

# HATH NOT A JEW EYES? ALLEGED ANTI-SEMITISM IN SHAKESPEARE'S THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

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## ABSTRACT

Literature and history are major fields in which a multitude of scholars operate, and the lines between the two are often blurred since the latter provides plausible explanations of the former. This extended essay examines William Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice from a historical perspective and assumes the existence of anti-Semitism in the play by casting light on Shylock, the Jewish moneylender. The discussion begins by addressing the concepts of otherness and anti-Semitism in addition to the tenets of the new historicist theory which is necessary to the next chapter that highlights a thorough depiction of Shylock and his characteristics. As this paper submits, the audience needs to reach a moral and rational stance and conclusion about Shylock the villain and man following his personality traits and Shakespeare's portrayal.

**Keywords:** anti-Semitism, new historicist theory, Shakespeare, The Merchant of Venice, Shylock

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## Introduction

The three pillars of literature, namely prose, poetry, and drama, have always worked in a complementary way to ensure the reflection and saving of the formidable experience of mankind, but each one of them flourished during a specific era and under different circumstances. English literature is no exception to this rule, and the diversity and timeline of its canonical works prove that it responded to the needs of the English-speaking people, whether those under oppression or the ones in power.

During the Elizabethan era, a unique playwright, who goes by the name of William Shakespeare, contributed to the evolution of the English language and wrote plays that continued to entertain and intrigue his audience for centuries. The works of the Bard of Avon – as he is called – transcend the notion of time, making him – as mentioned by his rival Ben Johnson - a man who is not of an age, but for all time. Nevertheless, his major masterpieces reflect the vibrant qualities of the Elizabethan age and are considered reliable sources to explain the entangled web of events in British history. But he did not escape criticism for he received charges of racism, ethnic discrimination, and mainly of anti-Semitism.

The Merchant of Venice is one of Shakespeare's most famous yet controversial plays. It is a comedy that shows sacrifice, greed, women's wit, and the triumph of Christianity through the character of Antonio, the merchant who financed his friend Bassanio's romantic sail and must default on a loan from a Jewish moneylender, Shylock. The Bard was criticized for his portrayal of Shylock, which suited the Elizabethan audience and was hard to confirm since very few Jews lived in England at that time. Nonetheless, the dramatist added other layers to the character of Shylock; the proverbial phrase "Hath not a Jew eyes?" resulted in a great feeling of sympathy towards Shylock especially from the contemporary audience, thus making him a victim and not only a villain.

The play confirms a pattern of mild anti-Semitism that was common during the rule of Queen Elizabeth I, and one cannot assume that it is unprecedented as many playwrights and authors of the time provided a darker description of Jews. But what attracts the audience is that Shakespeare granted Shylock an illuminating moment of humanity, making him a victim of both racial ostracism and domestic treason. How Shylock converses with Tubal shows that the man in him overthrows the usurer and the monster.

## New Historicism

Critics, such as Eagleton (2008) and Soares (2020), have always debated the essence of a literary work; some have emphasized the importance of the text as the Formalists, others put forward the issue of social struggle like the Marxists, while the structuralists categorized the literary work in a set of converging or diverging structures. Yet the assumption that the historical aspect of a text is crucial to its understanding is inevitable.

To explain this assumption, one should define the literary theory. New Historicism seeks to find meaning in a text by considering the work within the framework of the prevailing ideas and assumptions of its historical era. New Historicists concern themselves with the political function of literature and with the concept of power, the intricate means by which cultures produce and reproduce themselves. These critics focus on revealing the historically specific model of social construct and authority reflected in a given piece of work.

In other words, history is not an account of events and facts, but rather a depiction of the human society and realm and the notions that control them. This history is to be scrutinized to relate the literary work to the prevailing ways of thinking at the time of its production. Reconnecting the work with its time echoes Foucault's concept of episteme, which emphasized the structures underlying the production of knowledge in a specific time and place. Since history is a chain of related events, the critic can hardly neglect the historical angle of the text. Richter asserts that New Historicism is:

a practice that has developed out of contemporary theory, particularly the structuralist realization that all human systems are symbolic and subject to the rules of language, and the deconstructive realization that there is no way of positioning oneself as an observer outside the closed circle of textuality. (Richter, 2016: 1325)

The complex and entangled layers of history make it impossible for the critic and the reader to ignore the relationship between the literary text and the major cultural and historical powers that led to its creation. In the context of Academia, The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms defines New Historicism as:

A term applied to a trend in American academic literary studies in the 1980s that emphasized the historical nature of literary texts and at the same time (in contrast with older historicisms) the 'textual' nature of history. As part of a wider reaction against purely formal or linguistic critical approaches such as the New Criticism and

deconstruction, the new historicists, led by Stephen Greenblatt, drew new connections between literary and non-literary texts, breaking down the familiar distinctions between a text and its historical 'background' as conceived in established historical forms of criticism.

It is worthwhile to mention that New Historicism came as a reaction to the other critical theories that restraint literary criticism to the language and the form.

New Historicism is not a mere delving into factoids but rather an approach that is concerned with ideologies and cultural constructs. In addition to the fact that it resists the classical definition of history as mentioned by Tyson : "...history is a series of events that have a linear, causal relationship: event A caused event B; event B caused event C; and so on" (Tyson, 2009: 278). For example, Shakespeare made Richard III the villain of the play of his name not only because he was a tyrant, but also to serve the dramatist's technique of showing the good and evil dichotomy as the overthrowing of Richard III opened the door for the superb House of Tudor.

More specifically, New Historicists are not interested in history itself, but rather in the interpretations that it provides. Furthermore, they perceive the literary work as the product of time and culture. Thus, it should be analyzed according to the two aforementioned factors. In this respect, Tyson adds: "...we don't have clear access to any but the most basic facts of history...our understanding of what such facts mean...is...strictly a matter of interpretation, not fact". (Tyson, 2009: 279)

New Historical critical theory represents a return to the empirical scholarship in literature; thus, it requires following a specific framework of analysis. According to Jay, the analysis needs to describe the following:

- (1) The set of discursive possibilities offered to the writer by the cultural archive
- (2) The assumption within the text of a contemporary audience whose knowledge must both be used and resisted
- (3) The projection within the text of a future audience constituted by its decipherment of the text
- (4) The social and institutional sites of the text's production and reception
- (5) The figurations of subjectivity offered or deployed by the text
- (6) The effects of reflexivity inscribed in the text
- (7) and the possible contradictions between the text's cognitive, performative, didactic, aesthetic, psychological, and economic projects. (Jay, 2016: 35)

The two prevailing ideas in Jay's statement centers around the non-literary aspects of a text and the social situation of both the writer and the audience; it is crucial to forming a parallel relationship between the literary work and the other non-literary sides to perform a thorough analysis rather than the classical approach that considers the literary foreground and the historical background of a text.

As far as Elizabethan Literature is concerned, approaching its works from a historical angle must take into consideration the tenet of the cultural, political, and social situation of England. Such consideration should be in addition to the ideologies that led to the creation of these literary works and the distinct reactions and interpretations in different settings of time and place. A prominent example of new historicist criticism in literature is that of Shakespeare's Hamlet; the fact that both monarchs and pretenders to the throne are males, and it was written under the rule of Elizabeth I suggest that the Bard supports patriarchy

All things considered, New Historicists aim to put forward the idea that literature is related to and coextensive with all products of culture. Moreover, the most efficient analysis and interpretation of a literary text go beyond the restrictions of Formalism and structuralism and explore other facets of the human society which is a mixture of races and ethnicities sometimes living in harmony, as well as in agony and discrimination in others.

### **Anti-Semitism**

Among the most spread and controversial concepts of the contemporary world, anti-Semitism seems to be the most prominent one as it was used as a pretext to defend a minority and its religion-based state. In this vain , The Working Definition of Antisemitism (2005) , issued by The Holocaust Remembrance Alliance , reads:

Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities.

In interrogation of the abovementioned definition, Klug asserts that it prohibits legitimate criticism of the human rights record of the Israeli Government by attempting to bring criticism of Israel, Israeli actions and Zionism as a political ideology into the category of antisemitism and racially based violence towards,

discrimination against, or abuse of, Jews. In addition to that, Feldman states: "I fear this definition is imprecise, and isolates antisemitism from other forms of bigotry. Crucially, there is a danger that the overall effect will place the onus on Israel's critics to demonstrate they are not anti-Semitic." (Fredman, 2016: 27). The controversy expands beyond the preoccupation with the munitiae of the language when five universities in the United Kingdom had some of their events cancelled to comply with the definition. On this matter, Gould states: "These dimensions are made all the more contentious by its imprecise content and the significant ambiguity around its legal status. On the basis of the many ways in which the IHRA definition has been used to censor speech, particularly on university campuses." (Gould, 2018: 12).

But the definition itself causes controversy. The term "Anti-Semitism" would seem to indicate hatred and discrimination against all the Semitic Peoples: the Arabs, Assyrians, Samaritans, Jews, and the Ethiopians. While nowadays it is exclusive to the prejudice and/or discrimination against Jews, individually or collectively, that can be based on hatred against Jews because of their religion, ethnicity, ancestry, or group membership. It assumes that Jews share particular characteristics in common and think and act in special or "different" ways from other people. It manifests itself in a variety of attitudes, words, ideas, and actions. It can involve bigotry, bullying, defamation, stereotyping, hate crime, acts of bias, and scapegoating. The term was first used by Wilhelm Marr (1819-1904), a German politician in his book *Victory of Judaism over Germanism* and it was promoted by Heinrich von Treitschke, a Prussian nationalist historian. The term referred to Jew-hatred rather than hatred of other Semite peoples. Throughout their history, the Jews have been expelled more than once: from England in 1290, France in 1394, and Spain in 1492. This suggests that the spirit of anti-Semitism is deeply rooted in European society and that Europe was the cradle of such a concept. The history of European anti-Semitism is veritably formidable. It is at least two thousand years long, while anti-Semitism formed a solidly integral part of European culture until the middle of the twentieth century. The hatred exhibited a changing and manifold character over this period, depending on the time and the context. The motives behind the persecution of the Jews differed from one era to another; from Christian fanaticism during the Crusades, to the complete rejection of Jews in Martin Luther's reformed version of Christianity in the Reformation.

The etymology of the word "anti-Semitism" suggests that it is used to express prejudice and hatred towards all the Semite peoples, but it was never the case. As far as Renan's definition of Semite goes, it "designates the peoples who have spoken Hebrew, Syriac, Arabic or some neighboring dialect, and in no sense the people who are listed in the tenth chapter of Genesis as the descendants of Shem, who are, or at least half of them, of Aryan origin." (Renan, 2018: 50). Antisemitism came to replace the word "Judenhass" or "Jews-hatred" with a more scientific word, it is considered as a form of racism since it segregates Jews as a religious group and an ethnicity.

### **Famous Cases of Anti-Semitism**

Throughout history, there has been a considerable number of cases where the feeling of anti-Semitism was omnipresent, but the most famous one in modern times is the Dreyfus Affair. Captain Alfred Dreyfus was an officer in the French army, and in 1894, he was wrongfully convicted of treason for passing military secrets to Germany and sentenced to life imprisonment. Evidence proving otherwise made surface and his innocence was proclaimed eleven years later. It was clear that anti-Semitism was the driving force behind this affair, as Wilson mentions: "It is clear that the explosion of the Dreyfus Case into the Dreyfus Affair was largely the responsibility of an organized anti-Semitic movement and newspaper press." (Wilson, 1997: 27)

In Germany, anti-Semitism was deeply ingrained for centuries and the country witnessed the ascension of the feeling of hatred towards the Jews, which suggests that the Nazi's massacres and persecutions were the results of a long century of anti-Semitic acts and agitations. The historian Heinrich Von Treitschke wrote that "the Jews are our misfortune" (Von Treitschke, 1987: 233), blaming the Jews for the hardship from which Germany suffered. After a few years later, the philosopher Dühring wrote *The Jewish Question* in which he argued that the Jews are the main reason for Germany's decline and that they formed "a state within a state" and "a counter-race" which is impossible to be assimilated. In addition to the aforementioned aspects, the Jews shared the responsibility of Germany's military defeat in 1918 with the Socialists according to the German public opinion.

With their rise to power, the Nazis exploited age-old anti-Semitic stereotypes and myths to enforce their vision. Adolf Hitler revived the "blood libel" discourse of the Middle Ages, emphasizing that the inferior Jews would contaminate the pure and superior Aryan race. On this basis, all Jews were to be exterminated; initiating what is known in history as The Holocaust.

Anti-Semitic cases are abundant in European history that differs in time and impact; whether among the ignorant or the illuminated, the religious or the secular, the military or civilian, the Jews were to blame. The historian Hilberg summed up the development of the patterns of anti-Semitism as follows: Twelfth century Crusades: "You have no right to live amongst us as Jews". Sixteenth-century ghettos: "You have no right to live amongst us". Twentieth-century Nazis: "You have no right to live". (Hilberg, 2019: 52)

Similarly, Shylock was denied his right to live in a Christian society without being constantly scolded and mocked, his daughter "abdicated" her right to live with him as she eloped with Lorenzo, and he inescapably felt unwelcomed in a troubled Elizabethan society.

### **Controversy**

One must distinguish between the hate speech against the Jewish people that is a result of an anti-Semitic attitude and criticism of the Israeli occupation of Palestine. A considerable number of Jews view any critics of the occupation as anti-Semitic person. The lack of accuracy of the expression indicates excessive use of anti-Semitism and the employment of the horrors to which the Jews were exposed in Europe as pretexts to justify acts of colonization and oppression.

In the same vein, being anti-Semitic seems to be a ready-made accusation for leaders of Arab or Islamic origins, and even for those European politicians who sympathize with the Palestinian people, especially in Britain. In an interview with BBC Radio London, MP and member of the Labour Party Ken Livingstone defended the anti-Zionist MP Naz Shah. So and so said that he never heard anyone from his political party saying anything anti-Semitic. He further added: "When Hitler won his election in 1932 his policy then was that Jews should be moved to Israel. He was supporting Zionism before he went mad and ended up killing six million Jews." Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn said his long-time ally had been suspended amid "very grave concerns about the language he used in the interview this morning" and would face an investigation by the party. While others called Mr. Livingstone a "Nazi Apologist". In his defense, Mr. Livingstone submitted that he mentioned that Hitler was "a monster from start to finish" and that he was just quoting historical facts.

Ironically, the outbreak of the Dreyfus Affair led an Austrian journalist, Theodor Herzl, to form the Zionist movement which resulted in the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. There is ambiguity for a considerable number of people about the difference between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism; the anti-Zionism criticizes the horrible and inhuman practices of Zionists inside and outside the Middle East and has no relation whatsoever with the feeling of hatred towards Jews which is expressed by the anti-Semitism.

The concept of anti-Semitism has been used as an excuse for the atrocities and the crimes of Zionists. The allegedly guilty European conscience tried to redeem itself by supporting and providing legal and financial support for the state of Israel. In a nutshell, anti-Semitism ruled Europe throughout its long history and caused pain and horror to the Jews, while in modern times the philosophy of Zionism has changed the victimized Jew into a ruthless oppressor based on vengeance and ancient myths.

### **The Merchant of Venice**

*The Merchant of Venice* is a play by William Shakespeare that was classified in his First Folio. The play is believed to be written either in 1597 or 1598 and its events take place in Venice where a Jewish usurer by the name of Shylock cries for a pound of flesh as a settlement for his loan to Antonio, a melancholic Christian merchant. This masterpiece has raised a debate as both Elizabethan and Contemporary audiences developed sympathy towards the villain. In addition to the issue of anti-Semitism that led this work to face censorship in some cases, especially by Halperin who considers the play as "a blatantly racist work that would not be taught to impressionable students". (Halperin, 2020: 13)

The common assumption that Christopher Marlowe's play, *The Jew of Malta*, is the forerunner of *The Merchant of Venice* becomes untenable under examination, albeit it has a solid ground if one considers the wave of anti-Semitism that was initiated after the execution of Queen Elizabeth's Jewish physician, Roderigo Lopez, who was convicted of treason. The speculation that Shakespeare has burrowed the plot was manifested in the writings of Gregorio Leti (1630-1701), who stated that in 1587, Paul Mario Sechi, a merchant of Rome, gained information that Sir Francis Drake, the English Admiral, had conquered San Domingo. He communicated this piece of news to Simone Cenade, a Jewish merchant, to whom it appeared incredible, and he said: "I bet a pound of flesh that it is untrue." "And I lay one thousand scudi against it," (Philipson, 2012: 229) replied Sechi. A bond

was drawn up to that effect after a few days, news arrived of Drake's achievement, and the Christian insisted on the fulfillment of his bond. In vain the Jew pleaded, but Sechi swore that nothing could satisfy him but a pound of the Jew's flesh. In his extremity, the Jew went to the governor. The governor of the city promised his assistance, communicated the case to Pope Sixtus, who condemned both to the galleys - the Jew for making such a wager, the Christian for accepting it. They released themselves from imprisonment by each paying a fine of two thousand scudi toward the hospital that the Pope was erecting.

The chief source that may have inspired Shakespeare to write his play was a tale in an Italian collection entitled *Il Pecoroneor The Simpleton*, written in 1378 by Giovanni Fiorentino, and published in 1565. No known English translation existed for Shakespeare to use, but it is possible, that someone known to Shakespeare had translated a private copy and given it to Shakespeare to read. Another possibility lies in the fact that the Bard may have been of a higher intellect than he is known for, and might have read it in Italian. The story in *Il Pecorone* tells of a wealthy woman at Belmont who marries a young gentleman. Her husband needs money and his friend, desperate to help, goes to a money-lender to borrow the required money on behalf of his friend. The money-lender, who is also a Jew in *Il Pecorone*, demands a pound of flesh as payment if the money is not paid back. When the money is not paid in time, the Jew goes to court to ensure he receives what he is owed. The friend's life is saved when the wealthy wife speaks in court of true justice and convinces the judge to refuse the Jew his pound of flesh. Shakespeare adds the casket storyline and Shylock's usury.

A young Venetian, Bassanio, needs a loan of three thousand ducats so that he can woo Portia, a wealthy Venetian heiress. He approaches his friend Antonio, a merchant. Antonio is running out of money because all his wealth is invested in his fleet, which is currently at sea. He goes to a Jewish moneylender, Shylock, who hates Antonio because of Antonio's anti-Semitic behavior towards him.

Shylock nevertheless agrees to make the short-term loan, but, in a moment of dark humor, he makes collateral to the loan of exacting one pound of flesh from Antonio if he does not give the money back in three months. Antonio agrees, confident that his ships will return in time. Because of the terms of Portia's father's will, all suitors must choose from among three caskets, one of which contains a portrait of her. If he chooses that he may marry Portia, but if doesn't he must vow never to marry or court another woman. The Princes of Morocco and Arragon fail the test and are rejected. As Bassanio prepares to travel to Belmont for the test, his friend Lorenzo elopes with Shylock's daughter, Jessica. Bassanio chooses the lead casket, which contains her picture, and Portia happily agrees to marry him immediately.

Meanwhile, two of Antonio's ships have been wrecked and Antonio's creditors are exerting pressure on him for repayment. Word comes to Bassanio about Antonio's predicament, and he hurries back to Venice, leaving Portia behind. Portia follows him, accompanied by her maid, Nerissa. They are disguised as a male lawyer and his clerk. When Bassanio arrives, the date for the repayment to Shylock has passed and Shylock is demanding his pound of flesh. Even when Bassanio offers much more than the amount in repayment, Shylock, now infuriated by the loss of his daughter, is intent on seeking revenge on the Christians. The Duke refuses to intervene.

Portia arrives in her disguise to defend Antonio. Given the authority of judgment by the Duke, Portia decides that Shylock can have the pound of flesh as long as he doesn't draw blood, as it is against the law to shed a Christian's blood. Since it is obvious that to draw a pound of flesh would kill Antonio, Shylock is denied his suit. Moreover, for conspiring to murder a Venetian citizen, Portia orders that he should forfeit all his wealth. Half is to go to Venice, and a half to Antonio. Antonio gives his half back to Shylock on the condition that Shylock bequeaths it to his disinherited daughter, Jessica. Shylock must also convert to Christianity. A broken Shylock accepts. Portia's manipulation of the law leads to the grim reality that law is not always the ultimate ideal and judge. News arrives that Antonio's remaining ships have returned safely. Except for Shylock, all celebrate a happy ending to the affair.

Shakespeare's roles attribution creates intertwined patterns of wickedness and good; the major character, namely Shylock, was to conceal his evil and seize the opportunity to take revenge, while Portia exemplifies the tender woman who saves her lover's friend, Antonio, from the horrible collateral to Shylock's loan. The centralization of the play is undeniable as the main focus is on Shylock and the reactions of the other characters to his terms and conditions.

### **Shylock**

The play orbits around Shylock. The Jewish money-lender is the enigmatic center of *The Merchant of Venice*.

Albeit he is portrayed as a villain, an abundance of cruelties were committed against him: his servant left him for a Christian nobleman, his daughter, in contrast to her miser father, does not restrain herself from providing her lover Lorenzo with money and jewelry, and eventually escapes with him. Shylock's cry against the atrocities of his environment is manifested in the proverbial phrase: "hath not a Jew eyes?" (Shakespeare, 2010: 14). The play does not focus on the aforementioned events but rather on Shylock refusing any sort of alternatives to his "pound of flesh" collateral of the loan; hence "the Jew" is a persona non grata and seems petty and cruel. Greed is also a characteristic that was attributed by The Bard to Shylock, and this is seen through his reaction when he was informed about his daughter's escape: "Thou stickest a dagger in me: I shall never see my gold again: fourscore ducats in a sitting! Fourscore ducats!" (Shakespeare, 2010: 67-68) Outwitted by Portia, the smart heiress, and Bassanio's lover, Shylock is forced to compromise and to promise his wealth to Jessica, his daughter, and her lover after his death and eventually converts to Christianity. It is worthwhile to mention that modern readings started to explore the character of Shylock from a distinct angle from the ancient ones, denying that he was a villain but rather a victim of the indignities of the British society.

### **Portia**

An intelligent and willful woman, Portia is portrayed differently than the other characters: she is forced to follow her dead father's instructions about the lottery he set up to choose her husband, but she makes use of her scathing wit to provide her favorite contender Bassanio with hints to succeed in choosing the right casket as she addressed him: "before you venture for me. I could teach you how to choose right" (Shakespeare, 2010: 115). She finds no harm in dressing like a man and going to the courtroom to save her lover's friend Antonio from his horrible fate. Portia's acts are overshadowing the reactions of the other characters except for Shylock. As the play ends, Portia tricks her paramour into giving her the ring. Portia made him swear not to lose and triumphs over her "nemesis" Shylock since Shylock accepts collateral to the loan.

### **Antonio**

Antonio is actually "the merchant of Venice." His generosity and devotion to his friend, Bassanio, made him finance the latter's romantic pursuit of Portia even though he was not at disposal of the necessary assets by exposing himself to Shylock's deadly terms. He is saved by Portia by the end of the play and rewarded by his ships making port and full of merchandise. The issue about the character of Antonio lies in his sadness: He denies that it is related to money and his nautical ventures, as it may be the case for other merchants, which leaves the problem unresolved about his true intentions. It is worthwhile to mention that The Bard justifies Shylock's hostile attitude towards Antonio and the other characters by the wanton behavior of the Christians and their contempt of his religion, but the fact that Antonio mistreats Shylock has no foundation in the text.

### **Jessica and Lorenzo**

Shylock's daughter and Bassanio's friend, a couple that stands aside from the complex plot of the play. They exploited Shylock's riches and they stayed in Belmont while all the other characters (except Shylock) returned to Venice to save Antonio from his horrible fate. By the end, Shylock is forced to promise his wealth for them, and the happiness of this couple is in contrast to the troubles of the other figures of the play.

### **Setting**

Shakespeare divided the physical action of *The Merchant of Venice* between two settings: Venice and Belmont. Venice is a real cosmopolitan city which is close to the center of Christendom (Rome) and a commercial hub with an independent and orderly government, but as a result of Venice's internationalism, Shylock is represented as "the Other" who threatens the traditions of the Christian society. Belmont is an imaginary city of romance and festivity where music, laughter, and domestic bliss are the common values. It was ruled by Portia's dead father and there were no social restrictions to prevent a rich heiress from acting independently. By the end of the play, the victorious Christians retire to Belmont as The Bard wants to idealize it and to illustrate the contrast between real-world problems and fairytales solutions.

At the time Shakespeare wrote his play, he chose Venice to harbor the events for a multitude of reasons. On one hand, Venice was what England aspired to become, for its sophistication, beauty, and the disposition of Oriental luxuries. On the other hand, sixteenth-century Venice was more tolerant than Elizabethan England, but

this fact did not hinder the clash between the Christian characters and the Jewish usurer, which indicates that the problem goes beyond the issue of religion to be an existential predicament.

### **Shakespeare's Patterns of the Villain**

The Bard of Avon, throughout his plays, drew specific patterns for his villains and Shylock is no exception. These patterns include age, sanity, and control. The famous adage "That villainous old Jew, Shylock" comprises the characteristics of the villain according to Shakespeare.

#### **Age**

The distinction between Shylock and the rest of the characters is his age. He seems to be the only elderly among them. The Bard seems to cast light on and the inevitable collision between wisdom, represented by Shylock, and youth mainly embodied in Gratiano rather than an emphasis on the religious clash between the Christians and the Jew, and it is depicted in the following dialogue between them:

GRATIANO

O, be thou damn'd, inexecrable dog!  
And for thy life let justice be accused.  
Thou almost makest me waver in my faith  
To hold opinion with Pythagoras,  
That souls of animals infuse themselves  
Into the trunks of men: thy currish spirit  
Govern'd a wolf, who, hang'd for human slaughter,  
Even from the gallows did his fell soul fleet,  
And, whilst thou lay'st in thy unhallow'd dam,  
Infused itself in thee; for thy desires  
Are wolfish, bloody, starved and ravenous.

SHYLOCK

Till thou canst rail the seal from off my bond,  
Thou but offend'st thy lungs to speak so loud:  
Repair thy wit, good youth, or it will fall  
To cureless ruin. I stand here for law. (Shakespeare, 2010: 130)

Gratiano's insults make the audience expect a grotesque response of Shylock, but on the contrary, his answer is very reserved and calm by calling the Italian "a good youth" sarcastically. Anecdotal evidence that the young character seems to be ignorant is that he renounces his Christian faith by referring to ancient pagan Greek beliefs to prove Shylock's animalistic side. But this is held against him as Shylock exhibits his wisdom and maturity to face the young Italian who is prone to cursing and ill-faith. Shylock himself confesses that he is old. He tells his servant Launcelot that he will recognize "The difference between old Shylock and Bassanio" (Shakespeare, 2010: 1-2).

#### **Sanity**

Although He shows signs of wisdom, Shylock follows the conventional pattern of the Shakespearian villain as he seems to blackout from his idealistic reality to drown into a ruthless state. This was manifested in his horrifying response to Antonio, when the latter, in shackles, pleaded for him to abort the deadly collateral:

I'll have my bond; I will not hear thee speak:  
I'll have my bond; and therefore, speak no more.  
I'll not be made a soft and dull-eyed fool,  
To shake the head, relent, and sigh, and yield  
To Christian intercessors. Follow not;  
I'll have no speaking: I will have my bond. (Shakespeare 1.1.12-17)



Antonio addresses Shylock as "Good Shylock." Therefore, there is no evidence that Antonio mistreats or insults Shylock, which suggests that Shylock is blaming all the Christian characters for his social ostracism. Shylock's sanity is put under question as he shows that his old age which symbolizes his maturity is driving him towards senility.

### **Control**

There is hard evidence about Shylock's senility in the play, but it seems to be triggered by his daughter, Jessica, who causes him heart-burning anxiety. Shakespeare follows the conventionalized pattern of outrageous daughters (as Cordelia in *King Lear*) to expose the senility of the old Jew, as it is accompanied by the loss of physical vigor and ill-controlled emotions that distort the father's judgments and transform parental admonition into bitterness. Shylock's enemy is in his own household, the only offspring of his beloved Leah. His daughter, Jessica escapes with a Christian carrying her father's money and jewels and Shylock expresses the loss of his parental authority and a painful love of his vanished money in his cry:

My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter,  
Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats!  
Justice, the law, my ducats, and my daughter!  
A sealèd bag, two sealed bags of ducats,  
Of double ducats, stol'n from me by my daughter!  
And jewels—two stones, two rich and precious stones  
Stol'n by my daughter! Justice, find the girl!  
She hath the stones upon her, and the ducats. (Shakespeare 1.2.15-23)

On her first appearance, Jessica gives Launcelot a ducat and bestows her dowry on her lover Lorenzo. This seems to drive Shylock towards insanity for the miser that he is, even though he gained some sympathy of the Venetians as Salario declares:

Why, all the boys in Venice follow him,  
Crying, "His stones, his daughter, and his ducats!" (Shakespeare 1.2.24-25)

### **Shakespeare's Description of Shylock**

The Merchant of Venice does not speak about Shylock's physical appearance, nor does confirm any age-old stereotypes about a bottle-nosed Jew. However, Falsenstein states that "it was the eighteenth-century actor Charles Macklin who first gave Shylock a red hat and a big nose. He justified the red hat to Alexander Pope, who asked about it, by saying "he had read that the Jews in Italy, particularly in Venice, wore hats of that color." (Falsenstein, 1999: 158). It is worth mentioning that the Bard refers to circumcision as a bodily difference between the Gentiles and Jews, as Gratiano swears: "Now, by my hood, a gentle and no Jew." (Shakespeare, 2010: 53). He considers his "hood" as the foreskin emblematic of his Christianity and confirms that Jessica is a "gentle" or Gentile. Shakespeare's avoidance of Shylock's physical traits suggests that the English audience is accustomed to the Jews and that Shylock lived in Elizabethan England even though Edward the first expelled them of the country in 1290.

While reading the play, one notices Shylock's tendency for selfish behavior and thinking, in addition to the fact that he is unreasonable and demanding. The usurer takes immense pleasure in his "merry sport" of exacting "an equal pound/Of...fair flesh to be cut off and taken/In what part of [the] body pleaseth me" (Shakespeare, 2010: 146-151), but he poses like a victim of racism and discrimination because nobody has seen him beyond his Jewishness in the passage: "Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?" (Shakespeare, 2010: 54) Even though he is punished for the violence that he set in motion, the audience cannot help but question the values of Christian love and mercy, to deduce that Shylock's nemeses are not better than him.

## Religion

The word Jew and other strongly related terms such as Jewish, Jewess, and Hebrew were employed seventy-four times in the play. Its use becomes anti-Semitic when it is associated with negative racial characteristics and prejudices, and Shylock is addressed as "Shylock" only seventeen times throughout the play. The word Jew has a direct no neutral connotation albeit it was used to express foreignness to the non-Jews, and it was meant to depersonalize the character in some parts of the play, thus justifying the hostility of his enemies.

After the bargain between Antonio and Shylock was struck, the former murmurs: "Hie thee gentle Jew" (Shakespeare, 2010: 177). / "The Hebrew will turn Christian, he grows kind" (Shakespeare, 2010: 178). Antonio's ironic tone suggests contempt of Shylock for his religion and this relatively mild anti-Semitism is prevalent in the play. Yet, the Bard makes very few associations between Shylock and evil at the beginning of the play. And, one of these connections is manifested in Launcelot's monologue while he is reflecting on leaving Shylock's service: "Certainly the Jew is the very devil incarnation, and in my conscience, my conscience is but a kind of hard conscience, to offer to counsel me to stay with the Jew" (Shakespeare, 2010: 27-30). The repetition of the word Jew in this context indicates that Launcelot's aggressive attitude towards Shylock conforms with the medieval semi-mythical construct about the Jews and is fed by both literary (Chaucer) and theological (Luther) support, Friedman mentions that Martin Luther warned Christians stating: "next to the devil thou hast no enemy crueller, more venomous and violent than a true Jew." (Friedman, 2012: 67). The prevalence of the image of Jews as killers of Jesus Christ contributed to a great extent to the growth of such anti-Jewish attitude.

But Shakespeare hatches a similar plot for Christianity and makes it obvious that Shylock's vehement statements towards Antonio and his Christian cohorts are mere reflections of their cunning acts, especially when Shylock swore revenge: "...If a Jew wrongs a Christian, 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." (Shakespeare, 2010: 68-73). The Bard of Avon seems to attribute the eye-for-an-eye execution to Christianity rather than Shylock or his religion. However, since the Elizabethan audience perceived the Jews as fiendish creatures, Shakespeare gives them a happy ending by the conversion of Shylock, thus saving his soul in Elizabethan terms. The fact that Shylock is a Jew made him an outcast, but it is to his greatest sorrow that the pattern of the Jew is associated with other negative characteristics, one of which is usury.

## Usury

Among the negative trait that Shylock was burdened with, usury and avarice are the most dominant ones. Shakespeare makes it clear that Bassanio loves money as much as Shylock does. In addition to that, the young Venetian, with his fortune at its lowest ebb after squandering all his money, turns to Antonio to finance his venture to the rich heiress Portia. Antonio hated Shylock for lending money with interests and considered him a parasite to the Venetian economy, while Shylock made it clear that he loathes Antonio for his anti-Semitism and due to the fact that "He lends out money gratis and brings down" (Shakespeare, 2010: 34) "The rate of usance here with us in Venice" (Shakespeare, 2010: 35), Antonio defends his position by confirming that he will not lend money with interests: "I oft delivered from his forfeitures" (Shakespeare, 2010: 22) "Many that have at times made moan to me" (Shakespeare, 2010: 23).

In Elizabethan parlance, a "usurer" is a moneylender who takes even the slightest amount of money as interests on his loan. Antonio follows the medieval ideal of refusing interests just as Chaucer's merchant, while Shylock is a continuance to Marlowe's Barabas, who also combines money lending with Jewish religion and origins. The play itself was written in the midst of large debates about usury, as Carpi and Ost explain, due to the discovery of the New World and the rise of industrial banking in addition to the difficult transition from a feudal society to modern capitalism.

Many pamphlets were written to disgrace usury such as *The Death of Usury* (1594) and *The Usurers Almanacke* (1624). Causing a huge controversy about the activity, *The Usurers Almanacke* led the House of Commons to declare that "all usury was against the law of God". This provided a fertile ground for the association of the Jewish religion and usury, especially after the Spaniards of Jewish origins, who continued to live in England, did not cease to practice usury. Nevertheless, Antonio's attack on Shylock is flawed since usury was a legal commercial activity that was practiced by both Christians and Jews during the time of the writing of the play, and that Shylock lent money to Antonio without interest.

Anecdotal evidence lies in the fact that Shakespeare had personal intent for addressing the issue of usury; as

Philipson mentions, the Bard's father was sentenced for lending money at excessive interest, charging twenty pounds interest on loans of eighty and a hundred pounds (Philipson, 2012: 112), and that event seems to have an impact on the dramatist especially that it was a cursed activity and many clerks preached against it.

### **Criticism**

Critics, like Carpi and Tillyard, have come to draw contradictory and controversial conclusions about Shakespeare's true intentions; Shylock endures as a man and a monster, the ambiguity of the play spawned debates about this character and the aims of the dramatist. Shakespeare's subtlety of themes and scenery seems to transcend anti-Semitism. He tries, using a multitude of techniques, to show the audience the face of Shylock the man, the human that was oppressed by an ignorant and arrogant society. And, when he finally opts for revenge, he is considered as a fiendish cruel "Jew", his mistake could be that he wanted to take the life of a noble Venetian in front of the court, neglecting the Christian vice.

In a distinct facet than Shylock's ardor for his religion and his immense love for his daughter, The Bard seems to bring Christianity to the task of hypocrisy, as the Christian characters rebuke Shylock for seeking vengeance after they provoked him by goading him publicly. While it would be a normal reaction if he was of their own religion, it is in this context that Trevor Nunn, director of The Masterpiece Theatre productions, states: "My intention is to show that the play is as much anti-Christian as it is anti-Semitic. It is a masterpiece about human behavior in extremis".

One ought to also cast light on the genius of the dramatist: He gives no hints or indications about the reason behind making Shylock both detestable and sympathetic in the play, and this contributed to the ascension of the dramatic tension, the character stands as a grand creation of a mastermind. In this respect, Bloom notes: "We can keep finding the meanings of Shakespeare, but never the meaning." (Bloom, 2010: 256). With the never-ending interpretations of Bard's works, the issues that he tackled will continue to challenge the contemporary audience.

To sum up, neither Christianity nor Judaism is to blame for Antonio or Shylock; they are to be considered as individuals, who had their own initiatives and intentions without regard to religion. Shakespeare invested the former with noble qualities to guarantee the acceptance of the spirit of the Elizabethan age while attributed the role of "a necessary evil" to the Elizabethan age all in highlighting that the anti-Semitic Christian society is its real architect.

### **Conclusion**

After examining the most prominent facets of the play, one cannot exonerate Shakespeare of the charge of anti-Semitism, but it is by his emphasis on the image of "The Jew" in the center of his dramatic art that he makes Shylock a victim of an atrocious xenophobic Christian society. From the first attention of inquirers into Shakespeare's works, theatre directors discover that the Bard of Avon gives every villain his say, a chance to defend or justify himself. But the case of Shylock was different; he did not only defend himself against an oppressing society but also exposed the atrocious side of Christians, the ones who always consider themselves as the defender of the values of liberty and tolerance.

As a response to Halperin's call for banning the play from pedagogical institutions, and based on the analysis put forward in this paper, the researchers lectured about *The Merchant of Venice* at their alma mater (AbouBekr Belkaid University of Tlemcen, Algeria) in two different courses, the results are to be explored and analyzed in an upcoming research to confirm the negotiation tackled above.

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