Then pay thy half.

BARABAS: Why, know you what you did by this device?

Half of my substance is a city's wealth.

Governor, it was not got so easily;

Nor will I part so slightly therewithal.

FERNEZE: Sir, half is the penalty of our decree;

Either pay that, or we will seize on all.

BARABAS: Corpo di Dio! stay: you shall have half;

Let me be us'd but as my brethren are.

FERNEZE: No, Jew, thou hast denied the articles,

And now it cannot be recall'd.

[Barabas, Ferneze, and the First Knight argue about Ferneze's seizure of Barabas's estate. Barabas says it is theft, but Ferneze and the Knight claim that if Barabas is now poor, it is his own fault because the Jews turned their back on Christ on the cross. Barabas replies that he should not be punished for the actions of his ancestors.]

FERNEZE: Out, wretched Barabas!

Sham'st thou not thus to justify thyself,

As if we knew not thy profession? . . .

FIRST KNIGHT: Grave governor, . . .

Convert his mansion to a nunnery;

His house will harbour many holy nuns.

FERNEZE: It shall be so. . . .

FIRST OFFICER: Ay, my lord, we have seiz'd upon the goods
And wares of Barabas, which, being valu'd,
Amount to more than all the wealth in Malta: . . .

BARABAS: Well, then, my lord, say, are you satisfied?
You have my goods, my money, and my wealth,
My ships, my store, and all that I enjoy'd; . . .

¹payment from one ruler to another

²non-citizens

³person who converts to another religion

1. What words are used in the excerpt to describe Jews?

2. What does Barabas lose as a result of this conversation?

3. How are Jews treated as inferior to Christians in Malta?

The Canterbury Tales, Geoffrey Chaucer, c. 1387–1400, Trans. A. S. Kline (2007)

"The Prioress's Tale," Chapter XIII

There was in Asia, in a great city
Of Christian folks, a ghetto for Jewry,
Maintained by a lord of that country,
For shameful profit out of foul usury,
Hateful to Christ and all his company.
And through its streets men might ride and wend,
For it was free, and open at either end.

A little school of Christian folk there stood
Down at the farther end, in which there were
A crowd of children, born of Christian blood,
Who learned in that school, year by year,
Such manner of doctrine as men used there –
That is to say, to sing and then to read,
As little ones when children do, indeed.

Among these children was a widow's son,
A little schoolboy, seven years of age,
Who day by day off to the school would run,
And also whenever he saw the image
Of Christ's mother, as was common usage
And taught to him, would kneel down and say
His *Ave Maria*^{*}, as he passed by the way. . . .

Our first foe, Serpent Satan, who has
Made in the Jew's heart his wasp's nest,
Swelled up and said, 'O Hebrew folk, alas!
Is this a thing that seems to you full honest,
That such a boy shall walk by, as if blessed,
In spite of you, and sing out each sentence
That goes against the laws you reverence?'

From thenceforth the Jews there conspired
The innocent from out this world to chase.
A murderer, to serve this end, they hired,
Who in an alley had a private place,

And as the child passed by at a pace,
This wretched Jew caught and held him fast,
And cut his throat, and in the pit him cast.

Into a privy-drain him they threw,
Where the Jews purged their entrails.
O cursed folk of Herod, born anew,
How shall your evil intent you avail?
Murder will out, for sure, and shall not fail
God's honour, there, especially for to speed,
The blood cries out against your cursed deed. . . .

The poor widow waited all that night
For her little child, but he came not.
So, as soon as ever it was light,
Her face pale with dread, in anxious thought,
She, at the school and elsewhere, him sought;
Till this much she discovered, finally,
That he had last been seen among the Jewry. . . .

She begged, and she prayed piteously
Of every Jew who dwelt in that place,
To tell her if her child had been by.
They said 'nay' but Jesus, of His grace,
Put in her mind, within a little space,
To go from that place, where she cried,
To where he was, in the pit, cast aside. . . .

With torment and shameful death each one
The Provost sentence on the Jews did serve
Who of the murder knew, and that anon.
Death for such wickedness he must observe.
Evil shall have what evil does deserve;
So with wild horses he did them draw,
And hung them then, according to the law

^{*}Hail Mary (a Catholic prayer)

1. What words are used in the excerpt to describe Jews?

2. Why do the Jews kill the boy?

3. What happens to the Jews?

Answer Key

The Jew of Malta

1. What words are used in the excerpt to describe Jews?

infidel, accursed, hateful

2. What does Barabas lose as a result of this conversation?

his money and his religion

3. How are Jews treated as inferior to Christians in Malta?

They are not citizens.

The Canterbury Tales

1. What words are used in the excerpt to describe Jews?

hateful, cursed, evil, wickedness

2. Why do the Jews kill the boy?

Satan tells them to because the boy's song goes against Jewish laws.

3. What happens to the Jews?

They are executed.