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

*An Extended Essay Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for  
a Master's Degree in Anglo-Saxon Literature and Civilisation*

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## ***Dedication***

*I dedicate this work to Her, more than anytime before.*

*My love and appreciation are also addressed to my two families, for their kindness, devotion and endless support. I consider myself extremely lucky to have a twofold of families.*



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## **ABSTRACT**

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

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

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# General Introduction

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

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

*The Merchant of Venice* is one of Shakespeare's most famous and controversial plays, it is a comedy which shows sacrifice, greed, women's wit and triumph of Christianity through the character of Antonio, the merchant who financed his friend Bassanio's romantic sail and must default on a loan from a Jewish moneylender, Shylock. The Bard was criticized for his portrayal of the latter, which suited the Elizabethan audience and was hardly to confirm since very few Jews lived in England at that time. Nonetheless, the dramatist added other layers to the character of Shylock; the proverbial phrase "Hath not a Jew eyes?" resulted in a great feeling of sympathy towards Shylock especially from the contemporary audience, thus making him a victim and not only a villain. To fulfill the aims of this research that orbits around the description of Shylock and Shakespeare's involvement in anti-Semitism, the following research questions were formulated:

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- To which extent was William Shakespeare anti-Semitic in his description of Shylock?
- Did Shakespeare draw an image of “The Typical Jew” in his play?
- How did Shakespeare operate for Shylock to acquire the sympathy of the audience?

Since it is to be performed by nature, *The Merchant of Venice* has endured some adjustments on stage, especially in Shylock’s clothing, but the play still reflects the genius of the Bard in the matter of choosing the setting and the dialogues, and Shylock seems to draw all the attention of both the audience and critics for his unusual binary composition of victimization and villainy that Shakespeare may have associated him with.

In order to answer the research questions, new historicist theory will be applied to explore the historical layers of the play and to provide a solid ground for a subtle and thorough explanation for Shakespeare’s attitudes and motives behind the supposed anti-Semitism.

This extended essay is divided into two chapters. Chapter one is an examination of the historical perspectives of anti-Semitism, tackling the tenet of factors that led to such discrimination with a special emphasis on the concept of otherness.

Chapter two is a literary analysis of the play that casts light on the character of Shylock and his physical and moral description, and also an exploration of Shakespeare’s patterns of the villain and the key factors of the character’s creation as well as an overall criticism.



**CHAPTER ONE:**

**Historical**

**Perspectives of Anti-**

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## Outline Chapter One

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# Chapter One: Historical Perspectives of anti-Semitism

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## 1.1. Introduction

Literature, the complex and multifaceted notion that it is, is prone to different interpretations and can be approached from distinct angles. In such interpretations, the historical factors play a major role in understanding the literary masterpieces as they were written in a special historical and social milieu and addressed a specific audience that has its own perception of issues such as tolerance with minorities. This chapter explores the historical aspect of a literary text in addition to the main concepts that make Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* a canonical work and a masterpiece that relates history to literature and examines the concepts of otherness and anti-Semitism by scrutinizing the European society.

## 1.2. New Historicism

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

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

In other words, history is not an account of events and facts, but rather a depiction of the human society and realm and the notions that control them, and this history is to be scrutinized in order to relate the literary work to the prevailing ways of thinking at the time of its production. Reconnecting the work with its time period echoes in Michel Foucault's concept of episteme, this emphasized the

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structures underlying the production of knowledge in a specific time and place. Since history is a chain of related events, the critic can hardly neglect the historical angle of the text. David Richter (2007:1321) asserts that New Historicism is

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

The complex and entangled layers of history make it impossible for the critic and the reader to ignore the relationship between the literary text and the major cultural and historical powers that led to its creation.

In the context of Academia, The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms defines New Historicism as:

"A term applied to a trend in American academic literary studies in the 1980s that emphasized the historical nature of literary texts and at the same time (in contrast with older historicisms) the ‘textual’ nature of history. As part of a wider reaction against purely formal or linguistic critical approaches such as the New Criticism and deconstruction, the new historicists, led by Stephen Greenblatt, drew new connections between literary and non-literary texts, breaking down the familiar distinctions between a text and its historical ‘background’ as conceived in established historical forms of criticism."

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

New Historicism is not a mere delving into factoids but rather an approach which is concerned with ideologies and cultural constructs, in addition to the fact that it resists the classical definition of history as mentioned by Lois Tyson (2006:278): "...history is a series of events that have a linear, causal relationship: event A caused event B; event B caused event C; and so on". For example , Shakespeare made of Richard III the villain of the play of his name not only

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because he was a tyrant , but also to serve the dramatist's technique of showing the good and evil dichotomy as the overthrowing of Richard III opened the door for the superb House of Tudor.

More specifically, New Historicists are not interested in history itself, but rather in the interpretations that it provides .Furthermore, they perceive the literary work as product of time and culture and thus it should be analyzed according to the two aforementioned factors .In this respect, Tyson (2006:278) adds: "...we don't have clear access to any but the most basic facts of history...our understanding of what such facts mean...is...strictly a matter of interpretation, not fact".

New Historical critical theory represents a return to the empirical scholarship in literature, thus it requires following a specific framework of analysis. Gregory S. Jay (1990:6) states:

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

The two prevailing ideas in George S. Jay's statement centres around the non-literary aspects of a text and the social situation of both the writer and the audience; it is crucial to form a parallel relationship between the literary work and the other non-literary sides to perform a thorough analysis rather than the classical

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approach that considers the literary foreground and the historical background of a text.

As far as Elizabethan Literature is concerned, approaching its works from a historical angle must take into consideration the tenet of the cultural, political and social situation of England, in addition to the ideologies that led to the creation of these literary works and the distinct reactions and interpretations in different settings of time and place.

A prominent example of new historicist criticism in literature is that of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*; the fact that both monarchs and pretenders to the throne are males, and it was written under the rule of Elizabeth I suggest that the Bard supports patriarchy.

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

### 1.3. Otherness

The concept of Otherness has been a centre of debate between scholars, and its meaning surpassed the traditional literal sense of the word. Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines "Otherness" as the state or quality of being other or different, a broader definition of Otherness, which characterizes the Other, is the state of being alien to the identity of the Self. In other words, the focus centers around the Self while the Other is discarded.

Staszak (2008:19) defines Otherness as "the result of a discursive process by which a dominant group ("Us", the Self) constructs one or many out-groups ("Them", the Others), by stigmatizing a real or imagined difference, presented as a motive of discrimination». Said differently, the process of alterity implicates the

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categorization of groups of people basing on certain criteria i.e. people of dark and fair complexion, of Semitic or non-Semitic origins, thus allowing stereotypes to be the only reference of judgment.

From a sociological standpoint, the idea of Otherness defines how minority and majority identities are constructed, and these constructs are based on outward signs like race and gender. The Other is the marginalized group of people that lives outside the dominant social group, the latter manage collective ideas about who gets to belong to “their group” and which type of people is seen as different or an outsider.

Zygmunt Bauman (1991:6) states that Otherness is crucial to the categorization of societies, thus forming identities as dichotomies. He argues that “Woman is the other of man, animal is the other of human, stranger is the other of native, abnormality the other of norm, deviation the other of law-abiding, illness the other of health, insanity the other of reason, lay public the other of the expert, foreigner the other of state subject, enemy the other of friend”

The sense of Other puts forward how both societies and individuals build a sense of belonging by constructing social categories as social binary opposites. Among the scholars who addressed the issue of Otherness, Jacques Derrida has been acclaimed for his conception of alterity. In order to disclose the full ramifications of the issue, Derrida (1989) asserts that “the other of otherness” resists both processes of incorporation and introjections. The other can neither keep a totally foreign identity, nor introjected within the self. He also suggests that responsibility towards the other is about respecting and even emphasizing this resistance.

The Post-Colonial theorist, Abdul R. Jan Mohamed (1983:84) argues that “genuine and thorough comprehension of Otherness is possible only if the self can somehow negate or at least severely bracket the values, assumptions and ideologies of his culture”, that is to say that in order to understand the Other, one should de-center his vision from themselves so that the face of the Other can be

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recognized. In the same vein, George Herbert Mead (1934) states that identities are products of agreement and disagreement with the Other. One's behavior is based upon the interactions and the self-reflection about these interactions, thus forming "the looking glass self".

Literature provides a space for reflection, and also gives room for the Self to criticize its own position. Other Scholars as Jacques Lacan (1970) widened the definition of the Other beyond the other subjects that one encounters in their social life to the language and conventions of social life which are organized under the category of the law. In this case the Self is internally divided and alienated and the use of the Other in terms of language is crucial to Lacan's philosophical theory of the psyche.

It is worthwhile to mention that the study of the notion of Otherness is philosophical rather than empirical. The Self and the Other are interrelated and reflections of each other yet different in a way described by Richard Kearney (1995:17) as the "labyrinth of looking glasses". The recognition of the Other is the first step towards achieving the ethical obligation towards it as emphasized by Emmanuel Levinas (1976).

### **1.4. Anti-Semitism**

Among the most spread and controversial concepts of the contemporary world, anti-Semitism seems to be the most prominent one as it was used as a pretext to defend a minority over the supposedly oppressive majority throughout history, but the definition itself causes controversy.

#### **1.4.1 Definition**

The term "Anti-Semitism" would seem to indicate hatred and discrimination against all the Semitic Peoples: the Arabs, Assyrians, Samaritans, Jews and the Ethiopians, while nowadays it is exclusive to the prejudice and/or discrimination against Jews, individually or collectively, that can be based on hatred against Jews



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because of their religion, their ethnicity, ancestry, or group membership. It assumes that Jews share particular characteristics in common and think and act in special or “different” ways from other people.

Over the centuries, anti-Semitism has taken an abundance of forms and has been used as a reason of all kind of evil and atrocities against Jews: from the late eighteenth century events in Central Europe to the Holocaust. It manifests itself in a variety of attitudes, words, ideas and actions. It can involve bigotry, bullying, defamation, stereotyping, hate crime, acts of bias and scapegoating. The term was firstly used by Wilhelm Marr, a German politician in his book *Victory of Judaism over Germanism* (1873), and it was promoted by Heinrich von Treitschke, a Prussian nationalist historian. The term referred to Jew-hatred rather than hatred of other Semite peoples. Throughout their history, the Jews have been expelled more than once: from England in 1290, France in 1394, and Spain in 1492, this suggests that the spirit of anti-Semitism is deeply rooted in the European society and that Europe was the cradle of such concept.

The history of European anti-Semitism is veritably formidable. It is at least two thousand years long, while anti-Semitism formed a solidly integral part of European culture until the middle of the twentieth century. The hatred exhibited a changing and manifold character over this period, depending on the time and the context. The motives behind the persecution of the Jews differed from an era to another; from Christian fanaticism during the Crusades, to the complete rejection of Jews in Martin Luther’s reformed version of Christianity in the Reformation.

### **1.4.2 Association with the Jews**

The etymology of the word “anti-Semitism” suggests that it is used to express prejudice and hatred towards all the Semite peoples, but it was never the case . The term came to replace the word “Judenhass” or “Jews-hatred” with a more scientific word, it is considered as a form of racism since it segregates Jews as a religious group and an ethnicity.

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### 1.4.3 Famous Cases of Anti-Semitism

Throughout history, there were a considerable number of cases where the feeling of anti-Semitism was omnipresent, but the most famous one in modern times is the Dreyfus Affair. Captain Alfred Dreyfus was an officer in the French army, and in 1894, he was wrongfully convicted of treason for passing military secrets to Germany and sentenced to life imprisonment. Evidence proving otherwise made surface and his innocence was proclaimed eleven years later. It was clear that anti-Semitism was the driving force behind this affair, as Stephen Wilson (2007:27) mentions:” It is clear that the explosion of the Dreyfus Case into the Dreyfus Affair was largely the responsibility of an organized anti-Semitic movement and newspaper press.”

In Germany, anti-Semitism was deeply ingrained for centuries and the country witnessed ascension of the feeling of hatred towards the Jews, which suggests that the Nazi’s massacres and persecutions were the result of a long century of anti-Semitic acts and agitations. The historian Heinrich V. Treitschke (1879:233) wrote that “the Jews are our misfortune”, blaming the Jews for the hardship that Germany suffered from. After few years, the philosopher Eugen Karl Dühring wrote *The Jewish Question* (1881) in which he argued that the Jews are the main reason of Germany’s decline and that they form “a state within a state” and “a counter-race” which is impossible to be assimilated. In addition to the aforementioned aspects, the Jews shared the responsibility of Germany’s military defeat in 1918 with the Socialists according to the German public opinion.

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

There is an abundance of anti-Semitic cases in European history that differ in time and impact , whether among the ignorant or the illuminated , the religious

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or the secular , the military or civilian , the Jews were to blame . The historian Raul Hilberg (1961:52) summed up the development of the patterns of anti-Semitism as follows: Twelfth century Crusades:”You have no right to live amongst us as Jews”. Sixteenth century ghettos:”You have no right to live amongst us”. Twentieth century Nazis:”You have no right to live”.

### 1.4.4 Controversy

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

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

Ironically, the outbreak of the Dreyfus Affair led an Austrian journalist, Theodor Herzl, to form the Zionist movement which resulted in the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. There is ambiguity for a considerable number of people

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about the difference between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism; the former criticizes the horrible and inhuman practices of Zionists inside and outside the Middle East, and has no relation whatsoever with the feeling of hatred towards Jews which is expressed by the latter.

The concept of anti-Semitism has been used as an excuse to the atrocities and the crimes of Zionists. The allegedly guilty European conscience tried to redeem itself by supporting and providing legal and financial support for the state of Israel.

In a nutshell, anti-Semitism ruled Europe throughout its long history and caused pain and horror to the Jews, while in modern times the philosophy of Zionism has changed the victimized Jew into a ruthless oppressor based on vengeance and ancient myths.

### 1.5 Jews in English Literature

The image of Jews varied across the works of English literature, but some stereotypes prevailed during centuries and some Jewish characters were intentionally stigmatized while other were presented in a totally different manner, from the creation of Shylock and Fagin to the bright description of Daniel Deronda. In a similar vein, Edgar Rosenberg (1960:116) examines a catalogue of some appearances of the Jew in English literature and traces the origins of the myth of the Jew to its Biblical origins:

It dates back at least to Herod, the slayer of children and aspiring Christ killer in disguise ('and when you have found him, bring me word, that I may also come and worship him'); to Judas, the original businessman with the contract in the pocket; and to the anonymous vulgar Jewish farceur who, in answer to Christ's 'Eli, eh' forced a reed filled with vinegar between His lips."

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The association of the Jew with usury is the dominant factor behind the creation of the myth in addition to its depiction as manipulator. Another compelling evidence lies in the fact that literature evolved under the watch of the church and the religious texts influenced to a considerable extent the literary ones, and in this vein Rosenberg adds: "at a time when literature flourished under clerical auspices and when nine tenths of the *corpus poeticum* derived from Biblical paraphrases and martyrologies. . ."

The spectre of fear of the Jew is due, according to Rosenberg (1960), to the latter's fabled attribution in the Christian texts and thus subconscious as a god-killer, and that image developed during the Victorian age to be the swarthy-faced old man who makes his living by tramping the streets of London and that matches a very convenient image of child-quelling bogeyman. The accumulation of stories of necromancy, greed, lust and killing solidifies the stereotypes about the Jews during two millenniums.

The mosaic of depictions of the Jew in English literature resulted from the differences in the authors' backgrounds, historical and social milieu and perception of the Jews, and the description can be categorized in viewing the Jew as villain, saint or comedian.

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### 1.5.1 The Jew as a Villain

The dominant image of the Jews in English literature is a negative one; epitomized by Marlowe's Barabas and George du Maurier's Svengali, it is based on the stereotypes of a villain Jew who allies with Christians' enemies and uses his con and seduction to dominate the "innocent" Christians.

The stereotypes about the Jews contributed to the greater extent to associate usury and villainy with them, and albeit they lived in Britain from the Norman Conquest until their expulsion, their existence did not change the myth.

From the ballads and morality plays of medieval and Renaissance England to the novels of the Victorian Age, the portrayal of Jews has followed the good-bad polarity to the extreme, and in the case of Chaucer's *Prioress's Tale*, Marlowe's *Jew of Malta* and Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* the villain Jew paid the ultimate price or suffered humiliation and disgrace, in this respect, Rosenberg states: "In Chaucer he was torn by wild horses and hanged also. In Gower a lion tears him to death. Marlowe has him burned in a cauldron. Shylock, the fox at bay, loses both daughter and ducats, as well as his religion."

But in the case of Victorian writers such as Charles Dickens, one must cast light on some extra-literary phenomena such as the author's psyche and social milieu. In his novel *Oliver Twist*, Dickens referred to Fagin two hundred and fifty seven times as "The Jew" while neglecting any of the other characters' religion or ethnicity, in addition to that, Dickens has fervently supported the genocide against Indians in response to the Indian Rebellion of 1857. Another important factor is that the author projected his childhood images of the "old-clo" along with other ogreish images on Oliver's view of Fagin as a child-snatcher. The role of the usurer Jew prevailed throughout the Victorian Age as Dickens described his house's buyer as a "Jewish moneylender" and it was considered as a discriminatory statement.

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### 1.5.2 The Jew as a Saint

The analysis of the portrayal of the Jew in English literature is missing a great deal of the image if it is to neglect the counter-myth that rose in the late eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century. The paragons that represented the opposite image are mainly Cumberland's Sheva from his play *The Jew* (1794), Walter Scott's Rebecca and Eliot's Mordecai. In contrast to the villain Jewish characters, the aforementioned ones combine Self-righteousness with kindness and generosity, but being good demeanor did not prevent them from suffering from the age-long stereotypes about the Jews. It is worthwhile to mention that the creation of these characters galvanized other authors into changing their portrayal of the Jews in their writings, thus creating a literary apology to the Jews.

The apologies were mainly manifested in the creation of Maria Edgeworth's Harrington, Dickens' Riah and Du Maurier's Leah. The authors seem to try to redeem themselves and to avoid criticism by their Jewish readership, as well as reviving the image of the Jew in literature by adding another dimension to it as Rosenberg explains:

"The chief reason . . . is that [the good Jew] has been almost consistently a product of far too obvious and explicit ulterior motives. He bore from the first the pale cast of after-thought. Given the convention, the authors who kept the Jew-villain in circulation created their man with a good deal of spontaneity. The Jew-villain might not be a realistic figure; but within the canons of comedy and melodrama he could give the illusory appearance of being a creature of flesh and blood. The purveyors of the immaculate Jew, on the other hand, produced not so much a character as a formula.

Drama and tangled plots of novels gave a new option for the portrayal of the Jew especially in comedy, creating what is known as "The Wandering Jew".

### 1.5.3 The Jew as a Comedian “The Wandering Jew”

A new pattern of the portrayal of the Jew was created and it diverged from the conventional polarity of good and evil, it is known as “The Wandering Jew”. This motif is dynamic and attuned to the imaginative demands of distinct generations, and it is noticeable in Godwin’s novel *St. Leon* (1799) where the Jew is portrayed as a marooned black magician.

In a nutshell, and myth of Shylock allowed the counter myth to exist , thus enriching the English literature and providing a reflection of the British and European consciousness and feelings towards the Jews.

### 1.5.4 Historical Background of “The Merchant of Venice”

The common assumption that Christopher Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta* is the forerunner of this Shakespearian play becomes untenable under examination, albeit it has a solid ground if one considers the wave of anti-Semitism that was initiated after the execution of Queen Elizabeth’s Jewish physician, Roderigo Lopez, who was convicted of treason . The evidence that Shakespeare has burrowed the plot was manifested in the writings of Gregorio Leti (1685:229) who stated that In 1587, Paul Mario Sechi, .a merchant of Rome, gained information that Sir Francis Drake, the English Admiral, had conquered San Domingo. He communicated this piece of news to Simone Cenade, a Jewish merchant, to whom it appeared incredible, and he said: “I bet a pound of flesh that it is untrue.” “And I lay one thousand scudi against it,” replied Sechi. A bond was' drawn up to that effects after a few days, news arrived of Drake’s achievement, and the Christian insisted on the fulfillment of his bond. In vain the Jew pleaded, but Sechi swore that nothing could satisfy him but a pound of the Jew’s flesh. In his extremity, the Jew went to the governor. The governor of the city promised his assistance, communicated the case to Pope Sixtus, who condemned both to the galleys—the



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Jew for making such a wager, the Christian for accepting it. They released themselves from imprisonment by each paying a fine of two thousand scudi toward the hospital that the Pope was erecting.

### **1.6 Conclusion**

The European society is wrongly conceived as a whole unit that comprises cultures and ethnicities living under the umbrella of tolerance, there was much discrimination and segregation against minorities, especially Jews, that it was reflected in the works of its renowned writers and dramatists.

**CHAPTER TWO:**  
**New Historicist**  
**Analysis**

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## Chapter Two:New Historicist Analysis

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### 2.1 Introduction

Shylock, the Jewish character of “The Merchant of Venice”, is Shakespeare’s most widely known villain. In the parameters of the Elizabethan Age, The Bard of Avon designed the outfit of his villain’s personality to showcase a multitude of the phenomena of his era. The central issue addressed in this chapter is to put forward the hints of Anti-Semitism and the controversial role of Shylock and whether he was the Jewish scoundrel that he is claimed to be or that he was entangled in a larger plot of hatred and fear, by means of analysis of his physical and mental traits, along with an emphasis on the patterns that were set by Shakespeare to convey the message of confrontation between Good, represented by the Christian characters on one hand, and Evil, supposedly embodied in Shylock on the other.

### 2.2 The Merchant of Venice

*The Merchant of Venice* is a play by William Shakespeare that was classified in his First Folio. The play is believed to be written either in 1597 or 1598 and its events take place in Venice where a Jewish usurer by the name of Shylock cries for a pound of flesh as a settlement for his loan to Antonio, a melancholic Christian merchant. This masterpiece has raised debate as both Elizabethan and Contemporary audience developed sympathy towards the villain, in addition to the issue of anti-Semitism that led this work to face censorship in some cases, especially by Michael Halperin (2007:13) who considers the play as “a blatantly racist work that would not be taught to impressionable students”.

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### 2.2.1 Plot

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

A young Venetian, Bassanio, needs a loan of three thousand ducats so that he can woo Portia, a wealthy Venetian heiress. He approaches his friend Antonio, a merchant. Antonio is running out of money because all his wealth is invested in his fleet, which is currently at sea. He goes to a Jewish moneylender, Shylock, who hates Antonio because of Antonio's anti-Semitic behaviour towards him. Shylock nevertheless agrees to make the short-term loan, but, in a moment of dark humour, he makes a collateral to the loan of exacting one pound of flesh from Antonio if he does not give the money back in three months. Antonio agrees, confident that his ships will return in time.

Because of the terms of Portia's father's will, all suitors must choose from among three caskets, one of which contains a portrait of her. If he chooses that he may marry Portia, but if doesn't he must vow never to marry or court another woman. The Princes of Morocco and Arragon fail the test and are rejected. As Bassanio prepares to travel to Belmont for the test, his friend Lorenzo elopes with

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Shylock's daughter, Jessica. Bassanio chooses the lead casket, which contains her picture, and Portia happily agrees to marry him immediately.

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

Portia arrives in her disguise to defend Antonio. Given the authority of judgment by the Duke, Portia decides that Shylock can have the pound of flesh as long as he doesn't draw blood, as it is against the law to shed a Christian's blood. Since it is obvious that to draw a pound of flesh would kill Antonio, Shylock is denied his suit.

Moreover, for conspiring to murder a Venetian citizen, Portia orders that he should forfeit all his wealth. Half is to go to Venice, and half to Antonio. Antonio gives his half back to Shylock on the condition that Shylock bequeaths it to his disinherited daughter, Jessica. Shylock must also convert to Christianity. A broken Shylock accepts. Portia's manipulation of the law leads to the grim reality that law is not always the ultimate ideal and judge. News arrives that Antonio's remaining ships have returned safely. With the exception of Shylock, all celebrate a happy ending to the affair.

### 2.2.2 Characterization

Shakespeare's roles attribution creates intertwined patterns of wickedness and good; the major character, namely Shylock, was to conceal his evil and seize the opportunity to take revenge, while Portia exemplify the tender woman that saves her lover's friend Antonio from the horrible collateral to Shylock's loan. The

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centralization of the play is undeniable as the main focus is on Shylock and the reactions of the other characters to his terms and conditions.

### 2.2.2.1 Shylock

The play orbits around Shylock. The Jewish money-lender is the enigmatic centre of *The Merchant of Venice*. Albeit he is portrayed as a villain, an abundance of cruelties were committed against him: his servant left him for a Christian nobleman, his daughter, in contrast to her miser father, does not restrain herself from providing her lover Lorenzo with money and jewelry, and eventually escapes with him. Shylock's cry against the atrocities of his environment is manifested in the proverbial phrase: "hath not a Jew eyes?" (3.1.14). The play does not focus on the aforementioned events but rather on Shylock refusing any sort of alternatives to his "pound of flesh" collateral of the loan; hence "the Jew" is a persona non grata and seems petty and cruel. Greed is also a characteristic that was attributed by The Bard to Shylock, and this is seen through his reaction when he was informed about his daughter's escape: "Thou stickest a dagger in me: I shall never see my gold again: fourscore ducats in a sitting! Fourscore ducats!" (3.1.67-68). Outwitted by Portia, the smart heiress and Bassanio's lover, Shylock is forced to compromise and to promise his wealth to Jessica, his daughter, and her lover after his death and eventually converts to Christianity. It is worthwhile to mention that modern readings started to explore the character of Shylock from a distinct angle from the ancient ones, denying that he was a villain but rather a victim of the indignities of the British society.

### 2.2.2.2 Portia

An intelligent and willful woman, Portia is portrayed differently than the other characters: she is forced to follow her dead father's instructions about the lottery he set up in order to choose her husband, but she makes use of her scathing wit to provide her favorite contender Bassanio with hints to succeed in choosing the right casket as she addressed him: "before you venture for me. I could teach you how to choose right" (3.2.115), she finds no harm in dressing like a man and going

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to the courtroom in order to save her lover's friend Antonio from his horrible fate. Portia's acts are overshadowing the reactions of the other characters except for Shylock, as the play ends, Portia tricks her paramour into giving her the ring she made him swear not to lose, and she triumphs over her "nemesis" Shylock since he accepts another collateral to the loan.

### 2.2.2.3 Antonio

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

### 2.2.2.4. Jessica and Lorenzo

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

### 2.2.3. Setting

Shakespeare divided the physical action of *The Merchant of Venice* between two settings: Venice and Belmont. The former is a real cosmopolitan city which is close to the center of Christendom (Rome) and a commercial hub with an



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independent and orderly government, but as a result of Venice's internationalism, Shylock is represented as "the Other" who threatens the traditions of the Christian society. The latter is an imaginary city of romance and festivity where music, laughter and domestic bliss are the common values; it was ruled by Portia's dead father lingers and there were no social restrictions to prevent a rich heiress from acting independently. By the end of the play, the victorious Christians retire to Belmont as The Bard wants to idealize it and to illustrate the contrast between real-world problems and fairy tales solutions.

At the time Shakespeare wrote his play, he chose Venice to harbor the events for a multitude of reasons: On one hand, Venice was what England aspired to become, for its sophistication, beauty and the disposition of Oriental luxuries. On the other hand, sixteenth century Venice was more tolerant than Elizabethan England, but this fact did not hinder the clash between the Christians characters and the Jewish usurer, which indicates that the problem goes beyond the issue of religion to be an existentialist predicament.

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

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

#### **2.3.1 Age**

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

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*GRATIANO*

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

*SHYLOCK*

Till thou canst rail the seal from off my bond,  
Thou but offend'st thy lungs to speak so loud:  
Repair thy wit, good youth, or it will fall  
To cureless ruin. I stand here for law. (4.1.130-146)

Gratiano's insults make the audience expect a grotesque response of Shylock, but on the contrary, his answer is very reserved and calm by calling the Italian "a good youth" in a sarcastic manner. An Anecdotal evidence that the young character seems to be ignorant is that he renounce his Christian faith by making reference to ancient pagan Greek beliefs to prove Shylock's animalistic side, but this is held against him as Shylock exhibits his wisdom and maturity to face the young Italian who is prone to cursing and ill-faith . Shylock himself confesses that he is old, he tells his servant Launcelot that he will recognize "The difference between old Shylock and Bassanio" (2.5.1-2).

### **2.3.2 Sanity**

Although He shows signs of wisdom, Shylock follows the conventional pattern of the Shakespearian villain as he seems to blackout from his idealistic

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reality to drown into a ruthless state. This was manifested in his horrifying response to Antonio, when the latter, in shackles, pleaded for him to abort the deadly collateral:

I'll have my bond; I will not hear thee speak:  
I'll have my bond; and therefore speak no more.  
I'll not be made a soft and dull-eyed fool,  
To shake the head, relent, and sigh, and yield  
To Christian intercessors. Follow not;  
I'll have no speaking: I will have my bond. (3.3.12-17)

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

### 2.3.3 Control

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

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My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter,  
Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats!  
Justice, the law, my ducats, and my daughter!  
A sealèd bag, two sealed bags of ducats,  
Of double ducats, stol'n from me by my daughter!  
And jewels—two stones, two rich and precious stones  
Stol'n by my daughter! Justice, find the girl!  
She hath the stones upon her, and the ducats. (2.8.15-23)

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

Why, all the boys in Venice follow him,  
Crying, "His stones, his daughter, and his ducats!" (2.8.24-25)

### 2.4. Shakespeare's Description of Shylock

#### 2.4.1 Physical Description

*The Merchant of Venice* does not speak about Shylock's physical appearance, nor does it confirm any age-old stereotypes about a bottle-nosed Jew. However, Frank Falsenstein (1999:158) states that "it was the eighteenth century actor Charles Macklin who first gave Shylock a red hat and a big nose. He justified the red hat to Alexander Pope, who asked about it, by saying "he had read that the Jews in Italy, particularly in Venice, wore hats of that color<sup>1</sup>." It is noteworthy to mention that the Bard makes reference to circumcision as a bodily difference between the Gentiles and Jews, as Gratiano swears: "Now, by my hood, a gentle and no Jew." (2.6.53). He considers his "hood" as the foreskin emblematic of his Christianity and confirms that Jessica is a "gentle" or Gentile. Shakespeare's

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avoidance of Shylock's physical traits suggests that the English audience is accustomed to the Jews and that the latter lived in Elizabethan England in spite of the fact that Edward I expelled them from the country in 1290.

### 2.4.2. Moral Description

While reading the play, one notices Shylock's tendency for selfish behavior and thinking, in addition to the fact that he is unreasonable and demanding. The usurer takes immense pleasure in his "merry sport" of exacting "an equal pound/Of...fair flesh to be cut off and taken/In what part of [the] body pleaseth me" (1.3.146-151), but he poses as a victim of racism and discrimination because nobody has seen him beyond his Jewishness in the passage: "Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?" (3.1.54). Even though he is punished for the violence that he set in motion, the audience cannot help but question the values of Christian love and mercy, to deduce that Shylock's nemeses are not better than him.

## 2.5 Analysis of Shylock:

### 2.5.1 Religion:

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

After the bargain between Antonio and Shylock was struck, the former murmurs: "Hie thee gentle Jew. / The Hebrew will turn Christian, he grows kind" (1.3.177-178). Antonio's ironic tone suggests contempt of Shylock for his religion and this relatively mild anti-Semitism is omnipresent in the play. Yet, the Bard

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makes very few associations between Shylock and evil in the beginning of the play, and one of these connections is manifested in Launcelot's monologue while he is debating himself about leaving Shylock's service: "Certainly the Jew is the very devil incarnation, and in my conscience, my conscience is but a kind of hard conscience, to offer to counsel me to stay with the Jew" (2.2.27-30). The repetition of the word *Jew* in this context indicates that Launcelot's aggressive attitude towards Shylock conforms with the medieval semi-mythical construct about the Jews and is fed by both literary (Chaucer) and theological (Luther) support. Albert B. Friedman (1974) mentions that Martin Luther warned Christians stating: "next to the devil thou hast no enemy more cruel, more venomous and violent than a true Jew." The prevalence of the image of Jews as killers of Jesus Christ contributed to a great extent to the growth of such anti-Jewish attitude.

But Shakespeare hatches a similar plot for Christianity, and makes it obvious that Shylock's vehement statements towards Antonio and his Christian cohorts are mere reflections of their cunning acts, especially when Shylock swore revenge: "...If a Jew wrongs a Christian, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge! The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction." (3.1.68-73). The Bard of Avon seems to attribute the eye-for-an-eye execution to Christianity rather than Shylock or his religion. However, since the Elizabethan audience perceived the Jews as fiendish creatures, Shakespeare gives them a happy ending by the conversion of Shylock and thus saving his soul in Elizabethan terms.

The fact that Shylock is a Jew made him an outcast, but it is to his greatest sorrow that the pattern of the Jew is associated with other negative characteristics, one of them is usury.

### 2.5.2 Usury

Among the negative trait that Shylock was burdened with, usury and avarice are the most dominant ones. Shakespeare makes it clear that Bassanio loves money

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as much as Shylock does. In addition to that, the young Venetian, with his fortune at its lowest ebb after squandering all his money, turns to Antonio to finance his venture to the rich heiress Portia. Antonio hated Shylock for lending money with interests and considered him a parasite to the Venetian economy, while Shylock made it clear that he loathes Antonio for his anti-Semitism and due to the fact that “He lends out money gratis and brings down / The rate of usance here with us in Venice” (1.3.34-35), Antonio defends his position by confirming that he will not lend money with interests :” I oft delivered from his forfeitures / Many that have at times made moan to me” (3.3.22–23).

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

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

Anecdotal evidence lies in the fact that Shakespeare had personal intent for addressing the issue of usury; his father was sentenced for lending money at excessive interest, charging twenty pounds interest on loans of eighty and a hundred

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pounds, and that event seems to have an impact on the dramatist especially that it was a cursed activity and many clerks preached against it.

### 2.6 Criticism

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

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

One must also cast light on the genius of the dramatist: He gives no hints or indications about the reason behind making Shylock both detestable and sympathetic in the play, and this contributed to the ascension of the dramatic tension, the character stands as a grand creation of a mastermind. In this respect, Harold Bloom (1999:256) notes: "We can keep finding the meanings of Shakespeare, but never *the* meaning." With the never-ending interpretations of the Bard's works, the issues that he tackled will continue to challenge the contemporary audience.



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

### **2.7 Conclusion**

After examining the most prominent facets of the play, one cannot totally exonerate Shakespeare of the charge of anti-Semitism, but it is by his emphasis on the image of “The Jew” in the centre of his dramatic art that he makes Shylock a victim of an atrocious xenophobic Christian society.

## General Conclusion

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*The Merchant of Venice* is a canonical work that allows an abundance of interpretations; it can be approached as a representation of the historical collision between Christians and Jews embodied in Antonio and Shylock, while others perceive it as an extension of the anti-Jewish and anti-usury preaching that ruled during the Elizabethan era.

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

The accumulation of centuries of stereotypes influenced many theatre directors to build a physical construct of Shylock that converges to the prejudices of the era albeit Shakespeare did not mention any of the above. On the other hand, others tried to picture it as much anti-Christian as anti-Semitic, and they put forward the argument of Christian vice and bending the law when it does not serve the Christian interests, and this vision is adopted by a multitude of critics.

From the first attention of inquirers into Shakespeare's works, they discover that the Bard of Avon gives every villain his say, a chance to defend or justify himself, but the case of Shylock was different; he did not only defend himself against an oppressing society but also exposed the atrocious side of Christians, the one who always consider themselves as the defender of the values of liberty and tolerance.

This research targets the hints of anti-Semitism in *The Merchant of Venice*, as well as an investigation of Shylock "the human" that has been proven to exist in the play and took the lion's share in contemporary criticism and interpretations. Shakespeare's patterns of the villain prevailed in *The Merchant*, and it is by using the complexity of those patterns that the Bard succeeded in portraying Shylock as a human who was destroyed by the ills of an ignorant society.

## General Conclusion

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Being subject to distinct interpretations, *The Merchant of Venice* , although it goes in the wave of Elizabethan anti-Semitism for some , it portrays the darkness of the human soul and how it can be corrupt in the name of religion for others.

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