

Economy & Drama: From Shakespeare to Webster

The Portrayal of Jews and Anti Semitism in *the Jew of Malta* and *the Merchant of Venice*

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“The study of literature, it has been said, is a form of travel; it enables us to move about freely among the minds of other races. But it enables us also to move about freely in time, so that we may become familiar not only with the minds of other races, but with the minds of other epochs in the history of our own, as well as of the other races” (Samuel 21). As it is already understood from the quotation, to move through the history, literature is the best company which gives us a chance to see into ancient people’s mind, their belief and so to say the shadows of people having varied beliefs and minds, coming from different parts of a society and their way of living together in the same community. Every historical period shares varieties of characteristics which make it special, its own age. Beginning from 1558 and lasted in 1603 Elizabethan era is a fundamental period during which many key subjects such as religious and politics, additionally important play writers from the society were introduced. Religion was the essence of Elizabethan Era which has a great impact on people’s daily life from church, culture to education. A lot has been written and said about religion in that era leading to new dimensions and interpretations.

“A widespread independence of thought, a purer simpler faith, a deep religious earnestness, great vigour of imagination, a burning jubilant patriotism, all these are reflected in the literary out-pourings of the time, the lusty spirit of the age producing new literary forms, lyrics, sonnets, pastorals, religious and metaphysical poems, and, supreme among them all, the plays of Shakespeare” (Samuel 23).

Those times people had experienced some tough religious conflicts just because little differences among them resulting that Jews were blamed with being murderer by Christians. Plays written at those times provides us opportunity to be emphatic, merciful and sometimes feel sorry for those of discriminated because of their beliefs, feel sorry for those of being separated from community callously regardless of the fact that they are human and have rights in the society in which they included. “But the Christian hatred of the Jew, nurtured by popular superstition, middle-class *ressentiment*, the frequent complicity of Church and state, the place of the Jews in the European economy, and the complex religious and cultural barriers, would not be so easily turned against a particular structure of economic or social relations or a cast of mind that crossed racial and religious boundaries but would light with murderous force upon the whole Jewish community” (Greenblatt 293). As Greenblatt was correctly pointing that if there is a strong crowded community who shares all the same group of beliefs, ideas, social point of views and values, economic infrastructures, areas of common prosperity and more, than it would really hard to integrate new ideas and values. Therefore, history act as a witness that Christians did not accept Jews in the society and applied them different kind of separation policy like making them pay some taxes.

Of the minor dramatists belong to the century, Christopher Marlowe was among the best known writers and *The Jew of Malta* (1589-1590) is among the best so to say in the first place regarding its social and religious position because it has a representative status of Elizabethan era. Christopher Marlowe, a significant dramatist of Elizabethan Era was born in Canterbury and with his own writings and reflective ideas had gotten an important place in the literature and been a source of inspiration to play writers.

In his play "*The Jew of Malta*" Marlowe seized upon Jew society and anti-Judaism which is known as anti-Semitism in general. "The Jew is charged not with racial deviance or religious impiety but with economic and social crime, crime that is committed not only against the dominant Christian society but, in less "pure" form, by the society" (Greenblatt 292). On the basis of this quotation, it can be said that Jews had some political and economic effects on the society that they were charged racially and economically. To understand what Marlowe and the other writers who wrote about Anti-Semitism indicate, it is important to note what Anti-Judaism or in another word Anti-Semitism is. Although the fact that they have some slight differences, Anti Judaism and Anti-Semitism mean practically the same. As a general term, Anti-Semitism is simply about ethnic and racial prejudices toward Jews. Basically, anti-Semitism is an opposition to the beliefs and all the practices of Judaism, thus to believe that all Judaism practices are in a lower place. "Anti-Semitism is prejudice and/or discrimination against Jews. Anti-Semitism can be based on hatred against Jews because of their religious beliefs, their group membership (ethnicity) and sometimes the erroneous belief that Jews are a race." (Balsler 16). During the Elizabethan era, famous play writers like Shakespeare and Marlowe penned anti-Semitic themes. They had described the sentiment and social and cultural point of view of the era. Meanwhile, the rest of the paper will contribute to the issue of the portrayal of Jews anti-Semitism in collaboration with sample texts from Elizabethan era to make a conformable contribution. First of all, *the Jew of Malta* by Marlowe which is one of the first anti-Semitic themed plays of the era will be introduced. Thus, to make the cultural sentiment of the era clear, I will take advantage of Shakespeare because Marlowe had a great impact on Shakespeare regarding religious issues that are mentioned above and Shakespeare used Anti-Semitic figures perfectly in his play *The Merchant of Venice*.

With the aim of making a good comment and contribution to anti- Semitic themes, it is important to make progress with the light of major works such as Marlowe's play *The Jew of Malta* and *The Merchant of Venice* by William Shakespeare which is quite similar to Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*. *The Jew of Malta* by Christopher Marlowe written during Elizabethan era is sequence of events in which some religious issues were placed. The play was narrated by Machevill and at the very beginning of the play the Jew figure of Marlowe was defined by Machevill's prologue;

"Who smiles to see how full his bags are cramb'd"; he enters, then, already trailing clouds of ignominy, already a "marked case." (Marlowe 30-31). In the play Barabas was characterized as incredibly greed, unsatisfied, out of favour while Ferneze, for example, a Christian was shown as nominally "good" and "nobleman" who has everything so needs anything but in reality he runs on every occasion after the wealth that Barabas had therefore the situation makes the play feel ironical.

Barabas was grabbed the attention of the audience with his greediness, selfishness and his name. "Barabbas is the biblical name of a notorious Jewish man—both a thief and murderer—who, by public acclaim, was pardoned from crucifixion and released from Roman custody during a Passover feast in Jerusalem" (Tartell 1). In my opinion, the name of Barbara comes like a first prejudice so to say first stereotype in audience's mind regarding the fact that it is an utterly religious and Jewish name. When Marlowe created a character that is attracting the attention, he firstly gave attention to his name and its wealth. Marlowe applies this name policy in general of the play. For example Ithamore is believed to be religious name and a mixture of two religions.

“The name ‘Ithamore’, is a variant of the biblical ‘Ithamar’, Islamicizing ‘-mar’ into ‘-more’ Marlowe signals the fellowship between Jewish and Islamic legalisms signed by circumcision.” (Cheney 151).

Marlowe was supposedly trying to create a link between Jews and Muslims. Barabas is such a character who is rejecting to convert into a Christian under all circumstances and he is cheating everyone for the sake of being rich and being a Jew or to protect his identity of being a Jew. Actually the hatred is two sided, it means that as all the other Christians who hate Jews, Barabas has the same hatred toward Christians and he had the murderer soul just to protect his values.

Make account of me as of thy fellow. We are villains both;

Both circumcised, we hate Christians both. (Marlowe 2.3.213-15)

His anger and ambition makes him felt free to make a fool of people around him and always found a way out of being penniless and a Christian. These are also features of machievallist society which refers to a group of people who live only for money or earthly affairs and people who never hesitate to do anything for the sake of getting more and more, being the richest, being in the first place. By the time that *the Jew of Malta* was written, Jewish people were thought to be the murderers of Jesus and that is why people have some kind of hatred toward Jews, thus they were thought as sinful and unwelcomed people.

“Barabas serves as the vehicle through which Elizabethan society’s cultural prejudices can be personified. These religious prejudices, exemplified in Shakespeare’s writing, reflect a deep-rooted intolerant climate encompassing the sixteenth century, a period during which Jews lived in small number in England as Marranos, Jews pretending to be Catholic, and Conversos, converted Jews, due to rampant anti-Semitic backlash. Ultimately, this religious intolerance toward Jews is manifested through Christopher Marlowe’s portrayal of Barabas in order to validate a contemporary anti-Semitic stereotype.” (Tartell 1).

In the play which is based upon Jewishness through a particular character called Barabas, the identity of the character is associated with being Jew and the theme unconsciously reflects the hatred and opposition to the Jewish people. In the play while the hatred got off the ground, Christians were aware of the political and economic position of the Jews but Christians did not want Jews to take place in the economy or trade. Especially Governor Ferneze rather preferred converting Barabas to be christened or taking half of his esteem.

Ferneze: 'Why, Barabas, wilt thou be christened?'

Barabas: 'No, Governor, I will be no convertite.'

Ferneze: 'Then pay thy half.' (Marlowe 340; 1.2.82-84)

In a broader sense, the play was composed with some certain stereotypes having negative implications. At the same time, the play has different aspects. For example Marlowe seized upon some religious issues through the characters especially Barabas which is a reality of this play but the religion is not the only issue which is grabbing attention in the first place. In the play not only Barabas, the Jew, but also Ferneze, the Christian, was greedy, hypocritical and wants more and the tricks that the characters do during the play in order not to get conned were one step ahead of religion. "The Jews are 'accursed in the sight of heaven', Ferneze argues, they must be taxed above and beyond the Christian citizens by the political body that suffers their existence." (Cheney 148). As for Barabas, while clarifying many anti-Semitic stereotypes, he is not the only villainous character in the play and this is leading people to think that Marlowe might have been criticizing the decency of the Christians as well.

The Merchant of Venice by William Shakespeare has the quality of being the response of Marlowe's play. It is easy to note that both plays share nearly the same title, the same place (Italy) to be written down and the same subject or theme. "Shakespeare owes Marlowe much, both in the choice of material and in the many echoes which show how his assimilative ear had taken the rich suggestiveness of his contemporary's style." (Humphreys 279)

The content of this play includes revenge and money additionally anti-Semitic details draw the attentions because in Shakespearean England anti-Semitic prejudices was common and was formative to be mentioned. Besides anti-Semitic elements, the revenge, money lending and more were dominant themes in the play. "Even when the central theme has been recognized, *The Merchant of Venice* is not an easy play; it presents a plot to which we must respond as to a golden ideal, and also as to a human action." (Humphreys 280). Furthermore; the differential feature of this play is that it is not only about lending money, revenge or religious but also love and sort of self sacrifice for love and these elements stir audience up, let them think something more of emotional and moral things. *The Merchant of Venice* is chain of events which introduce anti-Semitic figures through the special character Shylock who has some common features with Barabas such as being 'Jew', having daughters who are so important for their fathers that the second important thing for them after money is their daughters, being greedy and lusting for money and both character were left by their daughters because of their Christian dependence. Through the play Shylock is mentioned as "a Jew" which is a handicap for drawing his own personality in readers mind because the setting begins with a direct prejudice and stereotype that the personal features stay in a second position. Shylock, in general, is the villain of the play who was alienated from the community.

In Shakespearean society, Jews were not allowed to have proper occupation in the Christian society and they were minority group and this is why the Jews mostly preferred to be a moneylender. The stereotypes were common in Shakespearean society, people had a Jew picture in their mind and this was a reason why they hated Jews since Jews were lending money and it was already a big sin according to their belief which made Jewish people hated figure. Jews were not allowed to anything that one must certainly keep doing in order to earning money and being alive for example having a farm, having a store, just working in a café and more. People did not want them to take part in the society so the rest allowed was just lending money which was seen as sinful and the worst so this statue made the character automatically villain one but at the end of the play, implicitly the villain became a loser. In the play, it is easy to note that Shylock was actually right side; it means that he gave money to a Christian character, Antonio and wanted back as it was already happening as they already agreed, though surprisingly the situation was happening like vice versa that Antonio did not pay back and as an addition to this Shylock was supposed to give his esteem to Christians and convert into a Christian otherwise he would not be forgiven. The reason why he was in a “forgiven” position is quite interesting story. So preliminarily, Antonio was given some money with the condition that he would pay back otherwise he had to give his pound of flesh, continuously Antonio could not pay back and squirmed out of this situation. While Antonio was supposed to be in a “forgiven” position, Shylock ended up being the one in the wrong. Antonio eventually conditioned that he forgave Shylock only when he became a Christian.

Shakespeare took into consideration of creating a Jew character and Jew stereotypes that at the very first prologues of the play Sharlock was mentioned as directly “a Jew”.

“During Shakespeare’s time, Shylock, and Jews in general, were portrayed on the stage as comical, yet villainous figures. The costume included an orange wig, a bulbous nose, and a large and sinister cape. Jews were types, not people” (Balsler 10).

Basically the play besides his bad features which are similar to Barbara’s, Shylock has something much of humanity, and as a reader, I am of the opinion that Shylock as a victim arouse sympathy.

SHYLOCK

You call me misbeliever, cutthroat dog,

And spet upon my Jewish gaberdine,

[...]

Fair sir, you spet on me on Wednesday last,

You spurned me such a day; another time

You called me dog; and for these courtesies

I'll lend you thus much moneys'?

ANTONIO

I am as like to call thee so again,

To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too. (Shakespeare 1.3.121-122; 135-141)

The humiliation of Jews confront us and make the fight of Shylock ultimately right as no one in the play was not fair, he created his own court of justice and wanted Antonio’s flesh. At first, it might be seen as a hatred of Christian but in fact it is a hatred that Shylock was threatened like an animal and it was not even an implication so Shylock wanted this for revenge of his past angers. In the play, the most striking speech of Shylock has the quality of being a summary of the unfair chains of events experienced by Jews;

“To bait fish withal. If it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge. He hath disgraced me and hindered me half a million, laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies—and what’s his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrongs a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrongs a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villainy you teach me I will execute—and it shall go hard but will better the instruction.” (Shakespeare 3.1. 56-58)

At this point Shakespeare left his mark on the play and people who read or watched the play feel great mercy for Shylock who was humiliated and blamed for being a Jew. With this speech Shylock wanted to arouse the intention that both Jews and Christian were the equal parts of this planet so they should be under the same conditions. Shylock’s passion for a fair play and vengeance turned him a persistent character moreover it seems in the play that Shylock seriously wanted to slaughter Antonio while trying to take his flesh, he actually did but the real aim was to establish justice that is his warranty. Eventually the Christian-predominant court decides to the detriment of Shylock just because he was a not one of those Christians but a Jew.

“In both Shakespeare's and Marlowe's plays the view inculcated is, that on the part of a Jew fraud is the sign of his tribe, whereas on the part of Christians counter-fraud, though accompanied by violence, is worthy of commendation.” (Jones 3). The differentiations of both plays are perfectly designed and as clear as crystal. The two different character and their psychologies that shape also perceptions and contents steer the future of the plays.

The concepts used varied for example in *the Jew of Malta*, besides characterizing a Jew, Barabas has a black personality which makes the reader feel no pity for him and he is identified with being a wrecker on the other hand in *the Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare draws a picture of unfair situation of Shakespearean Jews so the reflection of Shylock into society compose a sense of mercy among people. “Marlowe cuts a single-minded and powerful cleft through his startling material. Shakespeare myriad-minded and richly humane explores the varying shades and colors which make up human nature.” (Humphreys 279). Religion as an important element of human nature is mentioned perfectly in both play and anti-Semitic figures, intensely in *the Merchant of Venice*, mentioned in both plays. Anti Semitism was the fact of that era in which both plays were penned and they are the symbolic vehicles of anti Semitism.

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