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Trabajo Fin de Grado

**Anti-Semitism in
William Shakespeare's
*The Merchant of Venice***

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0. RESUMEN / ABSTRACT

El propósito de este trabajo es analizar la obra de *El Mercader de Venecia*, escrita por William Shakespeare entre 1595 y 1597. Más concretamente, el análisis se centrará en el posible carácter antisemita de la obra. Nuestro principal objetivo será determinar si existe dicho antisemitismo y a continuación señalar determinados episodios y hechos que lo reflejan. Se ofrecerá al lector toda la información necesaria en cuanto a Shakespeare y a la obra en general, seguido de una interpretación de la misma, que estará apoyada en los necesarios comentarios, referencias y pies de página.

Palabras clave: Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, Antisemitismo, Shylock.

The purpose of the present work is to analyze William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (1595-1597). More specifically, the analysis will be focused on the possible presence of anti-Semitism in the play. Our main aim will be to determine the existence of this anti-Semitism and to mark straightaway certain episodes and facts that reflect it. I will offer readers all the necessary information with regard to Shakespeare and the play itself, followed by an interpretation of it that will be supported by the necessary references, commentaries and textual notes.

Key words: Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, Anti-Semitism, Shylock.

1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this work is to analyze one of the most famous and controversial works written by William Shakespeare: *The Merchant of Venice* (1595-1597). In particular, this analysis will be focused on the anti-Semitic aspects of this play, and it will contain a number of topics which will be interpreted, discussed, and justified in full.

To fulfill this objective we will study the most important figure of this play with regard to this specific topic, the character of Shylock, as well as the attitudes adopted by the rest of the characters towards him and vice versa. Furthermore, emphasis will be placed on the analysis of certain scenes; the way in which certain attitudes took place in real life and how Shakespeare transmits them in his work.

The reasons why I choose this topic are quite simple. Firstly, because Literature has undoubtedly been the area I have enjoyed the most during these four years of learning. Secondly, because I became interested in both the history and the background conveyed in *The Merchant of Venice* at the time I studied it. Finally, we may say that when I decided my destination country in the Erasmus+ Mobility Programme, Poland, due to the fact of having the possibility to go deeper into the history of Judaism, my desires to reread, investigate and interpret this play were increased.

Nonetheless, what do I mean by “studying the presence of anti-Semitism in the play”? Basically, I would like to pose the following questions: Does the play support the anti-Semitic attitudes towards Shylock conveyed by its Christian characters? Does it criticize on the contrary the prejudices presented on stage? Or does it simply express and dramatize the intolerance and anti-Semitism as a fact, without adopting any position against one or another?

The answer to these questions is quite arguable, since it depends on several factors, such as ethics and culture, and even our own integrity and empathy. That is the reason why I consider *The Merchant of Venice* such an interesting play: there is no true or unique interpretation of it.

Since this is my own project, I will give my personal point of view and I will try to give readers the necessary justifications; but regardless of it, my main intention is no other

than providing information and objective data which make readers think of it and get their own conclusions.

Throughout my B.A. Dissertation, there will be some aspects that must be taken into account: therefore, the analysis will be developed as follows:

First of all a brief presentation of the play will be provided. This will comprise a brief biography of William Shakespeare followed by a summary of the play.

Secondly, a context of the play will be exposed in order to understand the reasons for anti-Semitism at the time in which the play takes place; so this way we can get a more precise reading.

Straightaway, since it is essential to make clear the concept of anti-Semitism¹, a brief, simple definition of it will be given.

Besides, we will proceed to supply an account of the events that take place in the play, followed by an analysis of particular characters.

Lastly, we will focus on the most relevant aspects of *The Merchant of Venice*, with regard to its alleged anti-Semitism.

¹ In order to give a proper definition of anti-Semitism as well as any other definition which might appear, the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* will be our main source.

2. SHAKESPEARE AND *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE* (1595-1597)

This chapter will be focused on a brief biography of William Shakespeare, followed by a summary of *The Merchant of Venice*.

2.1. WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE (1564-1616)

William Shakespeare was born in England, on April 26th, 1564. He was a poet, playwright and actor, and he is nowadays considered the most important English writer and one of the most famous ones of universal Literature.

He was born and raised in Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire. At the age of 18, he married Anne Hathaway and had three children. Between 1585 and 1592, he began a career in London as an actor, writer, and part-owner of a playing company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, later known as the King's Men. He retired to Stratford around 1613, where he died three years later at the age of 49.

Shakespeare's plays have been translated and performed more often than those of any other playwright. He produced most of his works between 1589 and 1613. His earliest were mainly comedies and histories, which are regarded as some of the best ones produced in these genres.

Early in his career, Shakespeare published his first two poems: *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594).

With the exception of *Romeo and Juliet*, which is a tragedy, William Shakespeare's first plays were mostly histories written in the early 1590s. Among these we find *Richard II*, *Henry VI* (parts 1, 2 and 3) and *Henry V*.

He also wrote several comedies during his early period: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*. Other plays, possibly written before 1600, include *Titus Andronicus*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *The Taming of the Shrew* and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*.

In his later period, Shakespeare wrote crucial tragedies around 1608, such as *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*. He also wrote tragicomedies such as *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*, and collaborated with other playwrights.

There are few records of Shakespeare's private life, and this fact has caused speculation about such matters as his physical appearance, sexuality, and religious beliefs, and whether the works attributed to him were written by others. Yet, in the 20th and 21st centuries, his plays remain highly popular, and are constantly studied, performed, and reinterpreted in diverse cultural and political contexts throughout the world.

2.2. THE MERCHANT OF VENICE (1595-1597)²

The Merchant of Venice was written between 1595 and 1597. Originally considered as a comedy, it was written in 5 acts.

The play opens in Venice, where Antonio, a Venetian wealthy merchant, complains of a sadness he cannot explain. His best friend Bassanio appears and asks Antonio for financial aid because he wants to court Portia, a wealthy heiress who lives in Belmont. Since Antonio has all his money invested in some trade ships at the sea, both friends agree that Bassanio gets a loan from Shylock, one of the city's moneylenders, being Antonio the guarantor.

In Belmont, Portia's sadness is due to her dead father's will. She is being visited by several suitors who are tested by three caskets – gold, silver, and lead –; in order to marry her. Portia complains about all of them and the fact that she cannot marry the man she wants.

Meanwhile in Venice, Bassanio negotiates with Shylock, the Jewish moneylender, the loan of 3,000 ducats on Antonio's credit. After reproaching Antonio his anti-Semitic attitude towards him, Shylock agrees on one condition: if Antonio does not pay his debt, Shylock will get a pound of Antonio's flesh. Antonio is sure that he will have the money from his ships before the date, so he agrees.

Back in Belmont, all Portia's suitors have chosen the wrong casket, and we learn that those who fail not only cannot marry Portia, but anyone else in the future.

² The edition used in this essay is *The Merchant of Venice* edited by John Drakakis, first published in 2010 by The Arden Shakespeare and reprinted by Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare 2011 (twice), 2013.

In Venice, Shylock's daughter, Jessica, tells us how ashamed she is of being the Jew's daughter and what a hell her house is. She is in love with Lorenzo, and she wants to marry him and to convert to Christianity. Jessica escapes when Shylock leaves the house to go dinner, taking with her a great amount of ducats and family relics.

In the meantime, Bassanio departs to Belmont to get his desired Portia.

Shylock is both mad and sorrowful when he finds out about Jessica's elopement and robbery, but he becomes excited when he discovers that Antonio's ships have sunk. He then gives a speech against Antonio, who hates Shylock for not being a Christian, and in defense of the humanity of Jews; so he will seek revenge and take a pound of Antonio's flesh.

In Belmont, Bassanio chooses the right casket and wins Portia's heart. Love also arises between Nerissa, Portia's attendant, and Gratiano, Bassanio's friend. Later, Bassanio learns that Antonio is about to die at Shylock's command. Portia gives him twenty times the debt owed to Shylock and Bassanio runs to Venice to save his friend. Moreover, Portia gives him a ring and makes him promise to never take it off. Same does Nerissa with Gratiano.

While Bassanio goes to Venice, Portia plots a plan which involves cross-dressing and posing as a lawyer in defense of Antonio, and both she and Nerissa depart to Venice.

After this, the scene moves to the court in Venice, where it seems to be no hope for Antonio since Shylock claims for revenge. Suddenly, a young lawyer called Balthazar (Portia) appears. She seems to give her approval to Shylock, but just when the Jew is proceeding to get Antonio's pound of flesh she stops him. She says that the bond allows Shylock to get the pound of flesh, but if he spills a drop of Christian blood, then he will be guilty of plotting to murder a Venetian Christian and therefore he will lose all his goods. Shylock then tries to get the money or simply leave, but Portia sentences that he has conspired to kill a Venetian and he must be punished.

After begging for his life, Shylock is forced to sign an agreement saying that when he dies all his money will go to Jessica and Lorenzo. Furthermore, he must convert to Christianity, and Shylock leaves losing both his possessions and his identity.

After the trial, Antonio and Bassanio want to give a gift to Balthazar for saving Antonio's life. Portia playing Balthazar asks for Bassanio's ring, to which he refuses, but finally accepts as well as Gratiano.

Finally in Belmont, Portia and Nerissa get into a fight with Bassanio and Gratiano about the missing rings and they accuse them of giving them to a woman. But later they reveal their plan and both reconcile with their husbands. After this, they also learn that Antonio's ships and money are safe after all. The play ends with happiness for all the characters, except for Shylock.

As we see, the plot could be divided into two parts: the first one has to do with Venice; there the main action revolves around Antonio, the Christian merchant, and Shylock, the Jewish moneylender. More episodes take place in this setting, involving other characters such as Jessica, the Clown, and Antonio's friends among others. As for the other part, more scenes occur in Belmont which appears to be a kind of antagonist place to Venice. The main participants in this scenario are Portia – together with her suitors – and Nerissa.

So, focusing our attention on Venice and its main action, who is the main character³ in *The Merchant of Venice*?

Let us take another look at the title: *The Merchant of Venice*. Shakespeare's work is named – once again, *The Merchant of Venice* – making reference to (presumably) the main character of the play, the generous good Christian merchant Antonio. From this point of view and quoting Stephen Greenblatt, the play might be summarized this way:

A wealthy merchant loses all of his wealth in a series of shipwrecks and is about to be carved up by a merciless Jewish creditor, until, through a clever interpretation of the law, he regains everything he has lost and acquires the creditor's money as well. (Greenblatt, 2004:81)

This way, all the storyline revolves around Antonio, from his unwarranted sadness at the beginning of the play and his great effort at helping his dearest friend Bassanio, followed by the tension and concern that he transmits to the audience through the loss of his assets, to his sudden success at the trial against the Jew.

Why Antonio? That is to say, it is logical that there had to be a main character and usually, in every single story the events related to that character are therefore more relevant than those related to the rest of the characters. We all agree up to here. But what one may wonder is: What could be the reason why the character of Shylock takes a back seat? Has it

³ As for the idea of both the alleged main character and the different characterizations of certain characters, I have made use of both Stephen Greenblatt's *Will in the World* (2004:257-258) together with Drakakis' Introduction.

not been the villain, usurer, Jew Shylock who has become the most important one throughout the years? Words like the following are enough to point out what many of us recall the play for: “If you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh? If you poison us do we not die?” (3.1.58-60)

But of course, taking into account the historical context and once we go back to these days, the fact that Antonio was the main character makes perfect sense, the same way it made perfect sense that the audience did support the Christian characters instead of Shylock, the Jew.

The Merchant of Venice was a play starring Christian characters and destined for a Christian audience. Everything revolved around Christians. Antonio is a Christian and an attractive melancholic wealthy merchant who is willing to do anything – perhaps even a little too much – for his best friend, even to accept the savage terms of the evil Jew. Jessica is a sweet and delicate young lady who is not happy beside her Jewish father and who is in love with a young Christian man. She even wants to convert to Christianity. How could she not gain the acceptance of the Christian audience? And with respect to the rest of the characters, the same old story: perfect and young Christian people absorbed by their perfect luxurious lives. The audience used up a great amount of sympathy towards them who looked so perfect, good and generous – they even invite Shylock to dine with them and he refuses! How ungrateful and despicable!

So this is the thing. What makes the audience of the time not feeling sympathy about Shylock are both the characterization and the Christian propaganda. The ironies of the text, the offensive dialogues and the critics towards Shylock are what create the comic effect and support to the rest of the characters. Only when the Jew is out of scene, the perfect Romantic comedy is developed, i.e. in Belmont.

It is thus important to mention here that *The Merchant of Venice* was long being played as a comedy. A comedy about the story of Shylock, a despicable resented Jewish moneylender whose only goal is to take revenge on the (a priori) central character, Antonio, a Christian merchant who has not paid his loan.

That is it. This is basically the central plot and no more. But here lies the complexity. It is not that simple. As we go deep into the storyline and above all into Shylock's characterization, we may be able to jump to the conclusion that there are plenty of other

factors by which the play might have been more precisely considered as a work which simultaneously covers three kinds of genre: comedy, tragedy, and history.

There is an extraordinary energy in Shylock's prose and poetry, a force both cognitive and passionate, which palpably is in excess of the play's comic requirements. (Bloom, 1998:171)

Nicholas Rowe once said that "the 'incomparable Character of Shylock the Jew' was performed 'by an excellent Comedian'"; although he also assumed that "'I cannot but think it was design'd tragically by the Author.'" (Drakakis, 2010:1-2)

The point is that, depending on how the story is interpreted, Shylock is full of imperfections, but is also a very complex and deeply human character. This is perfectly noticeable when we reach the part of his famous monologue:

Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh? If you poison us do we not die? (3.1.53–60)

Maybe Jews and Christians have something in common after all. Shylock is saying that both are equally human beings. Therefore, this is the moment when we feel that perhaps this story is not that much of a comedy, but a tragedy. And maybe we should also refer to it as a historical work if we take a look at the history which marks the context of *The Merchant of Venice*.

Here is when we encounter the factor of characterization. Shakespeare provides us the characterization of his characters and then he puts us in their skin and makes us question their feelings, thoughts and behavior. Maybe he is trying to say that we should classify neither plays nor people only for some elements, as in this case, religion.

Hence, we can say that there is a setback in terms of Shylock's characterization. He is a villain because he is depicted as a beast without feelings or remorse and carrying out acts of questionable integrity – such as the fact of asking for a pound of flesh of the merchant without showing mercy –; but at the same time he is a victim when we inevitably empathize with his character after giving speeches on the Christian's contempt and manifesting an equal idealism in respect to every human being.

The play itself becomes a test of our conceptions of genre and comic structure. [...] the Merchant of Venice also raises questions concerning the processes of composition and dramatic characterization, at the same time as it forces a reconsideration of the political myths surrounding Venetian republicanism that circulated in England during the late sixteenth century. (Drakakis, 2010:2-3)

3. CONTEXT

Since Shakespeare was born in England, we will focus our attention mainly on this place when it comes to the historical context.

3.1. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Merchant of Venice takes place in the Middle Ages, and it makes reference to the situation of Jews at that time. Jews were expelled from England in 1290⁴. Nevertheless, in the 15th century, after the expulsion of Jews from Spain⁵, some of them who practiced their religion in secret were converted to Christianity and settled in England; that is why there were some Jews in Shakespeare's England in the 16th century.

Usury was forbidden to Christians, so it was Jews who were forced to lend their money at high⁶ interest rates. This increased Christian rage. According to James Shapiro, there was a crisis of cultural identity, and that was the reason why Elizabethans stressed the line of separation between Christians and Jews. (Shapiro, 1997:26)

When Shakespeare was in his thirties, two important events took place. One of these has to do with Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593), who had written *The Jew of Malta*⁷. This was an anti-Semitic play which was staged around 1592. In 1593, Marlowe was murdered 10 days after being arrested under the accusation of spying and heresy against Queen Elizabeth I⁸ (1533-1603).

⁴ The expulsion of Jews from England in 1290 took place during the reign of Edward I. This exclusion had never been seen before, since England was "the first nation in medieval Christendom to rid itself by law of its entire Jewish population." (Greenblatt, 2004:258)

⁵. In 1498-80 the Spanish Inquisition was established by Ferdinand II of Aragon and Isabella I of Castile. A decade later, since Spain was under Christian rule after the defeat of Muslims in Granada, Ferdinand and Isabella expelled the Jews. (Bell, 2013:137)

⁶ The reason why Jews had to lend money at high interest rates was because they feared the risk that their borrowers did not repay them. (Falk, 2008:2)

⁷ More information about Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* will be provided afterwards, in "Theatrical representations of Shylock".

⁸ Queen Elizabeth I was the last monarch of the Tudor Dynasty. She was declared illegitimate very short after her birth due to her mother's execution, Anne Boleyn. During her reign, she established a Protestant Church which later will become the Church of England. Religious conflicts were taking place during the second half of

A year later after Marlowe's death, Roderigo Lopez (1525-1594), who was the personal doctor of Queen Elizabeth, was hanged and mutilated in front of a great amount of spectators after being judged and accused of betrayal due to the supposed attempt to poison the queen. No long after this, in 1597, Shakespeare released *The Merchant of Venice*. The play may make reference to a Wolf, which is the English translation of the name Lopez (Falk, 2008:3):

O, be thou damned, inexecrable dog,
And for thy life let justice be accused!
Thou almost mak'st me waver in my faith,
To hold opinion with Pythagoras
That souls of animals infuse themselves
Into the trunks of men. Thy currish spirit
Governed a wolf, who, hanged for human slaughter,
And whilst thou layest in thy unhallowed dam,
Infused itself in thee; for thy desires
Are wolvis, bloody, starved and ravenous. (4.1.127-137)

3.2. SETTING

The Merchant of Venice is divided in 5 acts and a total of 20 scenes divided in two geographical locations: Belmont and Venice. Some allusions will be made to particular episodes in Belmont, but our attention will be mainly focused on Venice, because it is there that Shylock lives and acts.

The Merchant of Venice takes place in Venice in the 17th Century. From the 15th century onwards, this place was considered a multicultural republic since it had a strong

the 16th century; and it was also during her reign that there was a great cultural splendor in England, with personalities like William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe.

maritime power, which allowed the city to have access to Turkey and to the trade routes of the eastern Mediterranean. By the 1590s Venice was synonym of exoticism of travel.

Venetian judicial institutions received detailed attention in Lewis Lewkenor's translation of Gasparo Contarini's *The Commonwealth and Government of Venice* (1599)⁹. *The Merchant of Venice* represents those details of the Venetian judicial system described in Contarini's report, with the difference that the authority is not in magistrates but in the figure of the Duke.

Venice was "a place of wonder" with fascinating political institutions and example of modern economy. Elizabethan writers as well as Shakespeare produced a representation "in response to cultural forces whose comparative novelty stood as a challenge to accept modes of thinking". (Drakakis, 2010:6)

Jews came originally from Germany, Spain and Portugal, and the Levant. They were settled in the Ghetto¹⁰ at the beginning of the 16th century. Venice allowed them to stay for extended periods of time under the condition of not owning land or practice "honest" (Greenblatt, 2004:261) trades, but encouraging them on de contrary to lend money at interest. This was of course very profitable for Venice in more than one sense, since this liquidity was very useful for a society where Christians were not allowed to take interest by law, whereas Jews were objects of popular loathing and upper-class exploitation.

As Venice was a centre of commerce, its laws protected non-venetian merchants who cooperated to the economical welfare of the city. For instance, when Shylock demands the payment of the debt, Antonio says the following:

The Duke cannot deny the course of law;

For the commodity that strangers have

With us in Venice, if it be denied,

⁹ "Contarini distinguishes between those courts consisting of ten elected citizens of Venice, and the merchant's courts, consisting of forty elected magistrates that dealt with legal disputes between merchants, and also between 'forayners and strangers'"(Drakakis, 2010:96).

¹⁰ According to Frederic C. Lane, the term 'ghetto' was not a symbol of racial segregation those years since "there was much 'friendly contact' between Jews and Christians, although the republic was not immune from occasional 'religiously coloured anti-Semitism'" (Drakakis, 2010:5).

Will much impeach the justice of the state,

Since that the trade and profit of the city

Consisteth of all nations (3.3.26-31)

Basically, this means that the fact of forgiving Antonio's bond and denying Shylock's duties will negatively affect to Venice's well-being.

Nevertheless, in spite of the fact that people from diverse religions and nationalities commerce in Venice, this atmosphere is full of religious conflicts in the play, in this case between Christians and Jews.

Furthermore, even though we will not make as many allusions to Belmont¹¹ as to Venice, it is important to mention that this setting is presented as a contrast and a refuge to Venice since it is a place full of beauty, peace, fortune, love, and so on. We could even trace a line dividing both cities by being Belmont a kind of fairytale place, and being Venice a reflection of real life and its harsh events.

The presence of the Jew as a justification for Christianity itself is imbricated in another series of narratives that the play formulates which have to do with cultural anxiety about the status of Venice as a republic, and with the precarious ethics of economic exchange. According to this formulation, the aesthetic principle of harmony, combined with the pleasure of comedy, is irreducibly political. (Drakakis, 2010:110).

¹¹ To Catherine Belsey Belmont it is “‘the location in the play of happy love’ that attracts competing suitors. It is ‘a refuge for eloping lovers, who flee the precarious world of capital interest and trade, to find a heaven of hospitality, music, poetry... and the infinite wealth (without origins) which makes all this possible’; whereas Venice is “the place of danger, anarchy and possible destruction, but the imperfect domestication that is finally effected in Belmont reflects ‘the extent to which Venice is superimposed upon Belmont’.”(Drakakis, 2010:60)

4. ANTI-SEMITISM

In this chapter attention will be focused on the concept of anti-Semitism, together with some history¹² and the anti-Semitic facts that may be perceived when reading *The Merchant of Venice*.

4.1. DEFINITION

According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, anti-Semitism means “hatred of Jews; unfair treatment of Jews”.

Tension between Christians and Jews has existed since biblical times. Jews deny Christ as their Messiah, and that is why the question of who was responsible for his death is a big source of conflict. The most well-known episode was the Holocaust¹³; however Jews have always been persecuted.

The Middle Ages was a very difficult time for Jews. Medieval society was tolerant until the Church became a powerful institution with more and more increasing and demanding rules. A lot of Jews lived in Christian Europe but, since they were not Christians, they did not have a place in the division of the feudal system (clergy, knights and serfs). Yet, they were protected by the highest positions, since its financial, administrative and medical services were of high interest.

Nevertheless, from 1300, due to the Roman Catholic Church's power, persecution of Jews and deportations were a fact. Therefore, Jews started to suffer more discrimination and persecution in Christian Europe. Christian people were not allowed to loan money at interest, and some Jews became moneylenders. This started to become an advantage for Christian personalities; therefore moneylending became a business only of Jews. The problem was that though Jews could earn a lot of money, the king used to take them over; this way most of the Jewish people became poor.

¹² As for the history of Jews, I have consulted Raymond P. Scheindlin's *A Short History of the Jewish People: From Legendary Times to Modern Statehood*, as well as Haim Hillel Ben-Sasson's *A History of the Jewish People*.

¹³ The Holocaust was “the killing of million Jews by the Nazis in the 1930s and 1940s” (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*).

Jews were often killed and exiled from the European countries. Forms of persecution of Jews in Europe included: forced conversions, book burning, property confiscation, vandalisation of synagogues, being burned alive, bans on travel and mass killings.

As in Europe, Jews were expelled from England. In 1290, under the rule of King Edward I, Jews were forced to leave. In Shakespeare's time, three centuries later, there were very a few Jews in England. Some of them were forced to convert to Christianity, and some others practiced their religion in secret. Moreover, plenty of propaganda has been used against them. Renaissance people used to spread invented stories about Jews which included crimes such as poisoning, the killing of Christian children, and the spread of the plague among others; all that based on fair and for propagandistic reasons.

Jews were not readmitted until 1655. Since Shakespeare died in 1616, many authors declare that he did not have many chances to get to know any Jewish person, and they think that for the construction of the character of Shylock he simply made use of those medieval mites and prejudices spread by the Elizabethan society against Jews.

For instance, here the play makes us go back to the racist (and surely false) stereotypes of the time and how this scene would remind the Shakespearean society of the 16th century about those stories about the wickedness and mercilessness of Jews:

This kindness will I show.

Go with me to a notary, seal me there

Your single bond, and, in a merry sport,

If you repay me not on such a day,

In such a place, such sum, or sums, as are

Expressed in the condition, let the forfeit

Be nominated for an equal pound

Of your fair flesh, to be cut off and taken

In what part of your body pleaseth me. (1.3.139-147)

So, according to the definition of anti-Semitism and the information that we have about this racial hatred from Christians towards the Jewish community, are we able to

perceive the presence of anti-Semitism in *The Merchant of Venice*? Of course; indeed, due to the presence of more recent occurrences such as the Holocaust, when reading this work nowadays, it is impossible not to notice those racial sentiments against Shylock the Jew, as C.L. Barber puts it:

If one adds humanitarian and democratic indignation at anti-Semitism, it is hard to see from a distance what there can be to say for the play: Shylock seems to be made a scapegoat in the crudest, most dishonest way. (In Drakakis, 2010:2)

4.2. ANTI-SEMITIC ELEMENTS

In his work *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (1998), Harold Bloom says that we “would be blind, deaf and dumb not to recognize that Shakespeare’s grand, equivocal comedy *The Merchant of Venice* is nevertheless a profoundly anti-Semitic work” (Bloom, 1998:171).

After reading Bloom’s words, though also agreeing with him, at some point we may encounter a kind of conflict. Is it the play itself anti-Semitic or does it just contains anti-Semitic elements? Both ideas are quite different, and the second one does not entail the first one. For instance, the fact that the play’s characters may have racist attitudes does not mean that Shakespeare was an anti-Semite and hence the play is oriented to launch racist propaganda against the Jewish race. Straightaway, I will provide some justifications to this impression.

4.2.1 The Characters: Attitudes, Facts and Dialogues¹⁴

In this section we will proceed to note both anti-Semitic words and attitudes of some of the characters in *The Merchant of Venice*.

Jessica is Shylock’s daughter. She is ashamed of it and her wish is to run away with a Christian man, Lorenzo, so that she can marry him and convert to Christianity. So with Lorenzo’s help, she escapes from home taking all her father’s ducats and some family relics with her:

¹⁴ In this section I have made use of Drakakis’ Introduction in this edition of the play.

Alack, what heinous sin is it in me
To be ashamed to be my father's child!
But, though I am a daughter to his blood,
I am not to his manners. O, Lorenzo,
If thou keep promise I shall end this strife,
Become a Christian, and thy loving wife. (2.3.16-21)

Through Jessica, Shakespeare makes us know how life is like at Shylock's house, which seems to be not very good. Both Jessica and the Clown, Lancelet Giobbe, wish to escape from Shylock. In one occasion, Jessica says to Lancelet: "I am sorry thou wilt leave my father so. Our house is hell and thou, a merry devil, Didst rob it of some taste of tediousness" (2.3.1-3). Likewise, Lancelet aside says things like: "Certainly the Jew is the very devil incarnation" (2.2.24); "My master's a very Jew" (2.2.98); "I am a Jew if I serve the Jew any longer" (2.2.105).

As for Antonio's dearest friends – Bassanio, Gratiano, Salanio and Salarino – they all throw racist comments about Shylock at some point in the play:

The villain Jew with outcries raised the Duke, who went with him
to search Bassanio's ship. (2.8.4-5)

I never heard a passion so confused

So strange, outrageous, and so variable

As the dog Jew did utter in the streets:

'My daughter! O, my ducats! O, my daughter! (2.8.12-15)

Salanio here relates how the "villain" and "dog" Jew shouted at the streets after Jessica's departure, and somehow he accuses Shylock from giving much more importance to the loss of his ducats rather than that of his own daughter.

As for Gratiano, he says things such as: "Now, by my hood, a gentle, and no Jew" (2.6.61) after Jessica's abandon scene, and it seems as if he is highlighting the difference between a gentleman and a Jew.

Another one of the offenses to Shylock is directed this time by Salarino right after Shylock says that Jessica “is damned for it” (3.1.29): “That’s certain, if the devil may be her judge” (3.1.30)

Bassanio also refers to him – alas – as a “man”, who is cruel and without feelings: “This is no answer, thou unfeeling man, to excuse the current of thy cruelty!” (4.1.62-63)

Finally, this is also said by Gratiano during the trial scene between Shylock and Antonio:

O, be thou damned, inexecrable dog,
And for thy life let justice be accused!
Thou almost mak’st me waver in my faith,
To hold opinion with Pythagoras
That souls of animals infuse themselves
Into the trunks of men. Thy currish spirit
Governed a wolf, who, hanged for human slaughter,
Even from the gallows did his fell soul fleet,
And whilst thou layest in thy unhallowed dam,
Infused itself in thee; for thy desires
Are wolvis, bloody, starved and ravenous (4.1.127-137)

Let us move on to Antonio. Undoubtedly, Shylock shows certain hostility towards this character throughout the entire play for the reasons that he himself provides:

Signior Antonio, many a time and oft
In the Rialto you have rated me
About my moneys and my usances.
Still have I borne it with a patient shrug,
For sufferance is the badge of all our tribe.

You call me a misbeliever, cut-throat dog,
And spit upon my Jewish gabardine,
And all for use of that which is mine own.
Well, then, it now appears you need my help.
Go to, then, you come to me, and you say,
‘Shylock, we would have moneys’. You say so.
You, that did void your rheum upon my beard
And foot me as you spurn a stranger cur
Over your threshold, moneys is your suit.
What should I say to you? Should not I say,
‘Hath a dog money? Is it possible
A cur can lend three thousand ducats?’ Or
Shall I bend low and in a bondman’s key,
With bated breath and whispering humbleness,
Say this: ‘Fair sir, you spat on me on Wednesday last,
You spurned me such a day; another time,
You called me dog: and, for these courtesies,
I’ll lend you thus much moneys. (1.3.102-124)

It may seem that Shylock has quite exaggerated his reasons for hating the merchant. However, our good Christian Antonio’s answer when facing such reproaches is: “I am as like to call thee so again, to spit on thee again, to spurn thee too.” (1.3.125-26)

So when Shylock points out the way in which he has been treated by Antonio, the merchant seems to feel proud of treating him that way and he makes clear that he is not going to change his behavior, even if Shylock lends him money. Hence, where can we find mercy, charity and Christian forgiveness around here? After reading this, is it that crazy to ask ourselves if Antonio’s abuse towards Shylock does not deserve a reaction?

Finally, and though the list could be longer, let us move on to Portia and the Duke. It is important to mention both discourses from each other and make some reference to theme of justice:

DUKE:

Shylock, the world thinks, and I think so too,
That thou but ledest this fashion of thy malice
To the last hour of act, and then 'tis thought
Thou'lt show thy mercy and remorse more strange
Than is thy strange apparent cruelty;
And where thou now exacts the penalty,
Which is a pound of this poor merchant's flesh,
Thou wilt not only loose the forfeiture,
But, touched with humane gentleness and love,
Forgive a moiety of the principal,
Glancing an eye of pity on his losses
That have of late so huddled on his back,
Enough to press a royal merchant down,
And pluck commiseration of his state
From brassy bosoms and rough hearts of flint,
From stubborn Turks, and Tartars never trained
To offices of tender courtesy.
We all expect a gentle answer, Jew! (4.1.16-33)

PORTIA:

Then must the Jew be merciful (4.1.178)
The quality of mercy is not strained:

It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.
'This mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown.
His scepter shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings.
But mercy is above this sceptered sway;
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
It is an attribute to God himself,
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew,
Though justice be thy plea, consider this:
That in the course of justice none of us
Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy,
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy. I have spoke thus much
To mitigate the justice of thy plea,
Which, if thou follow, this strict court of Venice
Must needs give sentence 'gainst the merchant here. (4.1.180-
201)

Here Portia and the Duke ask for Shylock's "mercy" and "remorse" towards "poor" Antonio. Both speeches may show how far Christians are not aware of their crimes. They expect Shylock to have mercy, without even considering that they have never shown any of

it for the Jew. Both Portia and the Duke make clear that such virtues are just Christian ones, but yet they try by all means that Shylock imitates them and so he goes through “the right path”.

To put an end to this analysis regarding the character’s racial attitudes, let us also be critical with Shylock, and let us analyze some of his acts and words that do not present him simply as an innocent character.

Shylock is clearly the most complex character in the play, and perhaps we could even dare to say that he is one on the most complex ones of Shakespeare’s plays. As mention before, Shylock is a Jewish moneylender, father of Jessica and enemy of Antonio. Shylock has questionable moral attitudes. Nevertheless, can we mark a difference between him and the rest of the characters who despise him? That is to say, can we excuse Shylock at some point?

Concerning the presence of money¹⁵ in the play, Shylock has been described as an usurer who is mainly concerned about money. He has been questioned hence for being materialistic as well as for not being clear where his priorities lie, for instance, if it is in money or his own daughter:

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 sealed 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. (2.8.15-22)

This is what, according to Salanio, Shylock yells through the streets of Venice after his daughter’s abandonment. So it seems that what really troubles Shylock is money above all.

¹⁵ Although our main point of interest in this thesis has to do with the presence of anti-Semitism in Shakespeare’s work, it is important to notice that, the same as its geographical location, commerce and hence money is a very important factor in *The Merchant of Venice* as the title itself implies.

However it is also true that later, when Shylock is talking to Tubal about this, we get the impression that he is not as materialistic as Salanio claims: “Out upon her! Thou torturest me, Tubal. It was my turquoise: I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor. I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys.” (3.1.109-111). This is Shylock’s response once he finds out that his daughter exchanges a family relic, a turquoise ring which means a lot to Shylock, not for its economic value but because it was a present by his deceased wife.

So here we face a new contradiction since, after knowing Shylock’s feelings towards his wife’s ring and hence his remembrance of her, we may take position in his favor and not that much in favor of his reputation, which is in this case that of a miserly villain.

Another aspect to comment has to do with Shylock’s opinion regarding Jews and Christians. Yet his ducats’ and daughters’ thing may make us face a moral conflict, it is also true that through his answer to Jessica’s behavior we may perceive that Shylock is extremely human, a factor he notes in a crucial episode:

Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same weapons, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh? If you poison us do we not die? And if you wrong us shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Cristian, what is his humility? Revenge! If a Cristian wrong a Jew, 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. (3.1.53–66)

It is impossible to remain indifferent in this scenario, through which Shylock insists that both Jews and Christians have something in common: they are human beings above all. And besides, this makes us think over the hypocrisy of Christians, who are always talking about love and mercy but at the same time despise Shylock for this one fact: being a Jew.

Even so in spite of the impact of this speech, Shylock does no other thing in the rest of the story than underlining the difference between Jews and Christians. Let us take a second to mention some of this phrases that emphasize the racial hate he also commits the same way as Christians do. By Shylock, we can observe several comments towards Christians which may be treated as racist:

[To Bassanio] I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you and so following. But I will not eat with you, drink with you nor pray with you. (1.3.31-34)

How like a fawning publican he [Antonio] looks.

I hate him for he is a Christian (1.3.37-38)

Paying attention to this, though we are clearly able to notice that Shylock is a victim of the Christians' intolerance and racial hate, it also becomes hard to fully excuse him when he pronounces speeches in his mind like this one. Harold Bloom refers to this when he insists that what troubles him "is that the play contains sentiments that are recognizably anti-Semitic, but at the same time a context is provided that invites us to read those sentiments critically". (In Drakakis, 2010:1)

However from a modern reading, we also may say that Shylock is product of his environment's oppression. He is a Jew despised for his trade and religion by society; and furthermore this society removes all his chances to survive.

From the very beginning, Shylock is defined as a miserly person whose main concern is material good, but it is when he decides to resemble to Christians when he adopts Christian's modus operandi and capacity of revenge:

If a Jew wrong a Cristian, what is his humility? Revenge! If a Cristian wrong a Jew, 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. (3.1.61–66)

This may be the moment when Shylock really shocks the audience. He starts being really cruel and vindictive and this makes the audience's hatred bigger. But maybe we should notice something: this is the moment when Shylock resembles more to Christians and less to himself. It is here where we may interpret a kind of demand against the falseness of the opposition between greed and vengeance desire of Jews and the generosity and sympathy of Christians.

As the play goes on, we are able to notice that their differences go down up to a point that, when Portia is dressed like a man and enters at the trial, the first thing she asks is: "Which is the merchant here, and which the Jew?".(4.1.170); the answer should be obvious.

This way, despite Antonio's and Shylock's differences, here they are linked in a place ruled by hatred and individualism.

From this point of view, is Shylock such a villain? Is he such a cruel and merciless character as he is represented, all that for being a Jew? Is it not possible that he may be someone who both external people and factors have turned him into a villain? – Thou call'dst me dog before thou hadst a cause, But, since I am a dog, beware my fangs". (3.3.6-7)

If we do the same with the rest of the characters, as it has been done with respect to the several representations of Shylock throughout the years, the story might change.

For instance in the case of Antonio, we might wonder if his feelings for Bassanio surpass the limits of friendship as, at the beginning of the play and after saying that the reason of his sadness has nothing to do with business, Salanio says: "Why then, you are in love" (1.1.45); in this case, the person who Antonio might be in love with would be Bassanio. Therefore, is really the loan as altruistic as it seems? If we get to the conclusion that his feelings for Bassanio go beyond friendship, maybe he does expect something in return: "My purse, my person, my extremest means lie all unlocked to your occasions" (1.1.138-139).

As for Bassanio, we could think that he is an ambitious fortune hunter who takes advantage of Antonio's feelings in order to fulfill his objectives, even putting his friend's life at risk and straightaway Porcia's, who could be his lifesaver when getting rid of Bassanio's debts:

Tis not unknown to you, Antonio,
How much I have disabled mine estate
By something showing a more swelling port
Than my faint means would grant continuance. (1.1.122-125)

A proper translation to this might be the following: "everyone knows I have lived beyond my economic possibilities and I have squandered all my money". And apart from that, he is also buried in debts, so maybe his friend's generosity – and of course money – seems to be quite convenient: "To you, Antonio, I owe the most in money and love" (1.1.130-131).

Same thing we could say about Portia. Regardless of judging if Bassanio has real feelings for her or not, it is quite true that in any case marry her is a kind of insurance, and even Bassanio uses words such as “richly left”, “virtues” and “worth” when describing his future wife: “In Belmont is a lady richly left, And she is fair and, fairer than that word, Of wondrous virtues [...] Nor the wide world ignorant of her worth” (1.1.161-167).

Portia may also be suspicious of tricking and manipulating in order to get her purposes, from the caskets scene where she tries to manipulate the game “Therefore, for fear of the worst, I pray thee set a deep glass of Rhenish wine on the contrary casket” (1.2.90-91); up to Shylock’s trial, where she shows no compassion or empathy for him. Not only she saves Antonio, but also she ruins Shylock economically and deprives him from both his goods and his identity. After proving that death penalty might be applied for being a foreigner, she says “Down, therefore, and beg mercy of the Duke” (4.1.359), proving the ability of a revenge that pretends to be charity. In this sense, maybe Portia makes us think that Christians are worse than Jews, because they are worse by pretending being better.

For these reasons we can affirm that Jews and Venetians are not equally guilty of racism, because the laws of Venice go against the first ones and benefits the second ones. Jews do not share the same status as Christians. They are not considered citizens but aliens, and therefore they have no right to claim justice in a city which accepts them for the same reasons that it marginalizes them, because the ironic thing is that Venice incorporates the moneylender as part of the economic function of the city in order to get benefit of his economic contribution, but then it marginalizes and despises him, and he is assigned an inferior legal status by which, as said before, he is not considered a citizen, but an alien.

Moreover, there is one factor that we do have to take into account: Shylock is, as much as Christians are, guilty of making derogatory comments about them, but his main reason is that he has been despised, spitted, and called alien just for – the reason of the Christians – being a Jew:

He [Antonio] hath disgraced me and hindered me half a million, laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned at my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies, and what’s his reason? I am a Jew.
(3.1.49-53)

It is imperative to remark the fact that in almost the whole play, instead of naming Shylock by his name, he is referred as the “Jew”, followed by a series of insults. What we

may emphasize here that it is true that we can make a distinction between Shylock and Jew – that is to say, Shylock may be a despicable character regardless of being a Jew, the same way that any other human being, independently of religion. But the trouble comes when Shylock is not treated as A random Jew, but as THE Jew. Then, when we speak about THE Jew (as a race, generalizing) as an alien, a villain, a murderer, and an evil being, it is when we do find anti-Semitism.

4.2.2. Theatrical representations of Shylock¹⁶

The contradictory status in the characterization of Shylock is necessarily reflected in his different theatrical representations.

James Bulman: “The play has ‘entered our historical consciousness as no other Shakespeare comedy has, converging with the pressures of history to yield meanings Shakespeare could never have imagined.’” (Drakakis, 2010:112)

So yes, Shylock remained defeated and deprived of his possessions and his identity at the end of the story, but over the years he has gained much more prominence than the rest of the characters. He has remained in our hearts, he has become one of the most legendary Shakespearean characters, and he has been interpreted by great actors such as Lawrence Olivier, John Gielgud, Edmund Kean, and more recently by Al Pacino.

In 1970, in Jonathan Miller’s elaborate production at London’s National Theatre, the sixty-three year-old stage and screen star Laurence Olivier portrayed Shylock historically; [...] Olivier’s performance became a definitive influence on subsequent America productions after it was televised in 1973. (Mahon, 2002:376)

By the time the play was written, anti-Semitism had come much worse due to Roderigo Lopez’s trial, as previously mentioned. So, in this context, theatrical representations of Shylock were made negatively, based simply on an extraction of the villain of the moment. This provoked and guaranteed the manifestation and the mobilization of the public sentiments much more easily against the Jewish community. For instance,

¹⁶ As for some more information about the different representations of Shylock, I have consulted Christopher McCullough’s *The Merchant of Venice*.

some years before *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Jew of Malta*¹⁷ by Christopher Marlowe had a great success with its main character, the cruel evil Jew Barabas:

The play gives voice to a full range of the worst anti-Jewish fantasies. 'I walk abroad a-nights,' Barabas declares,

And kill sick people groaning under walls.

Sometimes I go about and poison wells;

And now and then, to cherish Christian thieves,

I am content to lose some of my crowns,

That I may, walking in my gallery,

See 'em go pinioned along by my door. (Greenblatt, 2004:265)

In this way, it was not until the 19th century when less mocking and more empathic representations were produced. But even today, debate about the presence of anti-Semitism still exist, whether the representation of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* is a reflection of the prejudices of the time or if it Shakespeare simply adopted those prejudices against Jews.

The Merchant of Venice is characterized by a certain ambiguity which has led to the great variety of interpretations made throughout the years. According to René Girard (1995), this is one of the main characteristics of Shakespeare, the fact that he satisfies all audiences. This is why the play (and above all the character of Shylock) has been represented in so many ways: as a devil, as a comic villain, and as a victim.

The Merchant of Venice was one of the most performed works in Nazi Germany as an object of propaganda, but yet nowadays we can read it as a pro-Semitic play and a critique

¹⁷ In *The Jew of Malta*, the character Machiavel, a Senecan ghost based on Niccolò Machiavelli, presents the "tragedy of a Jew". This Jew is called Barabas. He is the richest man in Malta. However, he is left penniless after Turkish ships arrive in Malta to demand tribute. He plans the Maltese governor's downfall and he recovers some of his fortune and buys a Turkish slave, Ithamore who, as well as Barabas, hates Christians. Moreover, he uses his daughter's beauty to provoke a duel between the governor's son and his friend in which both die. When Baraba's daughter finds out, she consigns herself to a nunnery and there she is poisoned by Barabas and Ithamore for becoming a Christian. However Ithamore is persuaded by a beautiful prostitute and her criminal friend to betray Barabas, therefore, when he finds out, he poisons them all. After that, Barabas escapes execution by pretending his death and after helping the Turkish army to sack Malta, he becomes governor of the city. However, he then allows the Knights of Malta to kill the Turkish army, but in the end the Maltese kill Barabas and regain control of Malta.

to all forms of racism: “The events of the Second World War have, as Denis Kennedy observes, ‘completely transformed our ability’ to read the text.” (Drakakis, 2010:129).

Shylock has been analyzed and interpreted in many occasions by many authors. Maybe this is because Shylock is not the embodiment of his race, but of all oppressed beings. This may make a lot of sense because, as some critics point out, is it not true that in Shylock speeches we could replace the word “jew” for “proletarian”, “black” or “subversive” and obtain the same result?

After having the possibility of watching a discussion between David Suchet and Patrick Stewart¹⁸ about the different ways of playing Shylock, we may sense some of the reasons taken into account when facing the different interpretations of the character.

In the case of Stewart, “To concentrate in Jewishness is to avoid the great potential in the character, which is his universality. [...] wherever I’ve seen a very ethnic, a very Jewish Shylock, I’ve felt like something is being missing.”

Moreover, Stewart points out that “Shylock is essentially an alien, an outsider. [...] Shylock is an outsider who happens to be a Jew”, while Suchet points out the following:

I am an outsider who happens to be a Jew but because I am a Jew. The Jewish element in the play, I think, is unavoidably very important [...] Shakespeare never lets us the audience, or the character, forget the Jewish thing.

As for the dressing and the language, Stewart says the following:

It seemed to me that the part was eternally stuck in a kind of tradition, a ritual about the role that if I would play Shylock then it would necessarily mean ringlets, a hooked nose [...] that there were so much traditional appearance and traditional behavior attached to the role, that I could never free myself from it, I could never find a human being at the heart of that exterior.

However, he also admits that:

¹⁸ Both Patrick Stewart and David Suchet appear in John Barton’s productions of *The Merchant of Venice*. The production opened at The Other Place in 1978 with Patrick Stewart as Shylock and was revived in 1981 at The Royal Shakespeare Theatre with David Suchet, a performance for which he won an Oliver Award.

Something else began to unfold about the character and I found that indeed there was a highly complex and very modern creation. I decided therefore that I would avoid the easily recognizable symbolic elements.

Straightaway he says that “the most important thing for Shylock in the play is money, possessions and finance, having it” and therefore “you are not going to waste it in how you appear”, so he tried to make his Shylock very shabby.

As for the voice, he was influenced by the fact that Shylock lives in an alien country, and therefore he must assimilate himself into it. So he gave him “an over cultured, an over refined accent”. Stewart thinks that Shylock’s foreignness “lies in the language, not in how he appears”, and that “no one in *The Merchant of Venice* speaks like Shylock”.

In the case of Suchet, though he agrees with Stewart to a certain extent, he points out that:

I chose everything in opposition to that. I also discovered as you did in the language there is a certain rhythm to the language which I went with to the extend to if even going further with the lilt and slight accent, I didn’t placed the accent in any particular area at all, but I wanted to make it foreign with the language that was foreign. [...] I never wanted anybody to forget that I was an outsider [...] and it’s something that I felt shylock would not have tried to alter, because my Shylock is very proud of his Jewishness and, why hide it?

Finally, he also agrees with Stewart in terms of the dress, since as well as Patrick says there is a motivation for money, but also he thinks that “he would dress according to the status that he believes he has”.

So in short, we can close this chapter by concluding that several factors have influenced the characterization of Shylock throughout the years because, as mentioned earlier, there is never a unique interpretation of the play and of Shylock, since both Shylock’s features and individual perception take place at the same time when trying to define them.

5. CONCLUSION

I am aware of the difficulties derived from dealing with the most studied author in English Literature, as well as the limitations of the present essay, which is merely an initial approach to the referred topic. Therefore, this work has not been intended to discover or come across something that has not been discussed before; but to rediscover what has always been a controversial issue as well as to gather information and opinion from a merely personal point of view.

I believe that, as Patrick Stewart says at some point in the discussion previously mentioned, *The Merchant of Venice* is not an anti-Semitic play, but it has anti-Semitic elements.

As for the fact of picking sides, there are two ways by which we may be guided and that will lead to different interpretations. The first one would be to forget the recent story of anti-Semitism and simply look at the story. As Drakakis states:

The recent story of anti-Semitism has made modern audiences and readers more sensitive to the way in which both he and Shakespeare conceived the figure of the Jew. (Drakakis, 2010:24)

Consequently, it might be true that when regarding the analysis of Shylock and *The Merchant of Venice* in general, maybe we should just enjoy the evil side of the character together with its demoniac depiction and characterization as in any other character in any other story.

However, and this is where the second way takes place, I cannot avoid but think about the history – and not just the story – of the time conveyed by the play; the same way that it is seems impossible to me not to see the actual quandary that takes place in the play and Shylock's demand towards oppressed minorities and the hypocrisy that hides behind the speeches of those who are in charge.

Therefore I get to the conclusion that Shakespeare do transmits anti-Semitism in his play towards the previously mentioned anti-Semitic factors among others, but at the same time he creates characters or at least attitudes in those characters that makes us empathize not only with the situation of Jews, but with all those people in disadvantage. To support this

statement, we may take a look to Prince of Morocco words when trying to conquer Portia in Belmont:

Mislike me not for my complexion,
The shadowed livery of the burnished sun,
To whom I am a neighbor, and near bred.
Bring me the fairest creature northward born,
Where Phoebus' fire scarce thaws the icicles,
And let us make incision for your love
To prove whose blood is reddest, his or mine.
I tell thee, lady, this aspect of mine
Hath fear'd the valiant; by my love, I swear
The best regarded virgins of our clime
Have loved it too. I would not change this hue
Except to steal your thoughts, my gentle queen. (2.1.1-12)

So, to conclude, I dare to think that Shakespeare reflects the situation of the time in *The Merchant of Venice*, but in many other occasions, as in Shylock's speech, he exposes the very structure of all racial prejudices, and therefore a complaint about them.

George T. Wright has argued that [...] we cannot overlook the fact that the dramatist 'devised unmistakably individual speaking voices' for particular characters, of whom, he insists, Shylock is one. [...] the distinctiveness of Shylock's speech is indicative of an 'individuality' that distinguishes him from those around him. (Drakakis, 2010:44)

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