

Reinforcing the Dominant Discourse in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*

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ABSTRACT

Controversy has surrounded The Merchant of Venice. Although some critics believe the play is not anti-Semitic, the present study shows that Shakespeare could not go against the current of Elizabethan anti-Semitism. The play reinforced the dominant discourses and stereotypes working against the Jews. Few Shakespearean characters are more hotly debated than Shylock, the Jewish usurer in The Merchant. Although he has a relatively small part, this multifaceted and influential character governs the play and his multidimensional nature complicates the work significantly. The play depicts him as a cruel, crafty and wicked Jew just as Elizabethan Christians would demand. The playwright takes the stereotype character presented to him and makes it more complex, but he leaves its anti-Semitic qualities untouched. The Merchant of Venice represents and reinforces the dominant discourses of law, religion and nationality that support the Christians and work against the Jews. As a comedy, it made the audience identify with the winners of the trial scene, the Christians. Therefore, nothing remains of the resisting voices and what is heard more often and more powerfully is the dominant discourse of the time voiced by the winners of the play. Shakespeare made a clear distinction between 'self' and 'other', did whatever at his disposal to defeat 'the others' of the play, deprived them of genuine identity and form a homogenised community where no resisting voice could be heard.

Keywords: The Merchant of Venice; Shakespeare; anti-Semitism; discourse; Shylock

INTRODUCTION

After writing *Julius Caesar* and *Romeo and Juliet*, and before writing *Hamlet*, Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice* (c. 1596–1597), which since its publication has been performed more often than his other comedies. In fact, it has rivalled *Hamlet* in winning the stages. The controversy surrounding the play has made it (in)famous and fascinating to audiences in different contexts. Unlike the characters in a regular comedy, those of *The Merchant* are multifaceted, leading to different –often contradictory– interpretations of the characters' actions and motivations. Being extraordinarily challenging, controversial and confusing, the play has revealed some of humanity's severe shortcomings.

Few Shakespearean characters are more hotly debated than Shylock, the Jewish usurer in *The Merchant*. He appears in only five scenes and speaks about 400 lines. Although he has a relatively small part, this multifaceted and influential character governs the play and his multidimensional nature complicates the work significantly. Reactions to this play have for most of its history been defined by reactions to Shylock. Although modelled on old stock characters that are simply ridiculed, Shylock departs from the tradition. Unlike such characters, he is novel enough to arouse sympathy. The critics emphatically kept the spotlight on Shylock, whether played as an unsympathetic caricature or as a wronged victim. There are different ways of tackling this troubling figure of *The Merchant*. Miller calls him a “villain-victim” (2004, p. 204) and Girard argues that the playwright has created Shylock as a cartoon Jew for the anti-Semitic mob, while sneaking into his text a subversive thread of critique—an anti-anti-Semitism for the sophisticated viewer to decode (1980, p. 20). Gross proposes that Shylock, one of Shakespeare's most complex characters is in fact Shakespeare himself, revealing himself through his character (2006, p. 32). A reader's interpretation of the

troubling character of Shylock would change their understanding of the nature of the play. One of the important questions concerning the play is whether it is a comedy, tragedy, tragicomedy or else.

The play is thematically perplexing. While Grebanier interpreted it as an allegorical dramatization of the triumph of love and mercy over justice and hate (1962, p. 45), numerous scholars have discussed its attitude toward the Jews. Their argument concerns whether the play is anti-Semitic in and of itself or if it is a play about anti-Semitism. There is no agreement over anti-Semitism that many Jews see as a keystone of Shakespeare's play. On one hand there are critics who consider the play anti-Semitic. For instance, Cohen considers the play undoubtedly anti-Semitic (1990, p. 39), Boyce refers to the "evidently anti-Semitic nature of the play" (2005, p. 388) and Bloom states, "one would have to be blind, deaf, and dumb not to recognise that Shakespeare's grand, equivocal comedy *The Merchant of Venice* is nevertheless a profoundly anti-Semitic work" (1998, p. 171). On the other hand there are others who believe the play is no offense to any Jew and it helps other people get familiar with Judaism. For instance, according to Wynne-Davies, Shylock of the play may be seen to represent, not only a Jew with the significant and extensive racial and religious discrimination inevitably implied, but also a focus for all religious intolerance (2003, p. 372). There are also a group of critics like Tovey that argue Shakespeare criticises Christianity through his dramatization of Bassanio's relationship with Antonio (1981, p. 236).

Unlike political theories, literary works may not be capable of changing a society entirely, while the influential ones, like *The Merchant of Venice*, can make a nation aware of contaminated and decaying institutions or reinforce them. This play can be mentioned to approve the role of fiction as an instrument of reinforcing the dominant discourse. It is a difficult work to classify. It is possible to be anti-anti-Semitism and yet end up reproducing racial stereotypes. The present paper analyses controversy surrounding the play in the light of new historical approach, and tries to see the playwright and his writing within the scope of his immediate culture.

DISCUSSION

New Historicism considers power relations and the attempts to transfer, and to achieve power as the most important context for any text. It regards a literary text as a space to represent power relations and interactions of different discourses. Stephen Greenblatt coined the term 'New Historicism' in 1982. This new approach is in opposition to formalism, new criticism, and old historicism. The political issues of 1960's, the literary scholars' tendency toward finding out the link between literature and the social issues of the time, and the increasing number of literature professors from minorities contribute to the emergence of new historicism. The objectives of this approach is to find out how a literary text represents the interaction of different discourses, how it affects and is affected by them, how it deals with the dominant discourse, how the interpretations of a text interact with the contemporary discourses, and how these interpretations change throughout history.

To have a full grasp of new historicism one may contrast it with old historicism. According to old historicism, history is linear, causal, and progressive. By linear and causal it means that the event A causes the event B, and the event B in his turn leads to the event C, and so on. By progressive it means that history improves as it goes on. Old historical approach is one-sided in that it holds that history shapes literature and not the other way around. In new historicism, on the other hand, "all events—including everything from the creation of an art work, to a televised murder trial, to the persistence of or change in the condition of the poor—are shaped by and shape the culture in which they emerge" (Tyson 2006, p. 284). This approach rejects the idea of the autonomy of the text.

Old historicism considers history as the objective fact. “The conception of history that informed new historicism was ... reflecting shifts in thinking about the validity of absolute and objective historical knowledge” (Padley 2006, p. 172). Old historicism regards history as fact while literature is fiction. New historicism opposes this view. This approach “deconstructs the traditional opposition between history (traditionally thought of as factual) and literature (traditionally thought of as fictional)” (Tyson 2006, p. 286).

The ideas of the French philosopher Michel Foucault strongly influenced the formation of new historicism. His idea concerning ‘power’ is significantly different from the previous views on power. He believes that “power circulates in all directions, to and from all social levels, at all times” (Tyson 2006, p. 284). Regarding the exchange of power, he states that

The vehicle by which power circulates is a never-ending proliferation of *exchange*: (1) the exchange of material goods through such practices as buying and selling, bartering, gambling, taxation, charity, and various forms of theft; (2) the exchange of people through such institutions as marriage, adoption, kidnapping, and *slavery*; and (3) the exchange of ideas through the various *discourses* (italics mine) a culture produces” (Tyson 2006, p. 284).

Discourse is one of the most important terms in new historicism. New historicism defines a discourse as “a social language created by particular cultural conditions at a particular time and place” (Tyson 2006, p. 285) that “expresses a particular way of understanding human experience”. Foucault offers a range of meanings for discourse, “treating it sometimes as the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a number of statements” (Mills 1997, p. 6). Mills offers this definition: “[a] discourse is a set of sanctioned statements which have some institutionalised force, which means that they have a profound influence on the way that individuals act and think” (Mills 1997, p. 62). A comparison and contrast of discourse and ideology would be illuminating: “Although the word discourse has roughly the same meaning as the word ideology, and the two terms are often used interchangeably, the word discourse draws attention to the role of language as the vehicle of ideology” (Tyson 2006, p. 285).

The issue of power can be traced in *The Merchant of Venice*; Shakespeare depicts the title character, Antonio, as a powerful one. Since he is a merchant, he does exchange material goods through buying and selling. He belongs to the rich Christians who can have slaves so he has the power of exchanging people. In the play, one can observe “a dynamic, unstable interplay among discourses in which overlap and competition with one another takes place” (Yusof 2009, p. 129). Moreover, the dominant discourses of the society support him as well as other Christian protagonists and work against the Jews of the play.

There are two discourses of law in the play. The first supports the Jews. Venice was a powerful trading city with a vast fleet of merchant ships from different places. It was a powerful city-estate with a cosmopolitan aura tolerant of ‘others’. Because at the time of the play the economic system was shifting from feudalism to capitalism, trade, not land, became very important. Money was vital for trade, and as the Jews were rich, they were allowed to live in the city. Venice as a mercantile city was tolerant of foreigners and non-Christians. While self-professed Jews could not live in major European countries such as Spain and England, the Venetian law supported them. This is not, of course, the whole story. Although the city was believed to have achieved its success by exceptional tolerance toward foreigners, who were treated as equals in its laws, the legal support was not based on philanthropy, but on selfish motives. Although the Jews were allowed to live in the city, they were segregated; they lived in a ghetto, a part of a city in which the Jews were forced to live. The so called ‘tolerant’ Venice was so pioneering in segregating the Jews that the term ‘ghetto’ was

originally used in Venice. The Jews suffered many restrictions. The law prohibited Jews from owning land; they had to wear a distinctive ‘uniform’, which included the yellow badge later revived by the Nazis. Anti-Semitic rulers in Venice forbade Jews from many types of livelihoods, except lending money, even though the practice was deemed vicious.

When the Christian merchant, Antonio and the Jew moneylender, Shylock were in court, The Venetian law was on Shylock’s side, because the bond had the merchant’s signature on it. So the court was trying to find a way of stopping Shylock from demanding his pound of flesh. But he refused to accept Bassanio’s money in payment. Portia asked him to exercise mercy. He rejected that. At the last minute, Portia discovered a loophole. She discovered that Venetian law demanded the execution of any ‘alien’ who threatened the death of a Christian. Shylock was defeated and was ordered to bequeath his money to Jessica and become a Christian. Antonio labelled Shylock a ‘stranger’, just as the Venetian law recognised a Jew as an ‘alien’ and Portia took advantage of the law to defeat Shylock.

There are several religious discourses based on the two different religions in the play: Christianity and Judaism. The first forbade usury. Loaning money and charging very high interest on it were considered unethical or wicked. The Jewish faith did not forbid usury. So, The Christians viewed the moneylender Jews as wicked, sinful and impious. However, since 1571, usury had become legal in England whether for Jews or Christians and since there was no practicing Jew in England, practically all the usurers in London would have been Christians. In theory, the English Christians deemed usury a corrupt deed, while in practice they were usurers.

In addition to the issue of usury, there is the question of mercy versus justice. The Jewish faith supported justice while Christianity cared for mercy. Although Portia begged for mercy and Shylock demanded justice in the court, Portia herself showed no mercy when she ordered the confiscation of Shylock’s property and his conversion to Christianity. The biased view towards the Jew in the Christian discourse is best manifested in the belief that only the Christians’ souls would be saved. This was the justification behind Shylock’s forced conversion.

The discourse of nationality can also be traced in the play. Renaissance was the great age of nationalism. The Venetian protagonist and the English audience of the play each had their own nation, but the Jewish antagonists had no homeland to call their own. Wherever the Jews lived, they were ‘others’ or foreigners. Authors from Martin Luther to Samuel Purchas associated Jews with homelessness and failed assimilation. They had no nation based on the earlier definitions of the ‘nation’ as a “biblically ordained category of ethnic identity” (Kitch 2009, p. 193). Since their nationality was not based on land or ethnicity but on their religion, and as Judaism was considered a form of false Christianity that was to be overcome, they were deprived of any nationality. Thus, Shylock’s ‘sacred nation’ (*The Merchant of Venice*, 1.3.40) is despised.

In any critical approach that puts a great emphasis on power, such as new historicism, post-colonialism and feminism, the question of stereotype is highlighted. There is a mutual relationship between power and stereotyping. Power leads to stereotyping, and stereotypes, in turn, support the social position of the powerful. According to post-colonialism the British, other Europeans, and Americans create stereotypes of the peoples unlike themselves and call them Others. Feminists argue that male writers stereotype women into obedient pushovers or madwomen. One of the controversial issues of the play is whether Shylock is a stereotype or not.

The prejudiced attitudes of the Elizabethan England still survive in any culture that creates stereotypes of particular minority groups. Anti-Semitic notions were predominant in Shakespeare’s England. According to Shapiro, the Elizabethan England was obsessed with the Jews; they were the essential ‘others’, against whom the English defined themselves

(1996, p. 88). Jews had been banished from England almost three centuries before Shakespeare, who is not known to have ever left his country. The playwright most likely had never seen a Jew in his life and he created Shylock as almost the very model of the racial stereotype. Shakespearean characters have always been the subject of scholarly scrutiny and the first known person who studied these characters was Maurice Morgann (Ching & Termizi 2012, p. 344). Shylock is one of the most hotly debated Shakespearean characters; the following part sheds light on this controversial character. Shylock comes out of a history of prejudice against the Jews in the medieval and early modern Europe. This character embodies some comic stereotypes including a miser, a blocking father, a moneylender and a Jew. Shakespeare used the miserly father stereotype in Elizabethan and classical comedies. Shylock has the two typical features associated with Jews at the time: a spiteful detestation of Christians and the practice of usury. According to his speeches in the play, he is scheming, gluttonous, satanic, self-righteous, and willing for Christian blood. In the play Shylock is depicted as a wicked character that is ridiculed, disgraced, and finally destroyed by the Christians. The play suggests that Shylock's destruction is the result of his wickedness (Stewart 2010, p. 96). The play reinforces the anti-Semitic predispositions and horrible stereotypes of its time. Through the servant Lancelot Gobbo's and Antonio's heated speech in which he describes Jews as wolves, the play associates Jewishness with inhumanity, animality or demonism (*The Merchant of Venice*, 4.1.73 & 4.1.134). The term 'Jew' itself functions as an offense in the play.

Of course, one may argue that the aforementioned instances are merely individual lines within the play and that the total impression of the work outweighs such instances. Some critics believe that Shylock is not entirely evil, that his point is defensible, and his claim for revenge is made humanly comprehensible. They point to Shylock's only moment of nobility in the play: the instant of making the superb declaration, when he cries out: "Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?" (*The Merchant of Venice*, 3.1.46-7). In this celebrated speech, he reveals the Christian duplicity and hatred toward Jews and asserts his common humanity. The speech proposes that the common humanity of individuals is more significant than religious or racial differences and that Shylock's cruelty is what he has acquired in his interaction with the racist Christians who have maltreated him. The audience can understand Shylock's desire to do evil. Hence their sympathy toward Shylock is aroused.

But one should bear in mind that this only instant of dignity in Act III, Scene 1 quite strangely begins and ends with a shameful expression of the thirst for vengeance; Even such a distinguished request for equality "degenerates into an abrasive vindication of revenge" (Sutherland & Watts 2000, p. 153). One may take this speech as a request for impartial and benevolent treatment, but it is in fact a rationalization for an enormously vicious request. Although Shakespeare does not overlook the process whereby Shylock has become so wicked, it does not prevent him to depict Shylock as a horrendously vicious antagonist. Furthermore, it is just a twenty two-line speech flooded in some 400 other lines. Shylock discloses his character throughout the play and reveals his miserliness, hatred of the Christians, love of usury and gluttony. A reader who scrutinises the whole text will inevitably come to the conclusion that this only moment of nobility plays a very small part in the whole play and in revealing Shylock's character. One of Shakespeare's sources of the work, *The Jew of Malta* featured a Jewish usurer as a villain. Shakespeare borrowed the stereotype and created his Jewish usurer different from the stock characters found in *The Jew of Malta* and many other works. It may be true that Shylock, "the first of the mature comedies' great antagonists, owes some of his enduring impact to the skill with which Shakespeare invests his comparatively short role with its own distinctive voice" (Dobson & Wells 2001, p. 290). But the fact is that the voice granted by Shakespeare reverberates with anti-Semitism.

Although he made the character more humane, he left its anti-Semitic overtones untouched. Although this classical character created afresh by Shakespeare challenges the audience's expectation of a one-dimensional stereotype, he still fulfils their anti-Semitic expectations. Shylock may be an excellent character because of the breadth of life which he reveals. The playwright shows him in his family, in business, in social relations, in morality, and in religion. But in all of these he reinforces the racial stereotypes. Shakespeare has created a character who has become an epitome of the perverted personality of the deceitful miser.

One of the controversies surrounding *The Merchant* concerns its nature: is it a comedy or tragedy? The play contains four different stories. The first is that of Antonio, Bassanio, and Shylock's connection with the borrowed money and the bond. This is the only story that can give the play its tragic aura. The next story is that of the three caskets. Causing a little tension, this story is light-hearted and in some ways entertaining. The third is the love story of Lorenzo and Jessica. The ending story is that of the rings which ends on a happy note. Therefore, the only tragic story of the play is that of Shylock and this story is placed among three happy love stories. Moreover, the play ends with the story of the rings rather than Shylock's trial scene which would turn the play into tragedy. According to Abrams and Harpham,

comedy is a fictional work in which the materials are selected and managed primarily in order to interest and amuse us: the characters and their discomfitures engage our pleasurable attention rather than our profound concern, we are made to feel confident that no great disaster will occur, and usually the action turns out happily for the chief characters (2009, p. 48).

Thus, *The Merchant* tends to be a comedy rather than a tragedy. In Elizabethan period, a person going to a comedy would expect to see a play about love that ended in the union of lovers. In *The Merchant of Venice*, the audience finds three love stories that end in marriage: that of Portia and Bassanio; that of Nerissa and Gratiano; and the story of Jessica and Lorenzo. So the play is a comedy. As is true of all comic villains, there is no doubt that Shylock, being by no means a real threat, will be overpowered at the end of the play.

Furthermore, even if one considers Shylock the tragic figure of the play, the fact that he is laughable at times cannot be neglected. He rather bears a resemblance to the Vice of the medieval morality play. His parsimony turns him into a caricature and he is represented as a subject for laughter throughout the play except for his outstanding speech. Even the climactic scenes of the play which are of a tragic intensity are strangely fused with moments of comedy.

Of the four frequently distinguished types of comedy, this play is a romantic comedy. This sub-genre developed by Elizabethan dramatists on the model of contemporary prose romances such as Thomas Lodge's *Rosalynde* (1590). This type of comedy represents a love affair that includes an attractive heroine, sometimes disguised as a man. The "course of this love does not run smooth, yet overcomes all difficulties to end in a happy union" (2009, p. 49). Northrop Frye believes that some of Shakespeare's romantic comedies depict a shift from the normal world of struggle and anxiety into "the green world"—the Forest of Arden in *As You Like It*, or the fairy-haunted wood of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—in which the difficulties and wrongs of the usual life disappear, enemies reconcile, and true lovers unite (as cited in Abrams & Harpham 2009, p. 49). Belmont is "the green world" of this play. Linda Bamber in *Comic Women, Tragic Men: A Study of Gender and Genre in Shakespeare* (1982) argues that Shakespeare in his romantic comedies depicts women who are often superior to men, while in his tragedies he "creates such nightmare female figures as Goneril, Regan, Lady Macbeth, and Volumnia" (1982, p. 2). Portia is the female character in *The Merchant* who is superior to any man of the play.

The Merchant can be considered a tragicomedy, a type of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama that blends serious and light moods and provides a happy ending to a potentially tragic

story. Thus, the chief characters in tragicomedy embrace both people of high degree appropriate for tragedy and people of low degree fit for comedy. Furthermore, tragicomedy depicts a serious action which endangers the protagonist, yet, by an unexpected reversal of situation, turns out happily. *The Merchant* ends in a melodramatic reversal of fortune for the protagonist, Antonio, who had hitherto seemed headed for a tragic catastrophe. This tragicomic pattern of sudden relief from fatal threat turns the play into tragicomedy.

A significant cue to the nature of the play is the title character: Antonio. He belongs to the camp of the winners of the play. The title character which is the winner of the trial scene cannot come from a tragedy. The merchant of Venice, Antonio, who wins the trial against the Jew of Venice and is united with his beloved, turns the play into comedy, not tragedy. Just a glance at the titles of Shakespearean tragedies shows that the title of tragedy comes from the tragic hero as it is the case with *Hamlet*, *Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*, *Othello* and *King Lear*. Shylock is certainly the defeated character of the play and he may be sympathetic, but it does not turn the play into tragedy since the title of the play is *The Merchant of Venice* not *The Jew of Venice*. A critic calls the play “a troubling comedy,” (Charney 2000, p. 48) another finds “the tragedy within the comedy” (Haverkamp 2011, p. 105) still another refers to “a figure of tragedy trapped in comedy” (Creaser 2004, p. 84). The reason behind that may “be the dark presence of Shylock, a figure too powerful to serve comfortably as the type of comic counter voice represented by Jacques or Malvolio” (Hinely 1980, p. 217). Shylock is not a comic character; on the contrary, he belongs to tragedy. The Stationers' Register calls the play *The Merchant of Venice, or Otherwise Called The Jew of Venice*. But when it appeared in quarto in 1600 the title shifted to *The Most Excellent History of the Merchant of Venice. With the Extreme Cruelty of Shylock the Jew towards the Said Merchant, in Cutting a Just Pound of his Flesh: and the Obtaining of Portia by the Choice of Three Chests*. The first title can be the title of either tragedy or comedy since it refers to both the merchant and the Jew, the winner and the loser of the conflict. The second one, however, gives a synopsis of the play, and highlights the merchant and the Jew respectively as the protagonist and antagonist of the play. In fact it tries not to give chance to any other interpretation of the play. The popular title, *The Merchant of Venice* is actually the short form of the second title since it removes the Jew.

Casting a glance at the history of the play's adaptations in Jewish societies would be illuminating. Analyses of the Jewish Adaptations of the original Shakespearean text shed light on the Jewish interpretations of the play, indicating that they find the work anti-Semitic. Sometimes it is performed with Act 5 cut entirely. Without the ring story, the play would end as a tragedy and could be interpreted as an anti-anti-Semitic work. Finding the work offensive and anti-Semitic, and recognizing that the problem is with the comic nature of the play, the Jews tend to change it. Thus, by cutting the ring story they turn the play into tragedy. The recognizable solution for the Jews is to turn the anti-Semitic comedy into a tragedy about anti-Semitism. Those who wish to call the play tragedy find the fifth act ring trick “anti-climactic and thematically unnecessary” (Hinely 1980, p. 217). The point is that the original Shakespearean “comedy” has nothing unnecessary. The fifth act is vital to make the play a comedy. In 1943, the Palestinian Hebrew writer Ari Ibn-Zahav published a novel which was a fundamental change to Shakespeare's play. It was a Jewish reaction to the Shakespearean depiction of Shylock as a greedy, vicious, and non-Christian Other. If the play was not anti-Semitic why should the Jews bother to produce these adaptations of or reactions to Shakespeare?

A significant theme in new historicism is the “plurality of voices”. This approach tries to include “an equal representation of historical narratives from all groups” (Tyson 2006, p. 287) and is against the dominance of a *master narrative* that is “a narrative told from a single cultural point of view that, nevertheless, presumes to offer the only accurate version of

history” (Tyson 2006, p. 287.). In fact the promotion and development of “the histories of marginalised people” (Tyson 2006, p. 288) is what new historicism tries to accomplish. As mentioned in the introduction, the increasing number of professors from minorities contributes to the emergence of new historicism. Therefore, it is not surprising that it concerns for “a plurality of voices” and the “marginalised people,” who are struggling for their rights. Shakespeare gives a little voice to Jews, ‘the Others,’ but this voice is not so much heard due to the omnipresence of the dominant voice. “The kinds of writing made possible at any given time both [reflect] and [are] consequences of prevailing conditions at the time in which they [are] produced” (Padley 2006, p. 172). It may be true that various voices of the marginalised, among them that of poor Shylock as a Jew, are heard in the play. But the significant fact is that since *The Merchant* is a comedy and not a tragedy, the audience identifies with the winners, not the losers of the play. Therefore, nothing remains of those voices and what is heard more frequently and more forcefully is the voice of the dominant discourse of the winners of the time.

The play is anti-Semitic because of its depiction of Shylock, but its anti-Semitism is best manifested in letting Antonio’s contempt for the Jew go unchallenged while other Christian flaws in the play do not go unchallenged (Mahood 2003, p. 24). In fact the critics’ strongest objection to the play is its homogenizing attempt. At the end of the play, Venice turns into a “comprehensible and reassuring model of enforced uniformity” (Miller 2004, p. 205); the defeat and the conversion of ‘the others’ of the play, Shylock and Jessica, is the “victory of provincialism over cosmopolitanism” (Kitch 2009, p. 205). The play deprives ‘the others’ of any genuine identity and tries to impose a new identity to them. Shylock is ridiculed, and maltreated throughout a play. But instead of being excluded from the society, he is forced to convert to Christianity. By losing his Jewishness he consequently loses his position as an ‘other’, and therefore his identity. Shylock is a Jew, his rivals are Christian. One of the reasons behind Elizabethan anti-Semitism was the Jewish resistance to conversion, that is, their resistance to the political and religious hegemony of the state. At the end of the play Jessica is converted to Christianity through marriage and Shylock is condemned to conversion. Thus, the play can be read as an attempt to monophony, silencing the other voices and dissolving ‘others’ in the homogenised community.

CONCLUSION

Shakespeare as a playwright “highly conservative in every respect” (Lings 1966, p. 7) cannot go against the current of anti-Semitism in his day. *The Merchant of Venice* represents and reinforces the dominant discourses of law, religion and nationality that support the Christians and work against the Jews. It depicts Shylock as a cruel, crafty and wicked Jew just as Elizabethan Christians would demand. The playwright takes the stereotype presented to him and makes it more complex, but he leaves its anti-Semitic qualities untouched. Shakespeare creates a character who has become an epitome for the corrupt personality of the deceiving miser, thus he not only reproduces but also reinforces the stereotype of his time so powerfully that it survives to the present. The play is a comedy replete with love, marriage, elopement and union which ends happily. Being a comedy, the play engages enjoyable responsiveness rather than thoughtful apprehension and it makes the audience identify with the winners, not the losers. Therefore, nothing remains of the resisting voices and what is heard more often and more powerfully is the dominant discourse of the time voiced by the winners of the play. Shakespeare makes a clear distinction between ‘self’ and ‘other’, and does whatever at his disposal to defeat ‘the other’ of the play and form a homogenised community in which no resisting voice can be heard.

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