THE JEW WHICH SHAKESPEARE DREW

Liliana Tronea-Ghidel
Assist., PhD., University of Craiova

Abstract: The main objective of this paper is the analysis of the Jewish presence in England since Medieval to Shakespeare's time and the presence of Jews in England, which can be traced back to an early period in its history. There is no clear evidence whether they accompanied Julius Caesar in his invasion of Britain in 55 B.C.; but – as we have already seen – they came over in considerable numbers during the Norman period, and subsequently – as in all other countries where they ever settled – played an important part in determining and regulating the economic condition of the kingdom. It is therefore not surprising to find references about Jews in every section of English literature. Most of these references should embody the popular Middle Ages stereotypes inspired by intense religious fanaticism, profound racial antipathy, and a profound ignorance of the personality of the Jew.

Keywords: Jews, Turks, Marranos, Venice, racism.

To begin with, in the few early specimens of English ballads, as in the Scottish *The Jew's Daughter*, the feeling is anti-Jewish. The same must be said of the Chaucer's "Prioress's Tale" in *The Canterbury Tales*, where the terrible blood-accusation against the Jews finds a double reference. Similarly, in William Langland's *Vision of Piers Plowman* there is an allusion which can be fairly termed sympathetic. The poet prophesies a time when there shall be –

"Such a pees amonge the people and a perfit trewthe,
That Jewes shall wene in here witte and waxen wonder glade,
That Moises or Messie be come into this erthe,
And have wonder in here hertis, that men beth so trewe."

Langland evidently felt that the abundant peace to which he looked forward could only be reached by allaying the feud between the Jew and the Gentile. Even when his Christianity leads him to desire the conversion of all who are outside his own religion, a friendly, almost universalist feeling betrays itself.

They who were afterwards stigmatized in the Book of Comnmon Prayer as "Jews, Turks, infidels, and heretics," were not so utterly outcast but that the poet could say "Cryste cleped us alle... Sarasenes, and scismatickes. and Jewes" – Saracens and Jews especially, the one representing a branch and the other the root of Christianity. Both, because of their religious kinship, are to be taught and gently entreated. In what way the poet arrived at this generous estimate of the Jew can only be matter for conjecture. His knowledge of Jews was probably obtained from travellers, a supposition in some measure borne out by his reference to Avignon, then a place of protection for Jews.

A more recent example since Shakespeare's time is Stephen Gosson's *School of Abuse* (1579), in which there is mention of a play "The Jew shewn at the Bull," of which, unfortunately, no copy is extant. The production of the *Jew of Malta*, by Marlowe, marks a considerable advance, if not in any more favourable conception of the Jew, at least in the artistic treatment of him. Did sufficient historical materials exist, it would be extremely interesting to discover who were the prototypes of Barabbas and his daughter Abigail. Were

BDD-A27469 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 20:54:55 UTC)

they merely the creations of fancy or were they drawn from living types? For, although Jews were still legally forbidden to reside in England during Marlowe's lifetime, it is well known that many Jews – some even of note, such as Roderigo Lopez, Queen Elizabeth's personal physician – lived in that sovereign's reign.

A further example is a ballad, *Gernutus, a Jew* which appeared about the same period. Interestingly enough, it is based on a story of a bond akin to that which forms the central incident in *The Merchant of Venice*. Then a play ascribed to Robert Greene, *The First Part of the Tragicall raigne of Selimus, Emperour of the Turks*, appeared in the years following Marlowe's death. In this play we meet with a Jewish character which bears a striking resemblance to, and was evidently suggested by the career of the unfortunate Lopez.

This proposal is assented to by Abraham, who not only gives the poisoned liquid to Bajazet and his lords, but drinks it himself. That Lopez is the prototype of the Jew in Selimus is made still more evident when we note that Abraham calls himself an old man, which was likewise the case with Lopez.

Following hard on this play, or perhaps contemporary with it, appeared Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. It is not our intention to add to the already numerous criticisms which exist on this play, except to observe that popular interest in the Jew would seem to have been greatly aroused at that period. Whence Shakespeare drew his inspiration remains still a matter of dispute. It is generally agreed that he owed nothing to foreign travel for his knowledge of the Jew but, from a coincidence of dates in the respective lives of Lopez and the dramatist, it would appear highly probable that the latter enjoyed a personal acquaintance with the former, and that Lopez served, if not wholly, at least in part, for the portrait of "the Jew which Shakespeare drew."

One element which greatly adds to the dimension of otherness in *The Merchant of Venice* is the setting. The explanation resides in the historical development of the city: from the fifteenth century onwards Venice established itself as a dominant maritime power whose access to Turkey and to the trade routes of the eastern Mediterranean contributed to its reputation as a multicultural republic. Although it had no natural resources to speak of, it was the richest city in Renaissance Europe, located where the products of Asia could most conveniently be exchanged with those of Western Europe. As a town of traders, Venice was full of foreigners: Turks, Jews, Arabs, Africans, Christians of various nationalities and denominations. By sixteenth-century standards, the city was unusually tolerant to diversity. This relative tolerance was intimately linked with the city's wealth: its legal guarantees of fair treatment for all were designed to keep its markets running smoothly.

In 1591, James I, still king James VI of Scotland, first published his epic poem, *The Lepanto* (republished in 1603, when he became James I of England. We have all reasons to believe that at least a segment of Shakespeare's audiences were familiar to it and to the description of Venice. Here is an excerpt:

"Go quickly hence to Venice town,
And put into their minds
To take revenge of wrongs the Turks
Have done in sundry kinds.
No whistling wind with such a speed,
From hills can hurl o'er heugh
As he whose thought doth furnish speed,
His thought was speed aneugh
This town it stands with the sea,
Five miles or thereabout,
Upon no isle, nor ground, the sea
Runs all the streets throughout.

BDD-A27469 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 20:54:55 UTC)

[...]
The angel then arrived into
This artificial town,
And changed in likeness of a man
He walks both up and down..." (89-100; 111-14) [1]

It is an unexpected conclusion for this royal commentator of the town: according to the King, Venice is an "artificial town" which only exists through art, and human intervention, not naturally.

To Shakespeare's audience, although Venice was no longer what it had been, it remained a romantic land, with the trappings of empire still about itself – an efficient, stable, and long-established government over wealthy merchants and skillful seamen with territory and bases here and there in the Mediterranean. What's more, Shakespeare's century saw Venice reach its artistic heights. Titian and Tintoretto were sixteenth-century Venetians, for instance. Then too, even in decline, Venice remained Europe's shield against the Turks throughout Shakespeare's lifetime and for several decades after his death.

The title of the play – *The Merchant of Venice* – may be misleading, as far as Shylock is concerned. Actually, the Norton Shakespeare gives the following title: *The Comical History of the Merchant of Venice, or Otherwise Called the Jew of Venice*. [2]The play's "List of Roles" mentions Antonio – Christian merchant of Venice and friend of Bassanio – while Shylock is simply referred to as 'Shylock the Jew, a Venetian usurer'. It is perhaps the first definite distinction that the audience encounters. Irrespective of the mixture of tragedy and comedy, or the permanent conflicts – Christian vs. Jew, law vs. mercy, money vs. love – what is important for us is again the geographical space of the play, the same virgin Venice which is primarily a trade post.

Antonio's ships are compared to the rich merchants who dominate the sea trade and to whom their less fortunate competitors dutifully bow. Shylock contributes his own comment on the intense Mediterranean trade and as exemplified by Antonio's successful commercial endeavours:

SHYLOCK

He [Antonio] hath an argosy bound to Tripoli, another to the Indies; I understand moreover upon the Rialto, he hath a third at Mexico, a fourth for England, and other ventures he hath squandered abroad. But ships are but boards, sailors but men; there be land rats, and water rats, water thieves, and land thieves – I mean pirates – there is the peril of waters, winds and rocks. (*MV*, 1.3.16-23) [3]

We can extract some useful information from Shylock's comments: Antonio, like all Venetian merchants of his time, traded heavily with the port of Tripoli in the Levant (eastern Mediterranean). On the other hand, up to the beginning of the 17th century, the principal shipping lanes of the Indian Ocean shifted from the northern half (the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf) to the southern half (the Cape route). The references to Mexico and England simply

[1]James VI and I, *The Lepanto*, in *Reading Monarch's Writing: The Poetry of Henry VII, Mary Stuart, Elizabeth I and James VI/I*, ed. Peter C. Herman (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2002). Cited in Kim F. Hall, ed. *Othello, Texts and Contexts*. 251-56.

[2]Regarding the title of the play, the Norton Shakespeare gives the following explanation: "The title *The Jew of Venice* does not appear in any printed text of the play. It was used, however, when the play was entered on the Stationers' Register in 1598. Since the theatrical company, not a bookseller, was responsible for the entry, the Oxford editors believe that members of Shakespeare's company considered *The Jew of Venice* an acceptable alternative title" (Norton, 1119).

[3] Even the word "argosies" has historical and geographical connotations. It sends back to a city founded on the eastern shore of the Adriatic in the seventh century by refugees. The new city was named Ragusium, better known to us in the Italian version of the name, Ragusa. Ragusa was, for a time, a flourishing trading city, much like Venice itself, or like Genoa and Pisa. Ragusa was particularly known for its large merchant ships, which were called *ragusea.* In English the first two letters were transposed and the word became "argosy."

BDD-A27469 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 20:54:55 UTC)

demonstrate the diversity of Antonio's financial interests, as well as the risks in which he is currently involved, though possibly an exaggeration, designed to produce a particular effect.

In the cosmopolitan city of Venice (or London, as the case may be), the visibility of the black Other was an uncontested reality. On the other hand, due to their physical traits, the Jews could easily pass for white, therefore Christian, and hence English. Any analogy between the two races was out of the question, but analogies between blackness and Jewishness were not only possible, but also desirable. According to Anthony Barthelemy, since ancient times blackness was associated with sin and evil, and this association was readily adopted by Christianity and overlaid with a narrative of salvation and damnation: white became the color of the saved, black the color of the damned. [4]

Writing about the conversion of the Spanish Jews, Jerome Friedman mentions a 1604 biography of King Charles V of Spain which supports the idea that the Jews would have been the first among the damned:

> "Who can deny that in the descendent of the Jews there persists and enduresth eevil inclination of their ancient ingratitude and lack of understanding, just as in Negroes [there persists] the inseparability of their blackness? For if the latter should unite themselves a thousand times with white women, the children are born with the dark color of the father. Similarly, it is not enough for a Jew to be three parts aristocrat or Old Christian for one family-line [i.e., one Jewish ancestor] alone defiles and corrupts him." (Friedman16-17) [5]

The biographer equals Jewishness with "ingratitude" and "lack of understanding" – such traits are as persistent as the blackness of blacks, that they will not be erased by the Jews' marriage with Christian women just as the child of a black-and-white inter-racial marriage will bear the black skin of the father. In Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, Shylock's daughter Jessica seems to anticipate this equation when she describes her father as a countryman "to Tubal and Chus" (3.2.285) – the former is a Jew, and the latter a mythical originary black African. [6]

Such a connection between blacks and Jews as alien others offered one of the building blocks towards the construction of the racialized notion of Englishness. As a consequence of their skin colour – which was no different than that of the English – the Jewishness of the London Marranos were not always perceived as threats to the then emerging notion of Englishness. Roger Prior went as far as to discover an integrationist Italian Jewish community in Tudor London. These Italian Jews were not very much different from the Portuguese Jews: they had the advantage of royal patronage, engaged in trade, and maintained close connections to the Jewish community in Antwerp. They lived in the same places in and outside London as their Portuguese counterparts did, but they integrated into English society far more thoroughly through marriage to Christians (see Prior 138). [7]

Prior is convinced that Shakespeare draws a clear-cut distinction between converted Italian Jews, like Emilia Bassano – better known now as the poet Emilia Lanier – the woman alleged to be the dark lady of his sonnets, and Portuguese converts like Lopez whose resistant Jewishness was seen as a threat to English identity. [8] We can neither confirm nor deny

---

[4]Barthelemy, Anthony. *Black Face, Maligned Race: The Representation of Blacks in English Drama from Shakespeare to Southerne* (Baton Rouge: University of Louisiana Press, 1987).

[5]Friedman, Jerome. "Jewish Conversion, the Spanish Pure Blood Laws and Reformation: A Revisionist View of Racial and Religious Antisemitism." *Sixteenth Century Journal* 18 (1987): 3-29.

[6]1578 adaptation of the biblical narrative of Ham and his sons by George Best, an English traveler, is a possible source for Jessica's reference to Chus. See HakluytR., *The Principal Navigations, Voyages Traffiques, and Discoveries of the English Nation* (ed. Walter Raleigh, London, 1600) .

[7]Prior, Roger. "A Second Jewish Community in Tudor London," *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England* 31(1990): 137-52.

[8]For more on the influence of Lopez, see Katz, David S. *Jews in the History of England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

BDD-A27469 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 20:54:55 UTC)

Prior's claims about Emilia Bassano, but relevant documents regarding the Italian Jewish community in London at the time Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice* suggest the existence of competing notions of Jewishness. The construction of Jews as "deserving" (as they would later be labeled in the state documents calling for their readmission to England) or alien may have functioned to authorize the social and political agendas of British imperialism and the racialism it depended on. [9]

There are a number of major political questions that add to Foxe's concerns: How would the English distinguish resistant and finally unintegrable Jews like Lopez or Gaunse from more cooperative and thus "truly" convertible Jews like Bassano? How could they affirm this distinction without denying the meaning and promise of conversion to Christianity? And how could English Christians define the Jew's difference both as a difference of nature and as a difference of faith involving the act of will faith requires? Summing up, these issues constitute Shakespeare's challenge in *The Merchant of Venice* – a challenge he meets by presenting Jessica as a "fair" Jewish alternative to Shylock.

Shylock, the Venetian money-lender, first appears in Shakespeare's play in Act I, scene 3. We shall proceed to a detailed account of this scene, crucial for the ethnic conflict in the play. According to Isaac Asimov, Shakespeare invented the name himself:

> "Shylock is not a Jewish name; there was never a Jew named Shylock that anyone has heard of; the name is an invention of Shakespeare's which has entered the common language (because of the power of the characterization of the man) to represent any grasping, greedy, hard-hearted creditor. I have heard Jews themselves use the word with exactly this meaning, referring back to Shakespeare's character. Where did Shakespeare get the name? There is a Hebrew word *shalakh*, which appears twice in the Bible (Leviticus 11:17 and Deuteronomy 14:17). In both places, birds of prey are being listed as unfit articles of diet for Jews. No one knows exactly what bird is meant by *shalakh*, but the usual translation into English gives it as 'cormorant.'" (Asimov, I-510)

Shylock's Jewishness first manifests itself during the same scene, when he declines Bassanio's invitation to what was meant to be a pure business dinner:

> "Yes, to smell pork, to eat of the habitation which *your prophet the Nazarite* conjured the devil into!" (*MV*, 1.3.31-33, emphasis added)

By refusing to eat pork, Shylock simply observes the restriction imposed upon the Jews by the eleventh chapter of the Book of Leviticus – which later became the hallmark of the Jews-Gentiles difference, and a way for the converted Jews to prove that they had really abandoned their old religion:

> "And the swine, though he divide the hoof, and be cloven-footed, yet he cheweth not the cud; he is unclean to you. Of their flesh shall ye not eat, and their carcase shall ye not touch." (Leviticus, 11:7)

Unsure of his audience's knowledge of the Old Testament and Hebrew religion, Shakespeare has Shylock refer to a chapter in the New Testament – Matthew's story about Jesus evicting the devils from a possessed man, and sending them into a heard of swine: the devils "went into the herd of swine and, behold, the whole herd of swine ran violently down a steep place into the sea, and perished in the waters." (Matthew, 8:32)

Pursuing his intention of depicting an evil character, Shakespeare put into Shylock's mouth rather mocking remarks at Christianity which the Jews of the time were careful to avoid: the superstitious tales the religion was made up of, or references to "your prophet the Nazarite". It is also evidence that neither Shakespeare nor his audience had had any close

[9] The term "deserving" is used in a 1656 document in which a committee of the Council of State argues for the readmission of Jews to England. see Samuel, Edgar. "The Readmission of the Jews to England in 1656, in the Context of English Economic Policy" in *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England* 31 (1990): 153-70.

BDD-A27469 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 20:54:55 UTC)

contacts with real Jews in London – so scarce and, with the exception of the famous Doctor Lopez, almost invisible – to accurately write and speak about their most intimate thoughts.

Shakespeare conformed to the Early Modern stereotypes about Jews, so his audience was again satisfied: the Jew on the stage was as evil as the New Testament Jews who had had rejected Jesus and requested his crucifixion. The same evil Jews had opposed and persecuted the Apostles, and, during the Crusades, gruesome stories were being circulated about Jews poisoning the wells, and even sacrificing Christian children as part of the celebration of the Passover. Thus, the very use of the word, whether sensible or not, indicated Shylock's Jewishness, and that is what Shakespeare wanted it to do.

It is a useful addition to the general picture of the villainous Jew, one that would convince the audience that there was no difference whatsoever between the Jew on the stage and the Jews of the Old Testament. It also gives Bassanio an opportunity to comment, in an aside, that "The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose" (*MV*, 1.3.95) – which is another reference to the Bible, this time to both the Old and the New Testament [[11]]. It gives Shylock the chance to viciously, and hatefully attack Antonio:

> Signior Antonio, many a time and oft
> In the Rialto you have ratedme
> About my moneys and my usances.
> Still have I borne it with a patient shrug.
> *For suffranceis the badge of all our tribe.*
> You call me misbeliever, cutthroat dog,
> And spit upon my Jewish gaberdine. (*MV*, 1.3.103-9, emphasis added)

We have all reasons to believe that, when he says "suffrance is the badge of our tribe", Shylock alludes to the yellow Jewish badge (see Chapter Four above). Also, by mentioning the "Jewish gaberdine" he alludes to the long cloak that pilgrims were supposed to wear when going to a shrine, as a distinctive sign of their humility. In Venice, besides the obligation of wearing such items that would distinguish them from the Christians, the Jews had to face a further humiliation: they were forced to live in the ghetto.[12]

In Act II, we meet the second Jewish character in the play – Jessica, Shylock's daughter – and have a glimpse of an Elizabethan Jew's home life. Changes are taking place in Shylock's household as Launcelot Gobbo, his Christian servant decides to leave his Jewish master in favour of Bassanio. Jessica's reaction reveals a few details of her family life:

> "I am sorry thou wilt leave my father so;
> Our house is hell, and thou a merry devil
> Didst rob it of some taste of tediousness." (*MV*, 2.3.1-3)

The key words here are "hell", "merry devil" and "tediousness". Though Shakespeare does not give any clue in support of the supposition that Shylock is not a loving father and a good family man, the audience may presume that a Jew's house is nothing but hellish and that Launcelot-the-Christian was the one who managed to rob it of any "taste of tediousness". With Jessica, we have another cliché favoured by the Elizabethan audience: the villainous *Other* – be him a Jew, a Turk, or of any other nation – has a beautiful daughter who falls in love with a handsome Christian and finally elopes with him and is converted to her lover's faith.

---

[11] In Matthew, 4:6 we have the story of the temptation of Jesus by the devil in the desert: the devil urges Jesus to jump off the roof of the Temple in Jerusalem and thus prove that the angels of God would help him: "… for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone."

[12] *Gheto* (in Italian, "iron foundry"); it was the name of one of the islands on the Venetian lagoon where the authorities had decided – about eighty years before *The Merchant of Venice* was written – to move all the Jews for better protection and control.

BDD-A27469 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 20:54:55 UTC)

To Jessica, her Jewish origin is a sin, and the only way out – which will allow her to share Lorenzo's love and be accepted into the Venetian Christian community – is conversion to the Christian religion.[13]Jessica's resolution demonstrates that during the Middle Ages the religious prejudice against the Jews prevailed over the racial one. At surface value, conversion would bring about acceptance by and equality with the "old Christians".

It is a much-cited, pathetic appeal to humanity and understanding of the *Other*,but in Shylock's own terms. He does not want to become a Christian, like his daughter; he wants to remain a Jew among Jews. The humiliated, tormented Shylock does not even claim to be better than a Christian, and he is simply satisfied that he is no worse.

In the end, Shylock, becomes a victim of a perverse world, a victim of people who mislead, misuse and prejudge him – and force him to take a desperate stand and lose everything. The Christians, meanwhile, live on happily ever after, allowing the play to be called a comedy. But it is not a true comedy. At the end, while Christians exult in their victory at Belmont, one can imagine Shylock walking the streets of the Rialto or the Jewish ghetto looking for his dignity and the glow of a friendly candle. As Nicholas Rowe has observed,

"There appears in *The Merchant of Venice* such a deadly spirit of revenge, such a savage fierceness and fellness, and such a bloody designation of cruelty and mischief, as cannot agree either with the style or characters of comedy" (Rowe, 83)

To conclude, Shakespeare's intent in *The Merchant of Venice* may have been subversive: to challenge and subvert the anti-Semitic stereotypes of his day. As Jonathan Bate points out, the Christians in the play are 'no better' than the Jews while Shylock, the Jewish money-lender, is a complex figure, 'one of the most memorable characters in all literature'.[14]

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BARTHELEMY, Anthony Gerard. *Black Face, Maligned Race: The Representation of Blacks in English Drama from Shakespeare to Southerne*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987)

HAKLUYT, Richard, ed. *The Principal Navigations, Voyaiges, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation*,12 vols. (Glasgow: J. Maclehose and Sons, 1904)

HALL, Kim. *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995)

HUNTER, G. K. "The Theology of Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*."*Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 27 (1964): 211-40, cited in Mary Janell Metzger,""Now by My Hood, a Gentle and No Jew": Jessica, *The Merchant of Venice*, and the Discourse of Early Modern English Identity"

JAMES VI and I, *The Lepanto*, in *Reading Monarch's Writing: The Poetry of Henry VII, Mary Stuart, Elizabeth I and James VI/I*, ed. Peter C. Herman (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2002).

KATZ, David S. *Jews in the History of England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994)

PRIOR, Roger. "A Second Jewish Community in Tudor London," *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England* 31(1990): 137-52.

SHAPIRO, James. *Shakespeare and the Jews* (Columbia University Press, 1996)

[13] For a detailed analysis of the conversion of the Jews and the status of the "Marranos" in medieval England and Europe

[14] Jonathan Bate, *The Genius of Shakespeare* (London, Picador, 1998), p. 127.

BDD-A27469 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 20:54:55 UTC)