



**The Portrayal of Jewish  
Character in  
*"The Merchant of Venice"***

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## Introduction

Writing about the image of the Jew in Elizabethan age as Shakespeare exposes in *The Merchant of Venice* is the task of this paper. It is said that the play is about anti-Semitism which was quite apparent in the writings of the middle age in Europe, but what is anti-Semitism?

**Anti-Semitism** is a form of prejudice against Jews, ranging from antipathy to violent hatred. Before the 19th cent., it was largely religious and was expressed in the later Middle Ages by sporadic persecutions and expulsions— notably the expulsion from Spain under Ferdinand and Isabella—and in severe economic and personal restrictions. However, since Jews were generally restricted to the pursuit of occupations that were taboo, such as money-lending, the sentiment was also economic in nature.(EC, 2012, N.P.)

To the early Christian, the Jews were the crucifiers' of Christ, an allegation that for centuries was the justification for anti-Semitism. The ritual murder canard, or blood libel-i.e., the alleged sacrifice of Christian children at Passover – was first made in the 12th century. The legend was revived infrequently in Eastern Europe and Poland and, in the 1930, became part of Nazi anti-Semitic propaganda, as did another instrument of 12th-century anti-Semitism the compulsory yellow badge which identified the wearer as a Jew. There were periodic maltreatment, massacres, and expulsions of Jews until the 18th century. Were the Enlightenment brought Europe a new religious freedom. When the nationalism of the 19th century swept Europe, however, the basis of anti-Semitism shifted from religion to racial pride and gained a new respectability and much popular support. In Germany in the late 19th century, anti-Semitism became an organized movement, part of the program of some political parties. Semites can be taken to be used for all peoples descended from Sam, the oldest

son of Noah; they are now chiefly represented by the Jews and Arab of southwestern Asia but in ancient times also by the Babylonians, Assyrians, Aramaeans, Canaanites, and Phoenicians. (Ibd.)

The term Semitic also means a member of any of various ancient and modern Semitic-speaking people originating in south western Asia, including Akkadian, Phoenicians, Hebrews, Arabs and Ethiopian Semites.(semitic, n.p) Moreover, the word "Semitic", is derived from the Bible "Shem", or from the Greek word "Sem", which translated to Arabic: "السامي" While, "anti-Semitism", generally means: Hostility or prejudice against Jews. According to Bernard Lewis, (anti-Semitism, n.p) "Anti-Semitism" means a special case of prejudice, hatred, or persecution directed against people who are in some way different from the rest". Professor Helen Fein (Ibid.) defines "Anti-Semitism" as "a persisting latent structure of hostile beliefs towards Jews as a collective manifested in individuals as attitudes, and in culture as myth, ideology folklore and imagery, and in actions-social or legal discrimination, political mobilization against the Jews, and collective or state violence- which result in and /or is designed to distance, displace, or destroy Jews as Jews". In the same respect, Anti-Semite refers to a person who persecutes or discriminates against Jews.(Chanes, 2004, 150) It can also means "Hostility toward or discrimination against Jews as a religion group or "race". Moreover, it can be defined as "Anti-Semitism" as "certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews".(Eu-definition-of-antisemitism.htm, n. p).

It is mentioned in that "Anti-Semitism" means: "Prejudice or discrimination against, and persecution of, the Jews as an ethnic group. However, the word "Anti-Semitism", was coined in 1879, from Greek "Anti", that means "Against", and "Semite", meaning a descendent of "Shem". The word first used by Wilhelm Marr a German aviator, who created it to explain the current anti-Jewish campaigns in Europe. Arab people are also Semitic people, thus, it is not



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the best expression. "Anti-Jewish" and "Grew-hatred" {are more descriptive form. (Anti\_semitism, n.p).

Back to the middle ages in Europe, the middle Ages in Europe were a difficult time for the Jews. Many Jews lived in Europe between (1000-1500 AD) when Christianity completely dominated the life of the people. (Chanes, 2004, 150). According to the hatred of the Christian people toward the Jews for their killing their prophet — according to their belief— the maltreatment of the Jews was a duty of any Christian person. Thus, Anti-Semitism increased in the middle Ages because the people who had any power were Christians. Jews were considered as being different, strange, wicked, devil, money-making, murderers of the prophets and the God. They were called them drinkers and criminals. (Bernard, 1999, 117) The people of the middle age blamed Jews for *"Inexplicable death, for Plagues and/Or all unnatural disasters" of that time.* (Coles, 1989, p18).

Following the 4th Lateran Council in 1215 they were ordered to wear distinctive clothing, while the Synod of Narbonne in 1227 demanded that Jews wear badges; in Paris the Talmud was burned in 1242. Britain expelled many Jews in 1290, but they were formally readmitted in 1655 by Cromwell. (Anti-Semitism, n.p).

From the 16th century Jews were forced by law in many cities to live in a separate area, or ghetto (for the Jews)... Ghettos were often seen by the Jews as a prison. The Crusades and Legislation in the Middle Ages forbade Jews to own land or slaves in order not to become successful farmers *"to earn living, they had to become money-lenders and traders since, The Christian people were forbidden by the low of the church from lending money with interest"* (Coles, 1989, p.17) So the Jews get benefit from this by lending money to kings with interest .Sometime, The kings return the money back to them, sometime they do

not by manipulating the law saying that Christians do not have to return the money they borrow to the Jews or by casting them away. Like King Edward I. Who lends money from Jews, but when he could not return it back, he cast them away from England and they were not allowed back for more than 300 years, so they move to different areas like, France, but King Philippe threw them out of France too.

The theater always reflects the life of the people at certain moments, thus, it can be regarded as a recorder of the events of any and all ages. In this respect, Elizabethan theatre was reflecting the view of the Christian people toward the Jews because, their plays showed that the Jewish character is awakened and comic. They are also considered as a favorite low-comic character. For example the actor, who plays the role of the Jew, should wear a red bright wig, red beard and long red nose.

Critics suggest that Shakespeare's source of the events of *The Merchant of Venice* was a set of stories called *Il Pecorne*, which published in 1558, where the hero, Gainnetto, is trying to win the heart of a woman as a wife for him, but he has to choose the right casket from the three, but he cannot make the right choice in the first two attempts. In the third one, his grandfather borrowed an amount of money from a Jew in condition that the Jew will cut a pound of flesh if he doesn't pay it in the time. (Ibid, 18) Other critics believe that Shakespeare was influenced by Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, 1596.

Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice* probably in 1596-7. (Kinney, 2003, 47). In the Elizabethan theater the romantic comedies were very common and, this play among others (*Twelfth Night* and *Two Gentlemen of Verona*) is one of Shakespeare's romantic comedies. (Ibid, 1982, p. 10). The main element and action in these comic plays is love, however, beside the main plot there are two or three sub-plots. In *The Merchant of Venice*, there is the



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theme of love represented by Bassanio and Portia love-relation, and of Jessica and Lorenzo, and Nerissa -Gratiano's love-relation.

The play exposes four stories, the major two are (the story of the casket of Portia and the suitors) and (the story of the pound of flesh of Shylock and Antonio), while the minor stories are made to complete the plot of the play. The first is of Jessica's elopement with her beloved. The second is about the story of the ring.

Antonio complains to his friends of a melancholy that he cannot explain. His friend Bassanio is desperately in need of money to court Portia, a wealthy heiress who lives in the city of Belmont. Bassanio asks Antonio for a loan in order to travel in style to Portia's estate. Antonio agrees, but is unable to make the loan himself because his own money is all invested in a number of trade ships that are still at sea. Antonio suggests that Bassanio secure the loan from one of the city's money-lenders and name Antonio as the loan's guarantor. In Belmont, Portia expresses sadness over the terms of her father's will, which stipulates that she must marry the man who correctly chooses one of three caskets. None of Portia's current suitors are to her liking, and she and her lady-in-waiting, Nerissa, fondly remember a visit paid some time before by Bassanio.

In Venice, Antonio and Bassanio approach Shylock, a Jewish money-lender, for a loan. Shylock nurses a long-standing grudge against Antonio, who has made a habit of berating Shylock and other Jews for their usury, and who undermines their business by offering interest-free loans. Although Antonio refuses to apologize for his behavior, Shylock acts agreeably and offers Bassanio three thousand ducats with no interest. Shylock adds, however, that should the loan go unpaid, Shylock will be entitled to a pound of Antonio's own flesh. Despite Bassanio's warnings, Antonio agrees. In Shylock's own household, his servant Launcelot decides to leave Shylock's service to work for



Bassanio, Shylock's daughter, Jessica schemes to escape with Lorenzo. That night, the streets of Venice fill up with revelers, and Jessica escapes with Lorenzo by dressing as his page. After a night of celebration, Bassanio and his friend Gratiano leave for Belmont, where Bassanio intends to win Portia's hand.

In Belmont, Portia welcomes the prince of Morocco, who has come in an attempt to choose the right casket to marry her. The prince studies the inscriptions on the three caskets and chooses the gold one, which is an incorrect choice. In Venice, Shylock is furious for finding his daughter has run away, but rejoices in the fact that Antonio's ships are rumored to have been wrecked and that he will soon be able to claim his debt. In Belmont, the prince of Arragon also visits Portia. He, studies the caskets carefully and picks the silver one, which is incorrect. Bassanio arrives at Portia's estate, and they declare their love for one another. Despite Portia's request that he wait before choosing, Bassanio immediately picks the correct casket, which is made of lead. He and Portia rejoice, and Gratiano confesses that he has fallen in love with Nerissa. The couples decide on a double wedding. Portia gives Bassanio a ring as a token of love, and makes him swear that under no circumstances will he part with it. They are joined, unexpectedly, by Lorenzo and Jessica. The celebration, however, is cut short by the news that Antonio has indeed lost his ships, and that he has forfeited his bond to Shylock. Bassanio and Gratiano immediately travel to Venice trying to save Antonio's life. After they leave, Portia tells Nerissa that they will go to Venice disguised as men.

Shylock ignores the many pleas to spare Antonio's life, and a trial is called to decide the matter. The duke who presides over the trial, announces that he has sent for a legal expert, who turns out to be Portia disguised as a young man of law. Portia asks Shylock to show mercy, but he remains inflexible and insists the pound of flesh is rightfully his. Bassanio offers Shylock twice the money due him, but Shylock insists on collecting the written bond.



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Portia examines the contract and, finding it legally binding, declares that Shylock is entitled to the merchant's flesh. Shylock ecstatically praises her wisdom, but as he is on the verge of collecting his due, Portia reminds him that he must do so without causing Antonio to bleed, as the contract does not entitle him to any blood. Trapped by this logic, Shylock hastily agrees to take Bassanio's money instead, but Portia insists that Shylock take his bond as written, or nothing at all. Portia informs Shylock that he is guilty of conspiring against the life of a Venetian citizen, which means he must turn over half of his property to the state and the other half to Antonio. The duke spares Shylock's life and takes a fine instead of Shylock's property. Antonio also forgoes his half of Shylock's wealth on two conditions: first, Shylock must convert to Christianity, and second, he must will the entirety of his estate to Lorenzo and Jessica upon his death. Shylock agrees and takes his leave.

Bassanio, showers the young law clerk with thanks, and is eventually pressured into giving Portia the ring with which he promised never to part. Gratiano gives Nerissa, who is disguised as Portia's clerk, his ring. The two women return to Belmont, where they find Lorenzo and Jessica declaring their love to each other under the moonlight. When Bassanio and Gratiano arrive the next day, their wives accuse them of faithlessly giving their rings to other women. Before the deception goes too far, however, Portia reveals that she was, in fact, the law clerk, and both she and Nerissa reconcile with their husbands. Lorenzo and Jessica are pleased to learn of their inheritance from Shylock, and the joyful news arrives that Antonio's ships have in fact made it back safely. The group celebrates its good fortune.



## Methodology

To comprehend the portrayal of the Jewish character in Elizabethan Age is the aim of this paper. The paper follows character –analyses as an approach for pursuing discussion. Character-analysis is the fittest approach that achieves the aim of the paper.

## Discussion

Shakespeare by presenting the relation between the Christian society and the Jewish people presented a case that deserves discussion. In an attempt to clarify the image of the Jewish personality in the Christian society, an analysis of Shylock's character will be handled here alongside with other main characters in the play, Shakespeare discloses the idea that there is something wrong regarding the character of Jews in the Christian society.

Of the many unforgettable characters who poured out of the vast breadth of Shakespeare's imagination, one of the most fascinating is Shylock, the Jew. Though he appears in only five out of twenty scenes in the play, Shylock has attracted the major share of interest in the drama's long history on the stage and in critical literature. One's first association with *The Merchant of Venice* is invariably Shylock. "Shylock" has become a term of disapproval, a link in the history of anti-Jewish stereotype, just as Shylock's "pound of flesh" has become a metaphor for cruel and relentless greed (Shakespear\_plea\_human\_values.html, n..p).

In *the play*, the conversation turns to Antonio's losses, and Shylock warns:

***Let him look to his bond***



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***He wants to call me usurer***

***Let him look to his bond."*(3.1.37-9)**

In reply to Salerio's question, if he will really take Antonio's flesh?, Shylock launches into a passionate and famous speech. Shylock says he will use Antonio's flesh to bait fish with:

***If it will feed nothing else,***

***It will feed my revenge. (1.3.42-3).***

Revengeful character, is the character that the Elizabethan theatre presents for the Jew. Shylock's words about Antonio and the bond reflect his hatred and his desire for revenge upon Antonio. Moreover, Shylock's opinion regarding Antonio's behaviours towards him is very bad. He lists Antonio's offenses in Act III, Scene I, *He has disgraced him, Take business away from him, Laughed at his losses, mocked at his gains, Scorned his nation, Cooled his friends, heated his enemies;*"...and what's his reason? I am a Jew." Shylock furiously demands, *Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?...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?* Then Shylock concludes that: *"The Jews have learned their lesson of revenge from the Christians, says Shylock, and his intends to "better the instruction."* (Coles, 1989, 40).

It is a fact that Shylock listing his reasons for seeking revenge is one of the best known and most controversial speeches in the play. In this respect, critics of the romantic era, eager to applaud every word Shakespeare wrote, pointed to this speech as evidence of the playwright's great tolerance and humanity.(Ibid, 1989, p. 41.). He was trying, they said, to convert his intolerant audiences to a



sympathetic view of the persecuted Jews. He was attempting to arouse sympathy for the degraded Shylock. On the other hand, Shakespeare by presenting such conversation shows Shylock as a man who has a plan upon which he does his work. All these deeds and more suggest that Shylock is not a spontaneous character but a person who has his own opinion regarding the people around him in the Christian society and according to these opinions he acts and reacts.

Shakespeare's interest in handling the theme of the Jewish person in a professional way and his trial to present something that was common in his age regardless whom his audiences were is very obvious, that modern critics have dismissed this native notion. Shakespeare's audiences are Christian and Jew. He likes his audiences would have found it amusing that Shylock attempted to give out with the distinction.

It is noteworthy that for the Elizabethans, Jews were not like Christians. Shylock's argument for Jewish - Christian (Ibid, 1989, p. 41.). relationship is based only on fleshly similarities, for Shakespeare and all Renaissance Christians, the laughable aspect of Shylock's argument lies in the fact that he cannot understand his alienation from the Christians precisely because he is a Jew. Because Shylock shuns gentle ways, because he lacks humanity, generosity and charity, he is incapable of seeing the differences. He is right in complaining that Antonio hates him because he is a Jew— everyone in the Christian society hated the qualities the Jew supposedly embodied.(Ibid, 1989, p.41.).

The plot of the play presents many situations that prevent any compassion towards Shylock because of his point of view that is revengeful, e.g., Bassanio offers Shylock six thousands ducats instead of the original three thousands. But Shylock will not relent for any amount of money. Shylock's situation shows obviously that what Shylock seeks for is no merely his right rather, he seeks for



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revenge. This opinion is put in the play to aid presenting the Jewish character in certain features that are unadmirable to everybody.

In the court, Shylock exposes a man who has an unmerciful heart. The audiences are listening to the dialogue between the Duke and Shylock:

*"How shalt thou hope for mercy, rendering none?" asks the duke.*

*"What wrong?" counters Shylock. You all have slaves, continues Shylock, whom you treat unfairly." shall I say to you, "let them be free?" "If I say to you to let your slaves have as pleasant lives as you do, your answer would be, "the slaves are ours." So Shylock gives the same answer.(4.1.88-93)*

It helps the audience to have a clear image about Shylock in particular, and the Jewish personality in general, as it was understood by the Christian people at Shakespeare's time. The humanity in all met. It is a cry worn out from him in the complexity of his situation which reveals his humanity. His cruelty is not that of a cold heart, but the more terrible cruelty of outraged and perverted sensitiveness.

Another important dialogue is between Portia and Shylock as she tries to persuade him to be merciful toward Antonio, she said in act four in the first scene, *"You have justice on your side, she tells Shylock, but justice is not the way to salvation. It is mercy and merciful deeds which save"*.

Portia suspended her loophole in the law so long in order to give Shylock a chance to show mercy. His violent rejections of the opportunities lead everyone to be against him, that the audiences are less disturbed by the harshness of his sentence. The duke and Antonio show their generosity by pardoning Shylock, and Antonio fulfils his role as a Christian, saving Shylock from damnation by

forcing him to become a Christian.(Ibid, 1989, p.52.). Asking Shylock to be Christian, Antonio acquires more and more hatred from Shylock because Shylock feels that Antonio tries to punish him.

Regarding the plot, the playwright presents another important episode that is Jessica's escape with her father's fortune. Why, then does she cruelly deceive her father and steal his fortunes? The motivation is external to her psychology. Her father's house is a "hell" she is deceiving him for the sake of a greater good (Christianity). The deception is the only means of fulfilling her desire of marrying Lorenzo. Jessica is not at ease with her betrayal:

*Alice, what heinous sin it in me*

*To be ashamed to be my father's child(2, 3.14-15).*

However, the external circumstances at work on her, her external motivation, are so powerful and compelling as to override her inner nature.(ibid,1989, p.62.). The situation shows how bad Shylocks' relations with others are even if the others are his family. In this respect, his image as a gentle father is damaged in the eyes of his daughter and the audiences'.

His cautious nature is horrified by Tuball's account of her playful free spending. With the burden of all his on him he exclaims exaggeratedly that he wishes her "hearse at my foot, and the ducat in her coffin"....however, Shylocks' concern for his daughter equals his anguish over his lost ducats, and this confusion of love and money shows him to be a less than an admirable father figure.(Ibid, 1989, p. 66.).



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One can find a distinction between a man who puts love on a level with money: "*my ducats and my daughter?*"<sup>i</sup> who cannot separate human from material loss; (Wood, 1996, p.82.). Moreover, In the later scene with Tubal, he wishes his daughter : "*dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear? Would she were hearse at my foot, and the ducats in her coffin?*"

Shylock's main interest is money, with no incompatibility between money and love. Shylock cannot reconcile the two; shylock is not of this world. (Van doren, 1939, p. 79.). Van doren (Ibid, p. 81.) claims that love is the natural language of these men and women: love, and its elder brother generosity. Not generosity to Shylock, for he is of another species, and cannot receive what he will not give.

His anger at having been robbed is compounded by the fact that it was a Christian who aided his daughter in betraying him. He has spent money vainly in search for Jessica. Moreover, there are the taunts of Salerio and Solanio, and Tubal's alternately reminding him of Jessica's elopement and Antonio's losses. Antonio is another Christian upon whom he may avenge himself.

He goes to his synagogue immediately to swear an oath to carry out the terms of the bond:

***"by our holy Sabbath have I sworn***

***to have the due and forfeit of my bond;***

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

***shall I lay perjury upon my soul?" (4.1.36-9)***



This indicates that afterwards he feels an outward compulsion to obtain the forfeit and not settle the turn of the money loaned although he is later offered three times that amount. He refuses to explain why he insists on the forfeit except that he has a "lodged hate" for Antonio. This is indeed the whole explanation though the people in the court, who do stop to analyze the circumstances, cannot see to what extent it has to become an obsession with him. His obsession with revenge losses him some of the audiences' sympathy and pity and arouses their horror when he sharpens his knife. Though, to some critics, that at the end, the audiences' sympathy is aroused because he receives little mercy, aside from his life, while those who hate him receive more than they are entitled to.(Coles, 1989, p. 68.).

Antonio's only real affection, his only emotional outlet, is his love for Bassanio:

*"my purse ,my person, my extremist means,  
lie all unlocked to your occasions."(1.1.137-8)*

In his letter to Bassanio, Antonio asks only that his love for Bassanio be recognized. His only pun is uttered in what he thinks is his death speech, to lessen Bassanio's grieving at his death:

*Repent but you that shall lose your friend,  
And he repents not that he pays your debt;  
For if the Jew do cut but deep enough,  
I'll pay it instantly with all my heart.(4.1.274-77)*



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With Antonio, it is the prejudice against Jews which he has taken up. He is, by his own admission, violent and demonstrative in his hatred of Shylock. When Shylock reminds him of all the ways Antonio has abused him, his disgraceful answer is:

*I'm as like to call thee so again,*

*To spite on thee again, to spurn thee too. (1.3.121-22.).*

Shylock tells the audience that Antonio "hates our sacred nation". His opposition to taking interest is an old-fashioned prejudice which he has adopted because it gives him an objective reason for his dogmatic attitude. This attitude is so rooted in him that when he accepts Shylock's suggested forfeit as a piece of kindness he looks upon it only as a sign that Shylock may yet "turn Christian" because he has so excellent a reputation in his community. One can even less forgive him for his insufferable behavior towards Shylock. One feels that such cruelty must bring down on his head some proportionate punishment.

By taking the full half of his estate— which the law allows him and by the malicious terms he imposes on Shylock, and which the duke sustains— Antonio shows no mercy for Shylock just as Shylock did to him. (Ibid, p. 73.)

In his trial to portray the character of a Jew, Shakespeare uses any single situation to declare that a Jew does not want to be a friend of anyone except Jews. In this respect, the moment of Shylock's acceptance of Antonio's "bond" is carefully juxtaposed him against his refusal of Bassanio's invitation to dine them, *"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".* (1.3.28-30) The legality of Shylock's transaction—which is, in effect the only means he has of *protecting himself.* (Wood, 1996, p .36.) This juxtaposition serves the idea

that Jewish people do not want any humanist relation with other non-jewish people.

When Shylock declares his credit-search of Antonio's means to be adequate for the purpose- "*I think I may take his bond*", Bassanio responds indignantly: "be assured you may" "be assured here is a mere device of rhetorical insistence, suggesting that Shylock is being disrespectful to question Antonio's financial competence. Shylock replies exactly: "*I will be assured I may*" – i.e., he has a perfect right to establish the security of the proposed loan, since it needs to be "*assured against the possibility of losses*". Hence, the exchange between the two men begins to look less like Christian civility and enthusiasm pitted against Jewish calculation and malice; and more like the dignified resistance of a persecuted minority to the high-handed hypocrisy of those who wish both to despise and make use of their services.

Shylocks' punctilious definition of religious exclusiveness as applicable to certain private activities, "*I will not eat with you*", not to other more public ones, "*I will buy with you*", is perfectly in line with the multicultural constitution of Venice, which permits independent private belief in the context of an open involvement in and compliance with the general condition of social life.(Ibid, p.78.).

Shakespeare is successful in presenting Shylock's hatred of Antonio as it is exposed in personal, economic, racial and religious terms. Shylock's confirmed hatred of Christianity envelops Antonio into a history of persecution and resistance: it is because Antonio "*hatred our sacred nation*" that Shylock hates as a racial and religious duty:

***"cursed be my tribe,***

***if forgive him"(1.3.46-7)***



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This fundamental conflict between religions also has a history of Christian aggression in its economic aspect, since Antonio does not restrict his hostility to verbal and physical abuse, but extends it into business dealing:

*"he lends out money gratis and brings down,*

*the rate of us once here with us in Venice"(1.3.36-7)*

Although Shylock has already shown himself vigilant for any advantage he can secure over Antonio, it is Antonio who first introduces the idea of a financial transaction sealed in enmity rather than friendship:

*If thou wilt lend this money, lend it not*

*As to thy friends, for when did friendship take*

*A breed for barren metal of his friend?*

*But lend it rather to thine enemy*

*Who, if he breaks, thou mayst with better face*

*Exact the penalty. (1.3.122-27.)*

The play presents Shylock as looking to himself as a different person from the society that he is beginning his demand for equality of rights and dignity specifically from a position of "difference". The statement "*I am a Jew*" functions dramatically as a response to the rhetorical questioning of Antonio's motives for his personal enmity, "*and what his reason?*".

Positioned at that point in the dialogue, the statement can be read as a denial and dismissal of cultural difference- Antonio's reason for persecuting me is no stronger than this: "*I am a Jew*". (Ibid, p.82.).

*...I am a Jew: I am human like everyone else. I am a Jew: I am human but not like everyone else. I am a Jew: I am not treated as a human being. I am a Jew: I should be accorded a basic human dignity. (Ibid, p.85.).*

It is clear that Shakespeare intends to present Shylock's character as a one who knows exactly what he wants:

*In all his answers and retorts upon his adversaries, he has the best not only of the argument but of the question, reasoning on their own principles and practice. They are so far from allowing of any measure of equal dealing, of common justice or humanity between themselves and the Jew, that even when they come to ask a favour of him, and Shylock reminds them that "on such a day they spit upon him, another spurned him, another called him dog, and for these curtsies request he'll lend them so much monies"—Anthonio, his old enemy, instead of any acknowledgment of the shrewdness and justice of his remonstrance, which would have been preposterous in a respect-able Catholic merchant in those times, threatens him.(Merchant\_of\_venice characters\_essay\_htm, n.p.).*

Throughout the first half of the trial Shylock is continually assured that he is an equal in the eyes of the law, and is continually offered the opportunity of renouncing his suit, and embracing the common values of Venetian civilization. But since the offer is always couched in the language and imagery of Christian culture, it never quite succeeds in constituting Shylock as the free and equal citizen of Venice. He is theoretically guaranteed by the republics constitution to be.



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Portia leads Shylock almost to the point of execution with her assurance that his suit is legally unquestionable; and then with her famous injunction to pause-"carry a little"-produces a devastating dramatic reversal, which sets the action spinning off in a completely opposite direction. The law gives Shylock the right to exact his penalty is still not questioned, but Portia produces other statutes which render the exaction of the penalty a criminal offence. These laws, unlike the law protecting the cosmopolitan freedom of commercial exchange, are violently totalitarian in character, since they are designed to protect the life and property of Venetian citizens against the harmful action of racial or cultural outsiders:

*Take then thy pond. Take thou thy pound of flesh,*

*But in the cutting it, if thou does shed*

*One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and good*

*Are by the laws of Venice confiscate*

*Unto the state of Venice. (4.1.70)*

The subsequent injunction to cut off no more and no less than "a just pond" seems to be part of that same law which protects Christian men against the non-Christian enemy. To subvert the law that treats all men equally, Portia invokes a law designed explicitly to treats them unequally if the situation were reversed and Shylock stood in Antonio's danger, the law would not be protected against the Christian in the same way as the Christian. Finally, Portia reveals her bottom-line defense of Antonio, a conspiracy law targeted directly against the outsider:



*It is enacted in the laws of vance,  
If it be proved aganst an alien  
That by direct or indirect attempts  
He seek the life of any citizen,  
The party ganst the which he doth contrive  
Shall seize one half his ,  
goods; the other half  
Comes to the privy coffer of the state;  
And the offender's life lies in the mercy  
Of the duke only. (4.1.344-353.)*

Shylock's quest of his forfeit threatens symbolically to destroy the hierarchy of value that holds them apart. Money is now meaningless, it becomes a non-equivalent. All the money in Venice cannot buy Antonio's life and a pound of flesh is worth nothing-a waste of 3,000 ducats. The dramatic fulfillment of the pond would destroy the system of value regulated by economic exchange, and would consequently negate the hierarchical social code that separates merchant and usurer, Christian and Jew, and subordinates the latter to the former.(Ibid, p. 149.).



## Conclusion

The paper studies one of the best Shakespearean comedies, *Merchant of Venice*. The playwright has presented a very clear image of the Jew as being seen in the eyes of the people of the Elizabethan age. Shylock is a stereotype of the Jew that is to be hated by everyone. The play shows that the Jew is a human being, but he regards himself as being different. Being a human is vital, but one should cope with his society. The play presents that is Shylock's right to take the pound of flesh from Antonio's body, though the fact that this is Shylock's right, but it is the revenge rather than his right that operates Shylock. This stimulus is the cause behind Shylock's loss of any sympathy.

In the Elizabethan Age, Jews were undesirable and people avoid any relation with them. There were many attempts to convert them to Christianity. Shakespeare is very successful in presenting the Jew's image, though there were many comments by many critics who agree or disagree with the way in which the Jew's character has been presented and with the idea that Shakespeare intends to satirize the Jew's character or praises it.



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