

Anticipating the Jews' Danger on Humanity in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*

استشراف الخطر اليهودي في رواية تاجر البندقية لشكسبير

*Houria Mihoubi

حورية ميهوبي

University of Msila (Algeria)

جامعة المسيلة (الجزائر)

Houria.mihoubi@univ-msila.dz

Dep. Day : 24/02/2022	Acc. day: 29/03/2022	Pub. day: 02/06/2022
-----------------------	----------------------	----------------------

Abstract:

The present research paper deals with the image of the Jews in the Shakespearean famous play *The Merchant of Venice* that has long been hated and criticized by the Jews throughout history. In this play, the character of Shylock represents the Jewish people who were part of the Venetian society. Shakespeare might have the intention to give his readers an idea about how the Jews looked like. He portrayed Shylock as a stubborn man whose pride leads to provoking enmities. He is also greedy and materialist who has an incredible love for money. In addition, Shakespeare portrayed him as a vengeful man with a weak personality. The materialism of this Jewish character went to the extremes when nothing grieved him when his daughter fled with her Christian lover than his suddenness over the money.

Keywords: The Image; the Jews; Shakespeare; *the Merchant of Venice*; Judaism.

ملخص البحث

تتناول هذه الورقة البحثية صورة اليهود في مسرحية شكسبير الشهيرة تاجر البندقية، التي طالما كرهها وانتقدها اليهود عبر التاريخ. في هذه المسرحية، تمثل شخصية شيلوك الشعب اليهودي الذي كان جزءاً من المجتمع في البندقية. ربما ينوي شكسبير إعطاء قرائه فكرة عن شكل اليهود. لقد صور شيلوك على أنه رجل عنيد يؤدي كبريائه إلى إثارة العداوات. كما أنه جشع ومادي لديه حب لا يصدق للمال، بالإضافة إلى أن

* Houria Mihoubi. Houria.mihoubi@univ-msila.dz

شكسبير صورته على أنه رجل انتقامي ضعيف الشخصية، وتطورت مادية هذه الشخصية اليهودية إلى أقصى الحدود خاصة عندما لم يحزن حينما هربت ابنته مع عشيقها بقدر ما حزن على المال الذي اخذته معها.



Introduction

Undoubtedly, the image of the Jews in literature is an important topic that has recently constituted a wide space of debate among critics. Writers in all over the world used the religious group who have long been living in Diaspora, but one can observe that there was an agreement between men of letters that the Jews have the same characteristic features that distinguish them from other people. In the present paper there is an attempt to demonstrate that the negative image of the Jews is not only in Arab literature but also in famous western men of letters' works like William Shakespeare have also portrayed the Jews as wicked characters (McMurty 1989, 98)

It is worth noting that *The Merchant of Venice* is one of the most famous plays of the English playwright William Shakespeare that has been constantly studied by international critics, and is hostile to the official orientation of the Jews because of a character about a young merchant from Italy named Antonio, who is waiting for his boats to come to him with money, but he needs money for the sake of his friend Basanyo, whom he loves so much, because Basanyo wanted to marry a woman. In the play, other strings speak of the Christians' hostility to the Jews, and about love, wealth, isolation and the desire for revenge. This play was produced many times, and its last production was the movie *The Merchant of Venice*, starring Al Pacino.

1-Historical Background of *The Merchant of Venice*

Historically speaking, the drama of *The Merchant of Venice* by William Shakespeare was first printed in 1600 in quarto, of which nineteen copies survived. This was followed by a 1619 printing, and later an inclusion in the First Folio in 1623. The plot of *The Merchant of Venice* has been described as a great commentary on the nature of racial and religious interactions. A medieval legend says that Jews ate Christian flesh on Easter. (Mazer 2005,102).

Christians generally believe that the Jews offended Jesus Christ. When Europeans talk about Jews, they think about usury, and Jews can lend to Christians, and the Book of Deuteronomy records in the Old Testament: "Lending to nations can be profitable, but lending to your brother is not beneficial." Christians are forbidden to lend usury, and in 1179, the Third

Ecumenical Council of Lateran stipulated that moneylenders should be expelled. Jews were generally ostracized by society. King Edward I of England ordered the Jews to be expelled from Britain during his reign.(Perez 2007,42).

In 1492 the Jews were expelled from Spain. In 1509, the War of the Alliance of Cambrai broke out, during which Jews came to Venice to flee and lived in an old iron foundry, and these Jews had to wear yellow clothes or hats. In 1541, the Venetian authorities arranged Jews in another settlement, the later famous Red Table, which were seven stories high. The Jews were later allowed to become residents of Venice and could engage in commercial activities. Almost all of the early European bankers were Jews, and they lived in Lombardy, northern Italy (Perez 2007, 112).

Interesting is the idea that differences between Jews and Christians in *The Merchant of Venice* are a divergent topic discussed quite a lot by various scholars during diverse decades. Especially the question whether William Shakespeare was anti-Judaic or not was and is of great concern, since the complex protagonist Shylock arises hate and pity by the audience (or reader). This fact left critics wondering what Shakespeare was really trying to achieve with the play,(McMurty and Jo1989,107).

One needs to analyze this topic based on the play with special emphasis on the Elizabethan age, Shakespeare's historical background. Tremendously important for the understanding of the differences between Jews and Christians in the play *The Merchant of Venice* is the fact that all Jews were expelled from England in 1290. It took approximately 350 years to be exact, until 1652, to reverse these anti-Jewish politics.(Suárez Fernández 2012,138).

There is a need to stress the historical fact that during the Middle Ages, Jews were driven away from almost all parts of Europe but none of these expulsions were as final as in England. Adding to that, English monarchs performed a new critical stage of cruelty and exploitation and forced them to exploit, even for European standards during this epoch.

The natural demonization of the Jew is the natural result of the combination of the abuse of the Jew as usurer is with the Christian religious bias that marked Elizabethan England,. This demonization leads to the degradation of Shylock. In Elizabethan times, this corruption of the Jewish religion was of course perfectly acceptable. Shakespeare probably developed his images of Jews, which undermined his characterization of Shylock, either from the knowledge of books or more likely by urban legends,(McMurty 1989,187).

2-Judaism versus Christianity in *The Merchant of Venice*

The diverse memories, rumors and legends of the Jews substituted a realistic view of this monotheistic grouping. Although Jews were not permitted to settle in England, quite a few baptized Jews, who emigrated or were expelled from Spain - entered England. Nevertheless, there were no living conditions for professed Jews due to prejudices in financial, religious or national ways (Mazer 2005,97).

It is unlikely that William Shakespeare himself ever met a person of Jewish religion. He was probably just a person influenced by the ideas and ideals of his age and legends like the "Wandering Jew", the "Ritual Murder of the Jew" and other bias. (Sanders 1968,144) Especially the criteria of usury connote prejudices concerning the Judaism, a development which started in the early 12th century and was taken up by the Elizabethan literature, e.g. by Shakespeare or Chaucer.

Significantly enough, Christopher Marlowe wrote his play *The Jew of Malta* in 1594, just prior to the turn of the 17th century at a time when Jews were exiled from English society. This was nothing new, as Jews had been expelled from the country since the Middle Ages. William Shakespeare's play followed soon after in 1596, causing many critics to think that the great playwright wrote *The Merchant of Venice* in order to capitalize on the success that Marlowe had found with his play about a Jew named Barabas. While the plots of the plays are not similar at all, the setting, themes, and the characters lend themselves to further comparison in order to discover whether Shakespeare was trying to refute Marlowe's undeniably anti-Semitic play or simply write a play that would sell. (Sanders 1968, 197).

One needs to stress that research on this topic has recently constituted a wide space of debate, with critics arguing for both sides of the argument. Many dispute whether it is Shakespeare's play or Marlowe's that holds the anti-semitic tones. Other controversies arise when looking at how the Jew is used within the play—as someone to look down upon or as a balance to the hypocritical Christians in Italy. Evidence is in wide abundance for each side of the spectrum. (Rosenberg 1970,156).

Important is the idea that both *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Jew of Malta* are set in Italy, as noted in their respective titles. It's late in the 16th century and Jews are looked upon as money hoarders who will end up in hell because they do not believe that Christ is the Messiah. The Jews, in turn, view the Christians as hypocrites, which leads to Shylock's speech in act 3, scene 1:

He hath disgrace me and rendered me half

A million, laughed at my losses, mocked my gains,
Scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my
Friends, heated mine enemies—and what's his reason? I
Am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes, hath not a Jew hands...? (44-48)
If you prick us, do we not bleed? (53)

Undoubtedly, this speech allows the viewer to sympathize with the treatment of Shylock in society, though this pity is later lost when Shylock demands his pound of flesh from Antonio.

Interesting is the idea that in each of the plays, one of the central characters is a Jew who has a beautiful daughter. In *The Merchant of Venice* it is Shylock and his daughter Jessica and in *The Jew of Malta* it is Barabas and his daughter Abigail. The two Jewish men are similar as they both deal with money, Shylock as a lender and Barabas as a merchant. They both reside in Italy and have stakes in ships that are at sea, Shylock through the money he has lent to Bassanio and Barabas through his own stock on ships. (Humphreys 2005,167).

For his part, Jo McMurty determined that Shylock and Barabas must have been derived from the same closed-minded stereotypes of Jews that existed at the time, which might explain the similarities between the two Jewish characters: "They arranged loans at high interest and exhorted payments from helpless victims. [Each also] had a beautiful Jewish daughter who wanted nothing more than to be rescued from her cultural fate by a handsome Christian" (McMurty,1989.p.147).

Wilbur Sanders, in his book "Barabas and the Historical Jew in Europe," agrees with McMurty saying that the Jews in each of the plays were based on popular myths of Jews at the time that said Jews "were in the habit of stealing Christian children, crucifying them, and using their blood in the Passover ritual".(Sanders1968, 344).

Both authors came to this conclusion because of the fact that Jews hadn't been allowed in England for centuries, so stereotypes were the only thing the Marlowe and Shakespeare had to base their characters on. Because Shakespeare's Shylock is so similar to Marlowe's Barabas, it is conceivable that Shakespeare's inspiration for the character came not from these stereotypes but from Marlowe's work. Critics argue both ways. (Humphreys2005,178).

One can observe that both men were materialistic to the extent that they love their money more than anything, even their own daughters. When Jessica runs away with the Christian boy Lorenzo, Shylock is more worried and upset about his fortunes that she has taken than with the fact that he has

lost a daughter. When he discovers that Jessica took some of his wealth with her, Shylock cries in act 3, scene 1:

--Two Thousand ducats in that, and other precious, precious
Jewels. 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! (73-77)

It is obvious that Barabas too cares more for his money than for his daughter, imposing on her to become a nun in order to retrieve some of his fortune from his old house. He is ecstatic when his daughter returns with his money in act 2, scene 1, and cries "O girl, O gold, O beauty, O bliss!" (54). Though he is excited to see his daughter, his wealth seems to be more important than his daughter just like Shylock. "O beauty, O bliss," could refer to either his love of his daughter or his money, though the latter seems more fitting for his character. Barabas sacrifices Jessica a second time when he uses her beauty to play two men into killing each other to exact revenge on Ferneze who made him hand over his money and his house. (Humphreys 2005,147)

One needs to draw attention to the important idea that the theme of Judaism versus Christianity exists in each of the plays. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock is shown as a grisly selfish Jew who refuses to take even double the money owed to him, instead demanding the flesh.

He only becomes human when his own life is threatened, and even gives in and converts to Christianity to save his life, but only as a last resort. Shylock uses his religion prior to his conversion as a justification for asking for the flesh. In act 4, scene 1, Shylock rationalizes his asking for Antonio's pound of flesh saying:

I have possessed your grace of what I purpose,
And by our holy Sabbath have I sworn
To have the due and forfeit of my bond (lines 35-37).

And:

An oath, an oath, I have an oath in heaven.

Shall I lay perjury upon my soul?

No, not for Venice (lines 225-227).

There is almost an agreement among critics that the disgraceful deeds of the Jews pushed European society in the Middle Ages to ostracize them, which led to an increase in their negative actions and consequently an increase in the level of their hatred. Indeed, historically speaking, the Jews were known in England and the West in general in the Middle Ages with corruption, treachery and hatred to the extent that a Christian could not make

the nanny of his children a Jew even if it was Christianized. (Perez 2007,104), and this is what Shakespeare portrayed, so they had violent and subtle reactions until they became influential in the Global system today.

To better understand the image of the Jews in *The Merchant of Venice*, one has to deal with a number of axes, including: the Jews in England in the Middle Ages, and how they entered England while they did not exceed a thousand people until they penetrated into British society, and in the later decades they became a force to be reckoned with.

After they were pariah groups hiding their religion to practice their lives normally, as they were known as psychological "filth" The moral and the physical ones were thus ostracized from Christian societies, but after that they were able to forcefully enter British life through the portal of British drama and art and influence it without declaring it.

Critics have long been rereading Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and how he portrayed the Jewish merchant "Shylock" as a greedy, spiteful, usurious and vulgar man even in his expressions. Shakespeare even wrote the play in a strong poetic language. Then he depicts Shylock with hatred reaching its climax when he asks for a pound of the flesh of the Christian man, "Sanyo," if he is late in paying the debt!

He pushed them to hate those around them, or perhaps it was a criticism of the British government and judiciary at the time, which distinguishes between a Jew and a Christian, as the judge orders at the end of the play to confiscate Shylock's money and force him to convert to Christianity. (Introduction, *The Merchant of Venice* The Arden Edition 1964,204).

The famous sentence from *The Merchant of Venice* "I want a pound of this human's flesh, it is my right and I will not give it up" . It is a Shakespearean predictive cry of early colonialism. It is also a message that the Jews are cruel to the extent that they can deprive a human being from part of his body.

There is a European proverb that says, "A hateful personality leaves behind vivid, foul memories. And if we want to translate the above into Shakespeare's language, we must be thinking about what "Antony" said to his friend about the Jewish moneylender, "Shylock" while negotiating with him to give him a loan in the play *The Merchant of Venice*: "Notice, O Psanyo, how the devil can invoke the Bible to support his purposes, and what the evil spirit waving religious martyrs is like a rotten person with a smile on his cheeks or like a rotten apple with a beautiful appearance" (ibid.,178).

From a historical point of view, at that time, there were no anti-Semitic "laws", which gave Shakespeare a great impetus to portray the stereotypical personality of the Jew deposited in the Christian European culture at the time and to make an end to the play in which the Christian triumphs over the Jew whom Shakespeare wants us to see as a negative, spiteful, waiting for his opportunity for revenge. (Sanders,1968).

As a matter of fact, the film takes us towards its goal by achieving the required gap as an opportunity similar to seeing an exhibition of Renaissance paintings, revived to it with a real magic of theatrical language and ideas through which we discern the deep desire of director Michael Radford to dismantle the prestige of the text and its author, and within this visual framing of the text which combines tragedy and comedy.

Important is the idea that Radford's approach to the narrative is based, no doubt, on the tremendous capabilities of a great actor like Al Pacino, who, perhaps alone, burdened the film thanks to his ability to play Shylock in Venice in the sixteenth century and portray the marginal situation of the city's Jews at the time as it was in most European cities. The Jews practice their usual "usury" commercial activity by virtue of their being a functional religious group that performs or carries out "dirty" work that the rest of the "non-Jewish" population refuses to do. (Von Busak, 2002, 198).

It seems that the Shakespearian text refers to the trader, Antonio, who is involved in obtaining a loan from Shylock "3000 ducats" to help his lover friend in Sanyo to ask for the hand of Porsche and promises him to return the amount within three months. The moneylender agrees but insists on setting a harsh condition.

The film does not hide it either" and Shakespeare coined it with great intelligence. It is represented by cutting a pound of flesh from Antonio's body if he is unable to repay the debt. Of course, Antonio is unable to fulfill the debt on time, and therefore Shylock asks him to apply the condition as concluded.

One can observe that the matter that pushes Antonio to struggle with Shylock on one of the city bridges, which appears in the scene The opening movie is when we see Antonio spitting on a Shylock over the Rialto Bridge. "In the Skeptic script, this is a talk show scene." Antonio tells Shylock with all his rudeness that he will spit in his face again whenever he is asked to repay the loan, and this rudeness of Antonio is based on the stereotype of him and of the Jew, as Antonio is the Christian who bears good qualities and who refuses usury in exchange for the evil Jew Shylock.

Here, the sensitivity of the situation appears in showing Shylock as a villain and a victim at the same time, a profound tragic figure that is descending towards an inevitable fate due to his own "genuine" faults (Mazer 2005,134) Here he is trying to return the slap, with the emphasis (from the text and the movie) that his motives for responding to the slap are not revolutionary, as no person can be a revolutionary, and all that occupies him from his daughter's escape is that she only stole him without concern for her actions and her fate.

Conclusion

In fact, Shakespeare may have never met a Jew like Shylock, (McMurty, Jo,1989) and may have even visited Venice, France, or Denmark. Nevertheless, he presented us with a societal model that denotes an extrapolation of the personality of the Jew in the European Renaissance and what followed it, so hatred and hatred were portrayed as necessary to see the Jew side by side with the image of the wealthy Jew who exploits people's need for money and lends them interest that they are unable to pay and what is a pound of meat except for a symbol of the image of interest that is impossible to pay, so that image was about the Jew in the popular stories and stories that unanimously agreed on his stinginess, treachery, thirst for blood, and his desire to harm others, sabotage and readiness destroy people around them (Mazer 2005,164).

That is why one can affirm that Shakespeare succeeded to a great extent to provide his readers with a real image of the Jews through the character of Shylock which became an inspiration to all the novelists and playwrights who want to write about the Jewish personality. Moreover, Shakespeare could even anticipate the future of the Jews and their danger on humanity. *The Merchant of Venice* is then an authentic predictive cry of early colonialism and the role of the Jews in recent world order.

One can observe that Shakespeare could through *The merchant of Venus* portray the major characteristic features of the Jewish personality and to give a clear image of what the Jews can do in order to fulfill their greedy goals in society. One can say that Shakespeare though was criticized and accused of anti-Semitism, he could really anticipate the real future of the Jews in our globe, and his play can be considered as a testimony from this Western great man of letters that absolutely incriminates the Jews and exposes their bad practices throughout history. For this reason, we highly recommend that this play should be taught in our schools and universities.

Shylock's philosophy of life based on materialism and greed is nowadays seen in the practices of the Jews in the Middle East. The Jews in

present day world are just like shylock, display a strong desire for land, and they became a real symbol of imperialism.

Bibliography

1. Humphreys, Arthur. 1998. "The Jew of Malta: The Jew of Malta and The Merchant of Venice: Two Readings of Life. *Drama for Students*. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 13. Detroit: Gale,
2. Marlowe, Christopher. 1964. *The Jew of Malta*. Ed. Richard W. Van Fossen. Lincoln, NE: Univeristy of Nebraska Press,
3. Mazer, Cary M. 2005."My Problem with Shylock". Penn Arts & Sciences: Department of English. October,. <http://www.english.upenn.edu/~cmazer/mvnews.html> 2005.
4. McMurty, Jo. 1989. "Religious, Occupational, and Regional Stereotypes." *Understanding Shakespeare's England: A Companion for the American Reader*. Hamden, CT: Shoe String.
5. Rosenberg, Edgar. 1970. "The Jew in Western Drama: An Essay and a Checklist." New York: KTAV.
6. Sanders, Wilbur. 1968. "Barabas and the Historical Jew in Europe." *The Dramatist and the Received Idea: Studies in the Plays of Marlowe and Shakespeare*. New York: Cambridge UP,.,
7. Shakespeare, William. 2005. *The Merchant of Venice*. The Necessary Shakespeare. Ed. David Bevington. New York: Pearson Longman.
8. Introduction, *The Merchant of Venice* The Arden Edition London: Methuen, 1964p. xxxix. Google Scholar
9. Perez, Joseph (2007). *Criticism (ed.). History of a tragedy. The Expulsion of the Jews from Spain. Barcelona.*
10. -Suárez Fernández, Luis. 2012. *Ariel (ed.). The Expulsion of the Jews. A European Problem. Barcelona.*
11. Von Busak, Richard. 2002. "The Quality of Mercy." 1 November 2005. <http://www.metroactive.com/papers/metro/01.12.05/merchant-0502.html>