

Re-reading race: The Otherness of the Black and the Jew in Shakespeare's Plays

Hayder Naji Shanbooj Alolaiwi*

Abstract:

The dramatic works of Shakespeare were created and presented to the London audience a century after the circulation of prominent texts (mostly Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian) about European conquests outside of Europe had begun, and before English voyages started to significantly change both the extra-European imperial landscape and that of Europe itself. The question of the visible nature of otherness seems even more central in the case of Othello. Is the Moor of Venice black? Or rather, should the actors playing the role blacken their faces? This is a topic that has occupied critics from the late 17th century until today. Shylock defends his fundamental likeness to those who still perceive him as a foreign element. The emphasis on the bodily dimension of identity between Jews and non-Jews tells the audience that Jews suffer from stigma, even though nothing in their constitution distinguishes them from Christians. Shylock's monologue describes the process of othering endured by Jews in Christian lands, highlighting the political dynamics that transform one into the other. In our contribution we follow the formation of racial stereotypes in Early Modern England as reflected in two of Shakespeare's plays of otherness: "Othello" and "The Merchant of Venice".

Keywords: alterity, blackness, *Othello*, otherness, race, Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*

1. Introduction: How racial stereotypes were built

The Moors (mostly Berbers) and the Jews, who arrived with Tariq ibn Ziyad in 711, were expelled from Spain during the reign of Isabella and Ferdinand after the reconquest of Granada in 1492. However, a significant expulsion took place later, specifically during 1609-1614, when 300,000 Moriscos, Muslims who had converted to Christianity, were expelled. According to some scholars (Braxton, 1990), the Africans, along with the Spanish Moors, who arrived in England after being expelled from Spain, likely constituted the most numerous ethnic group after the English (Callaghan, 2000: 76). This was to such an extent that "... in regimes of cultural representation, negritude became the

* Lecturer PhD, Al-Qadissya Department of Public Education, Iraq, hayder.naji.884@gmail.com

sine qua non of Renaissance alterity. The capacity of blackness to simultaneously intensify, subsume, and absorb all aspects of otherness is a specifically Renaissance configuration of othering” (Callaghan, 2000: 78). Queen Elizabeth felt the need to entrust a merchant from Lübeck, Caspar Van Zeuden, with the task of carrying out a genuine ethnic cleansing to rid herself of the overly numerous Negars and Blackamoors. Later, she sought the support of the Moors themselves against the common Spanish enemy when the need arose. According to Robin H. Wells, “When it suited her, Elizabeth was quite happy to confide in the Ottoman emperor that she regarded Spain as their common enemy and ‘head of all the idolaters”” (Wells, 2000: 96). The edicts of 1596 and 1601 bear witness to the convergence between negritude understood as primary negativity and the grafting, on this substrate, of the religious-political propellant linked to Arab-Turkish influence.

The Moors had indeed arrived in England following their expulsion from Spain in 1492, and later in 1570, along with the expulsion of the Moriscos during 1609-1614 due to fears of a possible reconquest. The Battle of Lepanto (1571) also occurred during this period, which King James I commemorated with a poem that serves as an important anti-Islamic document. The poem, dating back to 1585, mythologizes the victory of the Holy League against Turkish-Muslim power, stating, “Betwixt the baptized race / And circumcised turbaned Turkes, / Rencountring in that place” (in Wells, 2000: 98). The conquest of Cyprus, which remained under Turkish dominion until 1878, was known to Shakespeare, although in *Othello*, it is the Turks who are defeated, drawing parallels to English battles against the Spanish Armada through the intervention of “divine storms.”

In “Literary Whiteness in Shakespeare’s Sonnets” (1998), K. F. Hall traces stereotypes about skin colour back to the period preceding the Elizabethan era. Derogatory or ironic observations about negritude itself can be found early in English literature, such as associating the devil with blackness or black being associated with hell. However, these references do not touch on anthropological fields and are limited to moral lexical notations that apply to everyone without distinction. George Puttenham, in chapter XVIII of his work “The Arte of English Poesie” (1589), suggests the use of Antiphrasis, or the “broad flute,” to disguise a racist remark, stating, “Or when we deride by plaine and flat contradiction, as he that saw a dwarfe go in the streete said to his companion that walked with him: See yonder gyant: and to a Negro or woman blackemoore, in good sooth ye are a faire one” (Puttenham, 1936: 201).

J. Adelman, in “Iago’s Alter Ego: Race as Projection in *Othello*” (1997), argues that the language of blackness was a tool for racial and

ideological discrimination against Africans, aimed at justifying the slave trade necessary for the emerging imperialism and mercantilism of the Elizabethan era (Adelman, 1997: 125). However, to us, this language is even more abhorrent because we are also familiar with the sophisms and cultural discourses used in the nineteenth century to justify colonialism (albeit also contested later). These notes reflect the variations of Victorian discourses on racial hierarchization and the use of pseudosciences and aesthetics to support them, which directly contributed to the ethnic cleansings of the twentieth century. Shakespeare, who early on recognized and intuited the negative implications of visual rhetoric and anthropological discrimination concealed within it, textualizes the problem in all its complexity to reshape the “monstrous” perception of barbarians, who, in the classical Greco-Roman sense, were merely considered “foreigners.”

2. The perception of blackness

In fact, people of colour were not absent in England during the Elizabethan period. For instance, Abd el-Ouahed ben Messaoud ben Mohammed Anoun, the ambassador of Muley Hamet, the king of Fez of Barbary, arrived in August 1600 and stayed for half a year. Officially, his visit aimed to establish trade agreements, but in reality, it was to sign a military alliance against Catholic Spain (Honigmann, 1997: 2). Barbary (Barberia) was the medieval term for the North African coast, the Maghreb, which included the Mauri region, the ancient Berbers of Mauretania, encompassing present-day Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Tripoli.

In Puttenham’s “Art of English Poesie” (1589), there is a different etymology proposed for “barbarian” (which, as known, meant “foreigner” for the Greeks and Romans), linking it to the flight of the Berbers to Mauritania, explicitly mentioned by Iago: “O, no. He goes into Mauritania and takes away / with him the fair Desdemona, unless his abode be / lingered here by some accident – wherein none / can be so determinate as the removing of Cassio” (Othello, IV, ii, 257-260).

The Moors were also Islamic corsairs or Barbary pirates who attempted to enslave Europeans through their raids. Notable instances include the capture of Ischia and its surroundings, Lipari, and Vieste, involving approximately 6,000 people. These captives were sold in the eastern slave markets of Algeria and Morocco. According to Robert Davies (2003), between 1580 and 1680, Algiers was home to a population of slaves numbering between 25,000 and 30,000 individuals. Overall, more than one million Europeans were captured by Berber pirates and sold as slaves in North Africa and the Ottoman Empire between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. While this number may

seem relatively small when compared to the estimated transfer of about 28 million Africans to the colonies, including 17 million transported by Muslim merchants, it highlights the general situation that justifies the main theme of *Othello* – the Arab and the white woman. This theme elicited various interpretations from the public, often invoking the enslavement of white women in harems and evoking intense feelings of rejection and indignation towards Arabs. These practices also led to the emergence of “narratives of captivity”, which served as pretexts for praising civilization as a “Western” bastion against the incivility of the barbarians (Rejeb, 1982).

Callaghan (2000) argues that the significant presence of black people had cultural and artistic implications. Consequently, after the rise of slavery, blackface took on a derogatory connotation and became associated with the grotesque in popular entertainment (81). It is important to note that in the theatre, both women and characters of colour (as gender and race often faced discriminatory policies) were portrayed exclusively by white male actors who would don costumes or darken their faces with burnt cork soot. This practice served to assert and reinforce the control of white males over visible and unsettling aspects of identity. For instance, during Shakespeare’s time, the role of *Othello* was played by Richard Burbage. However, in 1833, when African American actor Ira Aldridge took on the role, the public considered it a cultural appropriation that provoked considerable backlash. In his first interpretation in England, playing the role of Oroonoko, the protagonist of Aphra Ben’s work, Aldridge, being African American, faced criticism from *The Times*, which asserted that his pronunciation of English words was hindered due to the shape of his lips (Marshall and Stock, 1958: 53).

The perception of blackness as inferior to whiteness is a relatively recent phenomenon that emerged during the era of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery. It was a moral and ideological justification for the hierarchy among human races. However, in the seventeenth century, such notions were not yet prevalent. Africans, who were relatively unknown, were often depicted in a positive light, and the introduction of a black general from Venice, *Othello*, onto the English stage did not invite ridicule. Shakespeare intentionally gave his character this race and color. While the term “Moor” could be interpreted as a swarthy Mediterranean person, Shakespeare’s precise language, such as Iago’s description of *Othello* as an “old black ram”, indicates his portrayal as a black man who seduced the white *Desdemona*.

In four plays – “*Othello*”, “*Titus Andronicus*”, “*The Merchant of Venice*” and “*The Tempest*” – characters who are perceived as “others” are depicted and projected with animalistic qualities, becoming targets of racism. Brabantio accuses *Othello* of using drugs and spells to win over

Desdemona, but it is not true. Desdemona sees Othello for his true character beyond his skin color: “I saw Othello’s visage in his mind, / And to his honors and his valiant parts / Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate” (Othello, 1.3.287-289).

Despite Othello’s integration into Venetian society, he continues to be viewed as “the other”. Iago finds it absurd that the traditional “master-slave” relationship has been reversed. This sense of superiority is also evident in Prospero’s imposition of his culture and enslavement of the native Caliban, reflecting the behavior of a colonizer. The plays illustrate an opposition between the natural world and the civilized world, with the latter being perceived as superior. However, Caliban, unlike Othello, resists assimilation, strives to maintain his own culture, and asserts his identity, even if it is not recognized as such.

The term “moor”, in the Othello tragedy, seems to conceptualize a preconceived vision of the “Other”, in other words, a discriminatory construction effected through rhetoric. Being Moorish, in 17th century England, was synonymous with inferiority; the condition represented a potential for transgressions, for impurities related mainly to sexuality. The Moors were attributed the color black, which at the time symbolized evil. However, the impression Othello makes is that of a grandiose character, more used to military tasks than to practical life, hence his little ability to discern the smallest things of everyday life. On the other hand, he also feels inferior, since the circumstance of being black in some way affects him sensibly. Othello does not perceive himself as a foreigner in a strange land, subject to an unusual vulnerability for being a Moor, that is, “the other”, “the different”; surrounded by Italians and Cypriots, his apparent social acceptance is only because he has a role to play in that society that rejects the “different”. Finally, the tragedy of his condition is due to his not being able to discern his real identity in an apparently beneficial context, which, however, is hostile to him all the time. Hence, he was easily manipulated by his subordinate Iago, who had a very powerful rhetoric.

Othello embodies the victim of a social evil, and the domestic tragedy that strikes him through the manipulation of Iago goes beyond its anecdotal dimension. Othello is a dramaturgical guinea pig who allows us to grasp, on beings who are nevertheless beneficial to society, the consequences of the wear and tear of a social evil. Without the xenophobia of which he was the victim, without the racial rivalry and the paranoia which result from it, Othello would be much less quick to follow his standard-bearer in his hypotheses which nevertheless contradict all the evidence. Shakespeare, by means of this domestic drama, shows that the evil which threatens the City is not external to it (war against the Ottomans, in Cyprus) but very internal: its xenophobia,

precisely fear of the foreigner, which causes the death of two of its most valuable citizens. It is a domestic drama, in that the evil is in its own house, not in that it would be anecdotal or without social significance.

3. The otherness of the Jew

Many scholars argue that it is likely that Shakespeare incorporated the prejudices and medieval myths surrounding Jews in Elizabethan society to construct the character. The expulsion of Jews from England occurred in 1290, and they were not readmitted until 1655, leading many to assert that Shakespeare never encountered a practicing Jew in his life. The few Jews – approximately two hundred – who remained in England were compelled to convert to Christianity.

Furthermore, during the time Shakespeare wrote the play, the prevailing anti-Semitism in society had gained renewed strength due to the trial of the Portuguese doctor Rodrigo López, a converted Jew accused of plotting against Queen Isabella and subsequently sentenced to death in 1594. Immersed in this context, playwrights who portrayed Jews in a negative light drew upon a “villain” derived from the realities of the time, ensuring that the public’s emotions could easily be mobilized against such a character. A few years earlier, for example, Shakespeare’s contemporary Christopher Marlowe achieved tremendous success with the public through “The Jew of Malta”, featuring the cruel and wicked Jew Barabbas as its central character.

However, unlike “The Jew of Malta”, which is so inherently racist that it resists modern reinterpretation, “The Merchant of Venice” possesses a certain ambiguity that allows for the various readings that have emerged over the years. This is because the work itself contains the potential for multiple interpretations, as Shakespeare caters to diverse audiences. Throughout history, the play, particularly the character of Shylock, has been portrayed in diverse and contradictory ways, depending on the intentions of those who stage it. It is well-known, for instance, that “The Merchant of Venice” was frequently performed in Nazi Germany. Despite this, the play can still be seen as a powerful pro-Semitic plea and a criticism of all forms of racism.

In “The Merchant of Venice”, numerous dichotomies are underlined, including the Christian-Jewish divide. Shylock, a Jewish moneylender in a predominantly Christian society, is considered the villain. However, it is not only anti-Semitism that is portrayed in the drama; racism is not solely projected onto Shylock. Portia, in fact, discriminates against a suitor of hers who, unlike her, demonstrates a more mature vision of accepting differences. Morocco precisely highlights the absence of a substantial difference between oneself and others. He is not seen as an ethnic characteristic but rather as a result of

his environment: he is black, he explains, because he lives in a sunny climate.

Mislike me not for my complexion,
The shadowed livery of the burnished sun,
To whom I am a neighbor and near bred.
Bring me the fairest creature northward born,
Where Phoebus' fire scarce thaws the icicles,
And let us make incision for your love
To prove whose blood is reddest, his or mine.

(Merchant, 2.1.1-7)

In addition to Othello, Shylock, and Caliban, who represent the “others” in their respective plays, there are further marginalized characters due to their minority status. Desdemona can be considered one such character, as she rebels against the patriarchal society she belongs to by marrying an older man from a different ethnic group out of love. Unlike Miranda in *The Tempest*, Desdemona is the only actively present woman precisely because she is an obedient daughter. Both Desdemona and Othello belong to a minority group and tragically share the same unjust fate.

Antonio, too, represents a minority as an unconscious homosexual in a society dominated by heterosexuals. This is precisely why Portia's question, “Which is the merchant here, and which the Jew?” (Merchant, 4.1.176), creates a parallelism between Shylock and Antonio. While the former is excluded from the Christian community, the latter is excluded from the community of lovers.

What have we here, a man or a fish? Dead or alive? A fish, he smells like a fish— a very ancient and fishlike smell, a kind of not-of-the-newest poor-John. A strange fish. Were I in England now, as once I was, and had but this fish painted, not a holiday fool there but would give a piece of silver. There would this monster make a man. Any strange beast there makes a man. When they will not give a doit to relieve a lame beggar, they will lay out ten to see a dead Indian. Legged like a man, and his fins like arms!” (Tempest, 2.2.25-35)

On the island where “The Tempest” is set, almost every character is a stranger to one another. Therefore, the way in which each character reacts to the “new” is important. Prospero initially intends to integrate and then establish his own authority. However, one of the most significant reactions occurs between Trinculo and Stephano. Both of them, upon encountering the native, seek to exploit his otherness, treating Caliban as a curiosity or oddity. Caliban, on the other hand, wants to show them the beauty and abundance of the island, disproving the negative characterization imposed on him by others.

4. Shylock and the stereotypes

However, despite the initial impression that Shakespeare's plays highlight differences and showcase the racism of the time, they actually criticize prejudice. In "The Merchant of Venice", for example, the reader is disturbed by the mistreatment of Shylock and the apparent indifference of other characters who enjoy a happy ending in peace. The uniqueness of Shakespeare's plays lies in their ability to raise questions and help people understand what is right for each of us through the events depicted. This means that Shakespeare does not legitimize the experiences his characters undergo but rather reflects what could actually happen to them in hypocritical and corrupt societies.

William Shakespeare titled his play "The Merchant of Venice", suggesting that the main character would be the good and generous merchant, Antonio. However, over the years, it is the "villain," the Jewish loan shark Shylock, who has captured the most attention from the public and scholars. It is worth noting that many people remember Shylock's legendary words: "If you prick us, do we not bleed?" (Merchant, Act 3, Scene 1, 63-4). It seems as though Shylock, in a way, seeks a form of aesthetic revenge by engraving himself in the hearts and memories of the audience, triumphing over his enemy Antonio. He has firmly established himself in the pantheon of immortal Shakespearean characters and has been portrayed by the greatest actors of each era, including Lawrence Olivier, John Gielgud, Edmund Kean, and currently, the renowned Hollywood star, Al Pacino.

However, it was not until the 19th century that the buffoonish and ridiculous interpretations of Shylock were abandoned in favor of more empathetic portrayals, highlighting his marginalized condition within Venetian society. Even today, the question of Shakespeare's alleged anti-Semitism sparks numerous debates, as discussions continue regarding whether the stereotypical depiction of the Jew reflects the prejudices of the time that the author shared, or if it serves as a critical examination of the typical caricature of the greedy, cruel, and treacherous Jew, aiming to expose it.

Shakespeare, as a humanist, incorporates the prejudices and myths of his time. However, he goes beyond simply creating a character to fulfill the dramatic and comedic requirements of the play. Instead, he endows Shylock with such depth and complexity that it compels us to reassess his role in the story.

Initially, Shylock is portrayed as a greedy character solely driven by material wealth. However, when he decides to emulate the Venetians, he embraces the prevailing equivalence in Venice that equates individuals with money, making them interchangeable entities. In this system, Portia's worth is measured in monetary terms, as is Jessica's,

just as Antonio's pound of flesh and Nerissa and Gratiano's future child are equated with the ducats in the bet made by Bassanio and Portia: "We'll play with them the first boy for a thousand ducats" (Merchant, 3.2.218). Thus, Shylock, by choosing flesh over ducats, abandons his traditional form of exchange, which only accepted money for money, and adopts the *modus operandi* of the Christian characters, along with his thirst for revenge: "If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong 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 I will better the instruction" (Merchant, 3.1.67-72).

The play effectively challenges the false dichotomy that associates greed and the desire for revenge solely with the Jews, while attributing generosity and compassion exclusively to the Christians. As the play unfolds, the differences between the characters diminish to the extent that when Portia, disguised as a man, enters the court, her first question pertains to the identity of the merchant and the Jew, when the answer should be evident. Despite their attempts to emphasize their differences, the characters find themselves united on the same path marked by individualism and hatred.

Therefore, it is not difficult to argue in defense of Shylock, suggesting that the pound of flesh clause could have been a kind of joke and a gesture of peace, which the character only decides to truly enforce once the Venetians have humiliated, mocked, and stripped him of his daughter and his property. They not only ridiculed, spat on, and belittled him publicly but also betrayed him by facilitating his daughter's escape and the loss of his money. Shylock himself affirms this when he says to Antonio:

Thou call'st me dog before thou hadst a cause,
But since I am a dog, beware my fangs.
The Duke shall grant me justice.—I do wonder,
Thou naughty jailer, that thou art so fond
To come abroad with him at his request. (3.3.7-11)

From a modern reinterpretation, Shylock can be seen as a product of his oppressive environment. He is a Jew trapped within bourgeois society that despises him for his profession, yet simultaneously denies him any opportunity to live differently. The Jews in Venice were prohibited from engaging in trade or manufacturing, leaving them with no alternative means of livelihood. Working with capital in the form of money was advantageous for Jews since they faced the constant risk of expulsion or the need to escape, as they belonged to a persecuted minority. It was easier for them to move with their savings rather than

abandoning properties or businesses and facing financial ruin upon leaving.

Due to these circumstances, it can be argued that Shylock and Antonio, as representatives of Jews and Venetians, cannot be equally held responsible for the racism present. The order that governs Venice is inherently asymmetrical and hierarchical, benefiting the Venetians while harming the Jews. Shylock's demand calls for a redefinition of the social positions occupied by each group, through a plea for equality that is not only ignored but also dismissed for the same reasons that give rise to it: the Jews do not share the status of Christians, and as non-citizens, they lack the right to seek justice in a city that accepts them under conditions that later marginalize them.

Venetian society incorporates moneylenders as part of the economic dynamics that facilitate the city's commercial growth, and those who borrow at usurious rates legitimize their practices and social function. However, they subsequently marginalize and disdain the moneylenders, assigning them an inferior status in which they are not considered citizens but rather foreigners.

It is impossible to overlook the deeply relevant problem inherent in this supposed comedy written by the English playwright, and the enduring validity of Shylock's denunciation, which exposes the plight of oppressed minorities who often find themselves hidden behind the hypocrisy and rhetoric of those in positions of power.

5. Myth and reality

Complicated by the history of anti-Semitism, the representation and reading of "The Merchant of Venice" are, today more than ever, a challenge to the understanding and honesty of interpreters. In the figure of the Jewish usurer who asks the Christian merchant for a pound of meat to guarantee a loan, the play encapsulates centuries of anti-Jewish prejudice: the Jew, descendant of deicides, a stranger par excellence and inhumane profiteer, is portrayed as deserving of any vexation as just punishment. This image of the Jew, perpetuated by "The Merchant of Venice" for over four hundred years, has greatly contributed to its transmission. It is not surprising that the modern era, through targeted censorship, pitiful re-readings, or ignominious exploitations, has made the play pay for the contentiousness of its subject matter and the portrayal of a figure who has always been problematic throughout history. On one hand, the embarrassment of the 19th century highlighted the tragedy of the Jew by omitting the fifth act, while on the other hand, Nazi propaganda presented repugnant representations.

Suspended between history and fiction, "The Merchant of Venice" reflects and represents the cultural crisis of Elizabethan England in its

relationship with foreigners. Shylock is, in fact, the product, perhaps tainted, of a culture that had no direct contact with declared Jews since 1290, the year of their expulsion from the country. During Shakespeare's time, the hundreds of Jews living in London were conversos, Jews who had converted to Catholicism after their expulsion from the Iberian Peninsula (Spain in 1492 and Portugal in 1497 following a forced mass conversion), and then reconverted to Anglican Protestantism, practicing a form of secret Judaism known as crypto-Judaism or Marranism.

A long literary tradition has perpetuated anti-Jewish prejudice, even in the absence of an overt Jewish community. This tradition includes medieval allegorical dramas, ballads, Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Prioress' Tale" (ca. 1387), an anonymous lost drama titled "The Jew" (1579), Raphael Holinshed's "Chronicle" (1587), Christopher Marlowe's "The Jew of Malta" (1589?), and Thomas Nashe's "The Unfortunate Traveler" (1594), along with the widespread legend of the wandering Jew. An exception to this trend is Robert Wilson's drama "The Three Ladies of London" (1583), which portrays a clash between a generous Jewish moneylender and a greedy Italian and Christian merchant. Positive Jewish figures in literature are generally confined to the remote figures of biblical patriarchs seen as foreshadowing the New Testament. However, news events also played a role, such as the case of Dr. Roderigo Lopez, a converted Jew of Portuguese origin accused of attempting to poison Queen Elizabeth.

"The Merchant of Venice" is set against the backdrop of a mythologized Venice of commerce, which, in reality, was already being undermined by the new Atlantic trade routes. It depicts a vision of impartiality, hospitality, and tolerant justice towards foreigners. However, the text does not reflect the historical reality of Venice: Jews were limited to "inferior" activities, prohibited from owning real estate, and usury was a mandated profession with interest rates regulated by the Republic. The Jewish population regularly faced exorbitant taxes, as in England, resulting in legalized extortion depicted in Marlowe's "The Jew of Malta". The play lacks specific details such as canals, bridges, Piazza S. Marco, the Arsenal, famous courtesans, pawnshops, and the first Ghetto in history (established in 1516). The realism of the play's setting is a myth based on verifiable evidence. Aside from a "synagogue," Rialto, a gondola, and a masquerade during Carnival (possibly), any connections to the Serenissima are due to the biographical critic's eagerness for recognition. The play primarily focuses on the theme of the stranger's relationship with Venetian society and reflects the restlessness of a world disoriented by geographical discoveries, the new mercantile economy, the Copernican revolution, the Anglican Reformation, Montaigne's cultural relativism, and Bacon's inductive experimentalism.

It is more indicative of an English cultural climate, which, while looking to Venice as a model to emulate, is embroiled in debates on usury, nascent capitalism, foreigners, opposition campaigns, generational clashes, marriage, and law enforcement.

This identity crisis permeates the text, as the Jews, being a “nation” without a land and possessing an elusive identity, evoke as much anxiety as Catholics and Puritans, if not more than the distinguishable Moors with their visible physical features. The text reveals this crisis of conscience through its gradual denial of its own meanings, constructing a web of fragmented and conflicting truths that destabilize any simplistic interpretation. As a result, the play becomes no less dialectical and problematic than “Troilus and Cressida”, “Measure for Measure”, “All’s Well That Ends Well”, or a late romance like “The Winter’s Tale”.

Conclusion

For historians of Europe and its imperial and colonial domains, Shakespeare’s plays are an unrepeatable treasure. Bridge between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the political imagery of the English poet must be interpreted in the light of what was the long 16th century. It reflects what the geography of the world could be, not only in the mind of the writer but also among the different audiences that paid tickets to fill the theaters where the works were produced. The allusions to the different parts of that enlarged world that emerged on stage were there because they could resonate with the audience.

An examination of the thirty-eight works that have survived indicates that the theme of otherness, of social hierarchies rooted in blood, of racial differences, makes an appearance in almost all of them. Even if we stay there, it already shows to what extent this theme was present in the way the English thought about the social and political organization of their own lives. Within this set, some plays dedicate a special role to the question of race, be it that of the dominated colonial being (Caliban in “The Tempest”), of the Jew in Christian land (Shylock in “The Merchant of Venice”), of the African in European land (Othello in “The Tragedy of Othello”). For historians, after all, the passion that these masterpieces still arouse invites us to reflect together on the colonial processes, the historical legacy of the Jewish presence among the “nations” and the hierarchies based on skin color.

It is difficult to ignore all the markers in the text that make Othello’s otherness immediately visible in the Venetian context. Othello’s blackness does not necessarily have to conform to the image of sub-Saharan Africans, victims of the slave trade, who occupy a central place later, from the second half of the 17th century. Othello is an alien

to Venetian society and his oddity is evidenced by both his physical appearance and his life story. Shakespeare's plays are in fact based on an experience of otherness which shows that there is often only one step from the difficulty of securing one's own thoughts to the feeling of loss of identity. On the other hand, this distance does not coincide with the old image of the Ethiopian black, much less with that of the slave of the Atlantic trade, but rather with that of those dark-skinned men who come from the dark side of a shared world, the Mediterranean, that basin that remains common even when it remains outside the reach of Christianity.

From a modern perspective, Shylock can be understood as a product of his oppressive environment. As a Jew trapped within a bourgeois society that despises his profession, Shylock is denied opportunities to live differently. Jews in Venice were prohibited from engaging in trade or manufacturing, leaving them with limited means of livelihood. Working as moneylenders using capital was advantageous for Jews, as they faced constant risks of expulsion or persecution as a minority. It was easier for them to move with their savings than to abandon their properties or businesses and face financial ruin. We cannot overlook the deeply relevant problem inherent in this supposed comedy written by the English playwright, and the enduring validity of Shylock's denunciation. The play exposes the plight of oppressed minorities who often find themselves hidden behind the hypocrisy and rhetoric of those in positions of power. "The Merchant of Venice" challenges our understanding and forces us to confront the complexities of prejudice, justice, and power dynamics that are still pertinent today.

REFERENCES:

- Adelman, J., *Iago's Alter Ego: Race as Projection in Othello*, in "Shakespeare Quarterly", 48 (2), 1997, p. 125-144.
- Braxton, P.N., *Othello: The Moor and the Metaphor*, in "South Atlantic Review", 55 (4), 1990, p. 1-17.
- Callaghan, D., *Shakespeare Without Women: Representing Gender and Race on the Renaissance Stage*, London, Routledge, 2000.
- Davies, R., *Christian Slaves, Muslim Masters: White Slavery in the Mediterranean, the Barbary Coast, and Italy, 1500-1800*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
- Hall, K.F., 'These bastard signs of fair': *Literary whiteness in Shakespeare's sonnets*, in Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin, *Postcolonial Shakespeares*, Routledge, 1998.
- Honigmann, E.A.J., *Introduction to W. Shakespeare, Othello*, Croatia, Arden, 2006.



King James I, *Stanzas from Lepanto*, Available online at: <https://www.bartleby.com/lit-hub/select-poetry-of-the-reign-of-king-james-the-first/i-king-james-i-5/>

Marshall, H. and Stock, M., *Ira Aldridge: The Negro Tragedian*, London, Rockliff, 1958.

Puttenham, G., *The Arte of English Poesie*, 1589, edited by G.D. Willcock, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1936.

Rejeb, L. Ben, *Barbary's 'Character' in Europeans Letters, 1514-1830: An Ideological Prelude to Colonization*, in "Dialectical Anthropology", 6 (6), 1982, p. 345-355.

Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Othello, The Moor of Venice*. Edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine, Folger Shakespeare Library, <https://shakespeare.folger.edu/>

Shakespeare, William. *The Merchant of Venice*, Edited by Barbara Mowat and Paul Werstine, Folger Shakespeare Library, [the-merchant-of-venice_PDF_FolgerShakespeare.pdf](#) (folger-main-site-assets.s3.amazonaws.com)

Shakespeare, William. *The Tempest*, Edited by Barbara Mowat and Paul Werstine, Folger Shakespeare Library. [the-tempest_PDF_FolgerShakespeare.pdf](#) (folger-main-site-assets.s3.amazonaws.com)

Wells, R.H., *Shakespeare on Masculinity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000.