

*Stephen M. Finn*

**Antonio: The other Jew in *The Merchant of Venice***

**Abstract**

Antonio's melancholy and his excessive hatred of Shylock are two puzzling aspects of *The Merchant of Venice*, most critics agreeing that the cause of the first is never revealed. However, the two (melancholy and mutual detestation) are closely linked. Antonio's state of mind, his confusion, is brought on by his being (or, more accurately, having been) a Jew, too, who will always have to play the role of the born Christian.

His original religious orientation is revealed throughout the play, showing him to be a converted Jew, or marrano (from the Spanish meaning "swine"), a type of person distrusted and abhorred by both "Old Christians" and Jews.

Remarks throughout the play bear this out, and make it understandable why Shylock insists on Antonio's heart, this being understood in Shakespeare's day to be the centre of religious identity: he wishes to reclaim a Jewish soul.

After 1290, when Edward I expelled all of England's Jews, no "official" Jew lived there legally for almost four centuries, until Oliver Cromwell started making overtures to European Jewish communities in 1652. Because of this, the general critical attitude has been that the Elizabethans, and Shakespeare in particular, could not have been acquainted with Jews; therefore, Shylock, for one, must have been an imaginary character.

This point of view, it is believed, has blinded scholars for close on 400 years to the fact that Shakespeare could have known clandestine Jews and, of more importance, that Shylock is not the only major character in *The Merchant of Venice* who is of Jewish extraction.

This paper sets out to refute past approaches and is, therefore, a re-reading of the Christian-Jewish conflict in *The Merchant of Venice*, drawing largely on not only the text of the play but also on historical sources, including the Bible, as substantiation.

Antonio's melancholy and his excessive hatred of Shylock are two puzzling aspects of *The Merchant of Venice*. The first disturbs both himself and his fellows as he tells Salerio and Solanio in the opening lines of the play:

In sooth I know not why I am so sad,  
It wearies me, you say it wearies you . . . (I i:102)<sup>1</sup>

He maintains that neither love nor money is the cause of his depression, but that his role in the world is "a sad one" (I i:78). Van Laan (1978:61) holds that Antonio firmly establishes this "as a dramatic element of some consequence," but most critics agree that the cause of his melancholy is never revealed (cf. Wilders, 1969:18). What they have not found important, however, is that this melancholy and his and Shylock's mutual detestation are closely linked. Pettet (in Wilders, 1969:107) ascribes Shylock's desire for revenge to racial and religious antagonism (obviously Jew against Christian), vengeance for personal humiliation and "a touch of abstract hatred" or "revenge without adequate motive." Similarly, Goddard (in Wilders, 1969:147–148) points out that no motive appears to be sufficient to account for the two men's mutual excoriation. He then contends that Antonio hates Shylock "because he catches his own reflection in his face," a point also touched on by Midgeley (1960:130), Fiedler (1972:87) and Danson (1978:32–33), the last regarding them as spiritual kinsmen, with Antonio's malice convicting him of being spiritually a "Jew" (with all the derogation that that epithet implies).

Actually, Danson comes close to understanding Antonio's melancholy. This, and the merchant's hatred of the usurer, are because he, too, *is* a Jew, or to be more accurate, used to be a Jew – in religion as well as in behaviour. He hides this from his fellows as best he can, accepts that he will for ever play the role of the born Christian, but cannot fool Shylock who shows that he knows about his past.

Antonio's original religious orientation is revealed throughout the play, sometimes obviously, at other times subtly. But there appears to be little doubt that he is a crypto-Jew, a converso, more commonly known as a marrano. Marranos were Jews who had converted to Christianity, voluntarily but more often involuntarily, from the fifteenth century and more particularly after the Inquisition. They were found throughout Europe, particularly in Spain and Portugal, but also in Italy and England, which, as mentioned earlier, had expelled Jews in 1290, although a considerable number continued to settle there, and increasingly after the 1492 expulsion from Spain. Furthermore, a marrano community was existent in London during Shakes-

---

1. All quotations are from the Arden edition, edited by John Russell Brown (London: Methuen, 1981).

peare's time (cf. Wolf, 1888; Cardozo, 1925:19–21; Hyamson, 1928:117; Roth, 1978:137; Hirschson, 1985:51–54). The word is derived from the Spanish of the period and means "swine".

Applied to the recent converts in the first place perhaps ironically, with reference to their aversion from the flesh of the animal in question, it ultimately became a general term of execration which spread during the sixteenth century to most of the languages of western Europe. (Roth, 1959:28)

Hence, Shylock's understandable aversion to pork takes on an extra meaning in that it refers to proselytism:

Yes, to smell pork, to eat of the habitation which your prophet the Nazarite conjured the devil into: . . . I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you. (I iii:29–33)

The connotation of *marrano* being swine is underlined by Launcelot Gobbo when he responds to Jessica's telling him that her husband has made her a Christian:

Truly the more the blame he, we were Christians enow before, e'en as many as could well live one by another: this making of Christians will raise the price of hogs, – if we grow all to be pork-eaters, we shall not shortly have a rasher of the coals for money. (III v:19–23)

The "making of Christians" is really the making of hogs, of *marranos*.

With this in mind, when Shylock refuses to tell the Duke why he wants his pound of flesh and not the ducats, his evasion is loaded with innuendo:

Some men there are love not a gaping pig! (IV i:47)

The "Old Christians" detested and distrusted the new converts, fearing that they still practised their Judaism clandestinely, and the Jews abhorred them, regarding them as traitors. Millgram (1975:451) explains that

the most pernicious curse of the medieval Jews was the Jewish apostate, who often turned against his erstwhile co-religionists with venomous hate and brought upon the Jews untold suffering.

Both Jew and gentile were confused about and suspicious of these *marranos* who were often in inner conflict, too, regarding themselves as Christians at certain times, as Jews at others. Their self-concept is summed up by Antonio when he says,

I have much ado to know myself. (I i:7)

Antonio's origin is borne out by certain passages in the play, most, but not all, of which occur in his confrontation with Shylock in Act I and Act IV.

Gratiano's telling Antonio that

You have too much respect upon the world:  
They lose it that do buy it with much care (I i:74–75),

is an obvious reference to Matthew 16:25 (Authorized Version):

For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for My sake shall find it.

This not only foreshadows later events when Antonio is prepared to sacrifice his life but is then saved, but also implies both an acceptance of Christ as Saviour and neophytism, particularly in the light of Gratiano's next words:

Believe me you are marvellously chang'd. (I i:76)

The change is from Judaism to Christianity. Antonio's world is a stage, therefore, on which he plays the part of the Christian, his role being a "sad one" (I i:79) as he has his Jewish origin for ever plaguing him.

With this in mind, Shylock's comment that "Antonio is a good man" (I iii:11) takes on an additional irony to that tentatively considered by Brown (1981:22) who says this "may be an ironic pun". However, this certainly does appear to be a pun, not only on "commercially sound" but also on "pious" or "devout", used sarcastically by Shylock and which he attempts to cover up by his exclaiming:

Ho no, no, no, no: my meaning in saying he is a good man, is to have you understand me that he is sufficient . . . (I iii:13–15)

But when Shylock lists the destinations of Antonio's argosies (I iii:15–18), names repeated by Bassanio later in the play (III ii:267–268), the Jewish connection is evident once more. The marranos "were for the most part men of standing in commerce" (Hyamson, 1928:117) in the late sixteenth century, with centres of Jewish trade including Tripoli (or Barbary), England, India and Lisbon (cf. Gilbert, 1978:51), as mentioned by Shylock and Bassanio. Mexico appears to be an inaccurate reference (Elze, cited by Brown, 1981:90) as Venice had no direct communication with that country. Similarly, the Jews and marranos of the time also did not trade with that country. However, at that time Mexico had a marrano population which suffered under the auto-da-fé from 1574 onwards (cf. Gilbert, 1978:47). Therefore, it would have made sense for Antonio the marrano to send his ships to all these places.

When the merchant and Shylock come together for the first time in the play, the latter reveals his hatred in an aside:

How like a fawning publican he looks!  
I hate him for he is a Christian . . . (I iii:36–37)

Charlton (1938:138) finds Shylock's referring to Antonio's being like a "fawning publican" incongruous and not credible, holding that "it has no

apparent application to Antonio, even from Shylock's point of view". However, it should be borne in mind that the word "publican" – its only occurrence in the Shakespearean canon (cf. Spevak, 1973:1023) – "is specifically associated with the Jewish tax-collectors of the New Testament who sided with the Roman authorities" (Hirschson, 1985:53). In like vein, the office of publican or tax-collector was held by marranos in Castile in the fifteenth century (cf. Margolis & Marx, 1980:458). Moreover, publicans were long considered traitors and apostates (cf. Cruden, 1968:520) and this usage of publican or tax-gatherer was found from the fourteenth century to the sixteenth century (cf. Oxford English Dictionary). Therefore, it is understandable that Shylock calls Antonio a publican if the man is a marrano. From this it is clear that Shylock's hatred of Antonio stems not only from his being a Christian but from his becoming one. The "ancient grudge" (I iii:42) is not necessarily one of Jew for Christian, but of Jew for apostate.

With this in mind, Shylock's confusion of the first person singular and plural pronouns when talking to or about Antonio in Act I can be explained: he regards his antagonist as belonging to both religions. Hence, "He hates *our* sacred nation" (I iii:43), "cursed by *my* tribe" (I iii:47). "This Jacob from *our* holy Abram was" (I iii:67). "(For suff'rance is the badge of all *our* tribe)" (I iii:105), and "Forget the shames that you have stained *me* with" (I iii:135). Thus, "Your worship was the last man in *our* mouths" (I iii:55) with which Shylock greets Antonio, is a pun; not only is "worship" a form of respect, but it refers to Antonio's religious bent about which Shylock has just been talking.

When the usurer tells Antonio that he will

... take no doit

Of usance for my moneys, and you'll not hear me, -  
This is kind I offer (I iii:136–138),

"kind" could refer to Shylock's being generous, benevolent or natural (cf. Van Laan, 1978:64). Goddard (1969:153) contends that the interpretation of the play hinges on the answer to the question as to why Shylock offers the loan free of interest. Brown (1981:29) maintains that the short line and Bassanio's interjection, "This were kindness," suggest a hesitation by Antonio. This is understandable as he is shocked by Shylock. The word "kind," of course, also refers to a race having a common origin, a family, clan or tribe, so when Shylock says, "This is kind I offer," he means, and Antonio understands him to mean, "I am offering this to my kinsman." Shylock cannot lend money to Antonio at interest because Jewish law forbids one Jew from taking interest on a loan to or from another Jew. This prohibition is expressly mentioned a number of times in the Bible, including Exodus 22:24, Leviticus 25:36–37 and Deuteronomy 23:20, and would still hold true even if the other party is an apostate, as such a person is still regarded as a Jew by other Jews (cf. *Encyclopaedia Judaica* III 1972:211). This once more underlines both

Shylock and Antonio's confusion as to the latter's status: neither knows what to regard the merchant as.

When Shylock leaves, Antonio takes up the pun in telling Bassanio:

The Hebrew will turn Christian, he grows kind. (I iii:174)

This follows the merchant's "Hie thee gentle Jew" (I iii:173) which is another link, "gentle," like "gentile," being derived from the Old French "gentil" and Latin "gentilis" meaning "of the same family," and, therefore, being semantically linked to "kind." Therefore, in projecting this image of himself, Antonio actually acknowledges their kinship; it is Antonio, however, who is really the "gentle" or, to be more accurate, the "gentile" Jew.<sup>2</sup>

This can further be seen in the trial scene where Antonio turns to Bassanio, explaining:

I am a tainted wether of the flock

Meetest for death – the weakest kind of fruit

Drops earliest to the ground, and so let me . . . (IV i:14–116)

This is ambiguous as Antonio could be referring to his Christianity or his Judaism. But either way, it bespeaks his marranoism. As part of the Christian flock he is "tainted" because of his origins and is "the weakest kind of fruit" because his hold on Christianity is actually tenuous. However, the Judaic implication is even more distinct. He, "the weakest kind of fruit," has already dropped from the tree of Judaism; by deserting his former religion, he has castrated himself spiritually ("wether"); he is powerless, corrupted ("tainted") and for ever barren as no fruit will come from his loins. The Old Testament abounds with images equating the children of Israel with the flock of God (cf. Isaiah 40:11; 63:11; Jeremiah 13:17; 13:20; 23:2–3; 25:34–36; 31:10; 51:23; Ezekiel 34:12; 34:17; 36:38; Zechariah 10:3; 11:17). Antonio is, in effect, one of Jacob's "streak'd and pied" lambs (I iii:74), but his piedness results from his dual piety. He belongs to Jacob, to Israel, to Shylock, but because he has been infected by another religion, by Laban, he is weak, or feeble (cf. Genesis 30:31–42) and sees himself as deserving to die.

In certain Jewish circles it was (and is) customary to observe the mourning rites at the apostasy of a child (cf. *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 1972:214; Seltzer, 1976:13). The child, therefore, was regarded as dead. This is one other reason for Shylock's horror at Jessica's betrayal. "My own flesh and blood to rebel!" (III i:31), and his imprecation,

I would my daughter were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear:  
would she were hears'd at my foot, and the ducats in her coffin . . . (III i 80–82)

---

2. "Gentle" and "gentile" were not completely distinguished in spelling in Shakespeare's day (cf. Brown, 1981:49), as can be seen in the additional puns in Lorenzo's calling Jessica Shylock's "gentle daughter" (II iv:34), Gratiano's saying that she is "a gentle, and no Jew" (II vi:51), and the Duke's expecting "a gentle answer" from Shylock (IV i:34).

Therefore, when he tells Tubal shortly afterwards that he “will have the heart of him [Antonio] if he forfeit” (III i:116–117), he is taking revenge on another apostate who has rebelled. He insists on his bond because his own flesh and blood has rebelled twice, and he must cut out the offending portion embodied by Antonio’s heart. Antonio realizes this, knowing that in the eye of the vengeful father-figure he is “Meetest for death.” It is a case of “flesh for flesh,” “a heart for a heart,” or, in biblical terms, “life for life” (Exodus 21:23).

Shylock’s insistence on the bond is more than Thompson’s (1983:10) somewhat simplistic, “It is because Antonio was so heartless that Shylock fiendishly desires his heart.” The symbolism is more complex than that. As O’Hara (1979:11) points out:

Elizabethan Christians understood the heart in figurative and Biblical terms to be the center of their religious identity.

He adds that whereas actual circumcision was the mark of Judaism, that of Christianity was circumcision of the heart. However, the latter can also apply to the children of Israel as can be seen in the following quotation from the Old Testament:

And the Lord thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live. (Deuteronomy 30:6)

Therefore, Shylock wishes to cut out Antonio’s heart in order to reclaim a Jewish soul.

This is supported psychoanalytically, with the insistence on the pound of flesh being “a disguised request that Antonio be circumcised – become a Jew,” according to Reik (cited by Holland, 1979:233); one need add merely, “again.” Furthermore, Jekels (cited by Holland, 1979:231–232) points out that the money debt in *The Merchant of Venice* stands for a moral debt or guilt. The guilt here is one of Antonio’s having left the faith of his father-figure, Shylock, who now has to circumcise him; it was traditional in Judaism for the father to perform the act of circumcision on his son.

When Shylock is found guilty of conspiring to murder Antonio, he is stripped of his wealth and possessions, a peculiar punishment inflicted at one stage in the Middle Ages on Jews when they converted, both in Italy and in England (cf. Roth, 1978:79 and 98; Danson, 1978:164–165). One is inclined to ask why Antonio, the wealthy merchant, has no ready money to help his beloved Bassanio, and why he has to resort to borrowing from his arch antagonist. It is possible that he, too, has had to start from scratch after having had everything confiscated on his apostasy. He is a bankrupt (III i:39) who establishes himself once more only when his ships return.

If all this seems unlikely in respect of Shakespeare’s reputed knowledge (or

lack thereof) of Jewish customs, a Jewish source for *The Merchant of Venice* has been propounded. The first to do this was Cardozo (1925:330) who finds that in writing *The Merchant of Venice*.

Shakespeare relied to a considerable extent on an older drama of 1579, the author of which seems to have been a clerical scholar, with some knowledge of Hebrew.

And in a posthumously published article, Schönfeld (1979:115–128) reveals intriguing Hebraic links with the play. The former points out that the names of the four (obvious) Jewish characters in *The Merchant of Venice* (Shylock, Jessica, Tubal and Cush, who is merely mentioned) are all found in Genesis 10 and 11 (cf. Cardozo, 1925:222; Brown, 1981:3)<sup>3</sup>. “Shylock” could come from the Hebrew “Shelach” (Genesis 10:24), “Jessica” from “Yiscah” (Genesis 11:29), “Tubal” from “Tubal” (Genesis 10:2) and “Cush” (mentioned by Jessica in III ii:284) from “Cush” (Genesis 10:6). The fifth Jewish character is missing; there is no Antonio in the Old Testament.<sup>4</sup>

However, if one goes to the Hebrew root-words, the original of Antonio appears several times. Three consonants usually make up the root of any Hebrew word, with the various vocalic combinations being used to form related words. Therefore, “Shylock” would be derived from “SH. . .L. . .CH,”<sup>5</sup> meaning among other things, “to stretch out a hand, a missile, and a cormorant,” a name for a usurer in Elizabethan England (cf. Cardozo, 1925:227); thus, the name “Shylock” is symbolic of his function in the play. By the same token, “Jessica” would be derived from a word meaning “to fence or shut in or lock up”, “Tubal” from the original Hebrew meaning “to give provender, to confuse, or a violation of the divine order”, and “Cush” possibly from the word meaning “to be proper”.

“Antonio” would then come from “aNToNio”, the Hebrew “N. . .T. . .N” or “Nathan”, a name being found in the books of Samuel and Chronicles and meaning “to give” (cf. II Samuel 5:14; 7:2–4, 17; I Chronicles 3:15; 14:4; 17:1–3, 15). A derivative of the word, meaning “to apply or devote one’s heart to seek out” is found in the Old Testament, the most startlingly apt example being in Ecclesiastes 8:9:

All this have I seen, and applied my heart unto every work that is done under the sun: there is a time wherein one man ruleth over another to his own hurt.

Antonio’s actions reflect the words “applied my heart” which in the original

---

3. Bullough (1964:446) cites a Talmudic story with aspects similar to that of the pound of flesh.

4. One can look at the politics of Elizabethan England for a Jewish connection for Antonio. In 1594, Dr Roderigo Lopez, a Portuguese marrano, was executed for plotting against Queen Elizabeth and Don Antonio, a claimant to the Portuguese throne. Although Brown (1981:xxiv) rejects any resemblance between Don Antonio and Shakespeare’s Antonio, a similarity does exist: the Portuguese Pretender was of Jewish blood (cf. Roth, 1978:141). But this link is tenuous.

5. “SH” and “CH” are indicated by single consonants in Hebrew.



Hebrew are derived from the root “N...T...N”; the second part of the quotation sums up what happens to Shylock.

In the light of the situation, the innuendo, the attitudes, words and actions of Shylock and Antonio as well as the meaning of their names, it is not surprising that when Portia arrives for the trial, she asks,

Which is the merchant here? and which the Jew? (IV i:170)

With all this in mind, the title of the play as appearing in the Stationers' Register of 22 July 1598 is not as puzzling as might otherwise appear: “The Marchaunt of Venyce or otherwise called the Jewe of Venyce” (cf. Lewis, 1969:313). The Merchant and the Jew are one and the same: Antonio.

Therefore, this reinterpretation of the Christian-Jewish conflict in *The Merchant of Venice* shows that the ideological bias of Shakespeare's contemporaries and readers over the subsequent centuries has obscured what is actually a more rewarding and, it is believed, a more accurate reading of the play.

## Bibliography

- Brown, John Russel (ed.). 1981. *The Merchant of Venice*. Arden edition. London: Methuen.
- Bullough, Geoffrey (ed.). 1964. *Narrative and dramatic sources of Shakespeare*. Volume I. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Cardozo, Jacob Lopez. 1925. *The contemporary Jew in the Elizabethan drama*. New York: Burt Franklin.
- Charlton, H.B. 1938. *Shakespearian comedy*. London: Methuen.
- Cruden, A. 1968. *Cruden's complete concordance of the Old and New Testaments*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Danson, Lawrence. 1978. *The harmonies of The Merchant of Venice*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Encyclopaedia Judaica*. 1972. Volume III. Jerusalem: Keter.
- Fiedler, L.A. 1972. *The stranger in Shakespeare*. London: Croom Helm.
- Gilbert, Martin. 1978. *Jewish history atlas*. Second edition. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- Goddard, Harold C. 1969. The three caskets. In Wilders, J. (ed.) *Shakespeare: The Merchant of Venice*. London: Macmillan, 142–162.
- Hirschson, N. 1985. Shakespeare, Shylock, and the marrano factor. *Midstream*. November, 51–54.
- Holland, N.N. 1979. *Psychoanalysis and Shakespeare*. New York: Octagon.
- Hyamson, Albert M. 1928. *A history of the Jews in England*. Second edition. London: Methuen.
- Lewis, B. Roland. 1969. *The Shakespeare documents: facsimiles, transliterations, translations & commentary*. Volume I. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood.
- Margolis, M.L. & Marx, A. 1980. *A history of the Jewish people* n.p.: Atheneum.
- Midgley, G. 1960. *The Merchant of Venice: a reconsideration*. *Essays in Criticism*. X(2) April: 130.
- Millgram, Abraham E. 1975. *Jewish worship*. Second edition. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America.
- O'Hara, J. 1979. Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. *Explicator*. 37(3) Spring: 11–13.
- Pettet, E.C. 1969. *The Merchant of Venice* and the problem of usury. In: Wilders, J. (ed.) *Shakespeare: The Merchant of Venice*. London: Macmillan, 100–113.
- Roth, Cecil. 1959. *A history of the marranos*. New York: Meridian.
- Roth, Cecil. 1978. *A history of the Jews in England*. Third edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Schönfeld, S.J. 1979. A Hebrew source for *The Merchant of Venice*. *Shakespeare Survey*. 32: 115–128.
- Seltzer, Sanford. 1976. *Jews and non-Jews*. New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations.
- Spevak, M. 1973. *The Harvard concordance to Shakespeare*. Hildesheim: George Olms Verlag.
- Thompson, J.B. 1983. The modification of stereotypes in *The Merchant of Venice*. *English Studies in Africa*. 26(1): 1–11.
- Van Laan, Thomas, F. 1978. *Shakespeare: The Merchant of Venice*. Casebook series. London: Macmillan.
- Wilders, John (ed.). 1969. *Shakespeare: The Merchant of Venice*. Casebook series. London: Macmillan.
- Wolf, Lucien. 1888. *The re-settlement of the Jews in England*. London: Jewish Chronicle.