

# Re-examining the Merchant of Venice

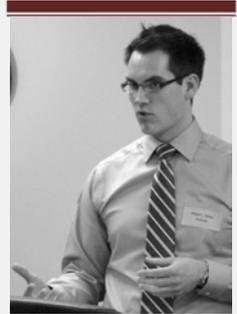
## Politics, Religion, and Gender in Early Modern Venice

William Sutton

### Abstract

William Sutton uses Shakespeare's classic play *The Merchant of Venice* as a starting point to explore three aspects of sociocultural identity negotiated between Jews and Christians in early modern Venice. Along the way, he evaluates how nearly the Bard's representations align with the historical sources native to that time and place. First addressing the complicated relationship between Shylock, Antonio, and the law in order to understand how the ministers of Venetian justice perceived Jews and Christian citizens. The paper then proceeds to discuss Geraldo de Sousa's idea of textual communities, showing both its power and its limitations in light of Jewish interaction with the larger Venetian society. Lastly, Sutton examines Shakespeare's depiction of the marriage of Shylock's daughter Jessica, her attendant conversion to Christianity, and how those experiences relate to the social and sexual climate of the time.

In order to accurately portray these relationships Sutton calls upon the text of Shakespeare's play as well as a number of collections of printed primary sources and anecdotes from scholarly secondary sources that relate stories of interfaith/interethnic cooperation or discord. While Shakespeare's representations of these relationships are relatively black and white, the author shows that the reality was more sophisticated and nuanced. These three examinations cooperatively depict an early modern Venice that was conflicted by chafing proto-Enlightenment ideals and traditional, ecclesiastically endorsed principles about acceptance and community. This competition of ideas made Venice's social boundaries and political structures much more ambiguous and difficult to predict than *The Merchant of Venice* would lead us to believe.



*William Sutton received his B.A. in history from Brigham Young University in December of 2010, shortly before presenting his paper at the 2011 Utah Regional Meeting.*

*William is a member of the Beta Iota chapter of Phi Alpha Theta.*



## Re-examining the Merchant of Venice

Despite the fame of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and its widely recognized depictions of Shylock, the 'merciless' Jew, we often fail to appreciate the deeper themes and observations that Shakespeare develops about religion, gender, and how socioeconomic factors mix and divide social groups. Like any great work of literature, this play can compellingly be read in a number of ways. From a historical standpoint, however, Shakespeare's commentary prompts a number of questions that he is unable to answer within his own text. Among these puzzling questions are musings about what or who inspired his story, his personal exposure to Jews, and the supposed philo- or anti-Semitic overtones that critics have argued about over the years. Additionally, Shakespeare's depiction of the relationship between Jews and Christians, the use of Venice as a setting, and his portrayal of male-female relationships beg a number of "what was it really like?" questions that merit our attention. This essay intends to investigate three relationships that Shakespeare develops in *The Merchant of Venice* in order to understand how socio-religious groups defined themselves and how closely Shakespeare's fictional story aligns with the historical accounts these groups made of themselves.

Firstly, I will evaluate how accurately the triangular relationship between Shylock, Antonio, and the state mirrored actual Jewish-Christian political and legal interactions in early modern Venice. I will then turn my attention to the more general question of how Jewish and Christian appeals to, and interpretations of, binding authoritative texts influenced the integration of Jews into the social sphere in Venice by reappraising Geraldo de Sousa's argument that "when cultures meet, [they] contest textual representations" that have bound their respective communities.<sup>1</sup>

Lastly, I will use the conversion/marriage experience of Shylock's daughter Jessica as a frame to investigate Jewish conversion to Christianity in general, interfaith sexual relationships, the reach of the Inquisition, and gender roles in early modern Venice.

These three examinations cooperatively depict an early modern Venice that was conflicted in different ways and to a greater degree than Shakespeare's text indicates. Rather than exhibiting and seeking to preserve a staunchly Christian cultural force that repudiated Jews and failed to acknowledge its own weaknesses and failures, Venice was

---

<sup>1</sup> Geraldo U. de Sousa, *Shakespeare's Cross-Cultural Encounters* (London: Macmillian Press, 1999), 3.

conflicted from within by its dual ideological goals of being a preeminent Christian city and standing as a beacon of enlightened, forward thinking that leaned toward more humanistic policies. In short, as a cosmopolitan city during the early modern period, Venice was saddled with chafing identities and ideologies that made its social boundaries and political structures ambiguous and difficult to predict.

### Shylock, Antonio, and the Venetian State

Among Shakespeare's host of memorable characters, Shylock ranks as one of the most widely recognized.<sup>2</sup> The scenes in *The Merchant of Venice* in which he and Antonio face off are among the most memorable and commonly cited in the play. And Shylock's "hath not a Jew eyes?" speech<sup>3</sup> and the sermon-ruling from Portia that "in the course of justice none of us should see salvation" from the famous 'pound of flesh' trial have become two of the most often repeated lines in the western world.<sup>4</sup> Owing to the play's popularity, Shylock is also "the most famous Jew associated with the city of Venice." That cultural currency means that he is "familiar to millions who have never read the play, [and serves as] one of the most widely known and controversial stereotypes of the Jew."<sup>5</sup> To the uninitiated, the story of Shylock creates stereotypes of Venice as well.

These stereotypes are not the only baggage popularity carries, either. Because of the ubiquity of the play, passages like those above are often cited uncritically, handed out as universal truths that are clichéd in their recitation and blanketing in their coverage. Rather than rely on conventional wisdom, we would do well to acknowledge both the intricacies of the scenes that produced such comments and, more importantly, the limits of Shakespeare's text when compared with the real world. Approached through this lens, the story leads us to not only richer commentary from Shakespeare, but also to critical thinking that brings

---

<sup>2</sup> Allan Lazar, Dan Karlan, and Jeremy Salter, *The 101 Most Influential People Who Never Lived: How Characters of Fiction, Myth, Legends, Television, and Movies have Shaped our Society, Changed our Behavior, and Set the course of History* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 192-193.

<sup>3</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, 3.1.42-60. (Hereafter cited act.scene.lines.)

<sup>4</sup> 4.1.187-209.

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin Ravid, "The Venetian Government and the Jews," in *The Jews of Early Modern Venice*, ed. Robert C. Davis and Benjamin Ravid (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 26.

## Re-examining the Merchant of Venice

with it an awareness of the folly of making sweeping, one size-fits-all statements about or derived from the text of the play itself.

The literary benefit of subscribing to this approach is that instead of taking the interactions of Shylock and Antonio at face value, the reader is directed to the slightly more subtle commentary that Christian ‘virtue’ mirrors Jewish ‘wretchedness,’ but simply wears another name.<sup>6</sup> Such a conclusion could and does occupy volumes, but what is of greater concern here is actively acknowledging that despite the popular temptation to believe otherwise, Shakespeare’s drama is not a reliable base for reconstructing Venetian reality. Recognizing that the conditions in which Shylock and Antonio are made to face each other in play did not exist in reality allows for provocative questioning about the true nature of such interactions and more thorough understanding of the ambiguities in the Jewish-Christian relationships that Shakespeare treats so definitely. There do exist, however, some truths in Shakespeare’s depiction of Venice. Unraveling the mixture of conditions that are corroborated by primary source texts and those that are patently fiction is the task at hand.

Given the resolution of the play, it would be logical to assume that the highly volatile feelings Shylock and Antonio have for one another are representative of the feeling of all Jews and Christians for the other group. It would likewise stand to reason, after seeing Portia’s manipulation of the law, that the governing bodies of Venice were only interested in protecting their Christian citizens and did so by using unbridled bias against aliens in their decisions. These conclusions, however, do not seem to resonate with the position that the Venetian government consistently took on issues of religious or social propriety. Repeatedly the courts and councils of Venice sought to establish humanitarian justice over self-perpetuating Christian favoritism. This is not to say that the authorities were completely void of bias on either a general or case by case level, but it does discount the Shakespeare-inspired notion that prototypical Venetians looked out for one another before looking out for fair and sound principles. When Catholic bias did inform decisions, it sometimes did so in an inverted manner, making authorities

---

<sup>6</sup> Literary analysis of *Merchant* is not the aim here, but one particularly worthwhile source in this regard is Janet Adelman, *Blood Relations: Christian and Jew in The Merchant of Venice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

more “deeply suspicious” and swift to take action against “their own subjects and... other Italians” than against religious outsiders.<sup>7</sup>

In the first place, it is true that, as Antonio insinuates, the state was bound to treat even Jews fairly because of the “the commodity that strangers have with us in Venice” and the fact that “the trade and profit of the city consists of many nations.”<sup>8</sup> The cosmopolitan economy and its role in placating social tensions did make Venice much more accommodating towards Jews than its contemporaries, and these factors induced the Venetian government to offer a measure of protection even to those who were not citizens.<sup>9</sup> This was done in a number of ways.

One way of protecting Jews and other aliens who were brought before the tribunals of the state was to assign their cases to special magistrates that would ensure they were tried ‘fairly.’<sup>10</sup> “Cantarini declares that Venice had special judges to handle legal matters between Venetians and aliens: ‘But if the question bee betweene straungers, or that if any citizen will sue a stranger ... those judges must then bee repayred unto that are appointed to heare the causes of straungers, and have thereof their proper nomination and tytle.’”<sup>11</sup> At the very least, the use of specific magistrates to deal with outsiders like Jews evidences two things. One is that there was a sizable population of foreigners generally--and Jews specifically--that called Venice home.<sup>12</sup> The second is that Jews were important enough to the state economy and social structure to merit special control. Whether such control was meant to protect them as minorities from those who would exploit them, or meant to protect the state from the Jews, they were nonetheless of interest to the state and were treated according to rules that acknowledged this.

---

<sup>7</sup> David Chambers and Brian Pullan, eds., *Venice: A Documentary History, 1450-1630* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), 228. The Inquisition is obviously the most notable example of how authorities were more likely to worry about their own, since it technically did not extend to non-Catholics.

<sup>8</sup> 3.4.29-34. Modern Historians agree. “...the toleration [Venetian authorities] extended to non-Christians” was amplified “if such people’s presence was useful to commerce, and if they caused no scandal.”

See Chambers and Pullan, *Venice: A Documentary History*, 228.

<sup>9</sup> De Sousa, *Shakespeare’s Cross-Cultural Encounters*, 84. Brian Pullan, *The Jews of Europe and the Inquisition of Venice, 1550-1670* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble Books, 1983), 151.

<sup>10</sup> Fairness according to the laws of the day. Those laws would have contained some Christian bias, but it seems that attempts were made to be transparent about the how they was being enforced, even if by more modern standards the laws themselves still evidenced a bias against certain parties.

<sup>11</sup> de Sousa, *Shakespeare’s Cross-Cultural Encounters*, 84.

<sup>12</sup> Chambers and Pullan, *Venice: A Documentary History*, 325-327.

## Re-examining the Merchant of Venice

The precedent set by specific historical cases involving foreigners during the early modern period of Venice is also indicative of a protection for all people that emphasized “Venetian humanity” over Catholic solidarity.<sup>13</sup> In 1499, when a German merchant named Heinrich Stamler and his company left the city while owing a debt of 12,000 ducats to “several of [its] nobles and citizens,” the Venetian Senate determined that it should be patient in allowing Stamler to repay them according to a plan he had proposed. In its ruling, the senate indicated that most of those owed by Stamler concurred with that approach.

*the majority, indeed three quarters [of the creditors], have been content with this agreement and put their names to it; but a few, out of stubbornness rather than any other motive, have refused [Stamler’s] assent. Now it is a godly act to assist the said Germans, especially as they cannot apply to our magistracy of the Sopraconsoli, since they are aliens and not subject to its jurisdiction; and we must also save all these our nobleman and citizens from losing their credits; and this has been done for other foreigners in similar cases.*<sup>14</sup>

In this case, the leaders of Venice saw the fact that the accused party was foreign as a reason to be more lenient rather than more strict. They even go so far as to call assisting them “godly.” Such a determination is evidence that Venetians were not only interested in helping their own. It can rightly be observed that the Germans in this case, while foreigners, were fellow Christians and also had a permanent residence in their homeland to which they would return. Jews, on the other hand, were not brothers in the faith, and according to the propaganda of the day, were more like leeches sucking the resources of the state.<sup>15</sup> They lived in Venice permanently, and though separated into the ghetto, they had no state of their own to which they could return. These distinctions certainly make any Jewish case very different from the Stamler case, but the Venetian governing bodies are also on record for having shown a steady hand and not bowing to irrational bias in other instances that more directly included Jews.

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 169-170.

<sup>15</sup> Diane Owen Hughes, “Earrings for Circumcision: Distinction and Purification in the Italian Renaissance City,” in *Persons in Groups: Social Behavior as Identity Formation in Medieval and Renaissance Europe*, ed. Richard C. Trexler (Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1985), 162.

In the wake of a large scale earthquake in 1511, which the clergy attributed to the unrighteousness of the people, a Franciscan friar named Rufin Lovato was observed on multiple occasions vehemently preaching against the Jews. He “attacked the Jews, saying it would be good to deprive them of everything they owned and put them to the sack.” This led two influential Jewish bankers, Asher and Chaim Meshullam of Mestre, to complain to the Venetian Council of Ten, who saw fit “to admonish this preacher, together with those of the Frari and San Cassiano, who [were] also preaching such things, to ensure that there [was] no attack upon the Jews.”<sup>16</sup> The fact that the Meshullam brothers had the wherewithal to obtain an audience with the Council of Ten does speak to the idea that “the toleration [Venetian authorities] extended to non-Christians” was amplified “if such people’s presence was useful to commerce, and if they caused no scandal,” but well placed in the economic structure or not, it must be recognized that those at the highest echelon of Venetian influence both listened to Jewish concerns and responded in order to protect Jewish well-being.<sup>17</sup>

Despite the seemingly swift, positive reaction from the Venetian authorities in this case, there is some doubt about the force with which the Venetian leaders reprimanded Lovato. It was just over two weeks later that he was back to his incendiary rhetoric, this time from the pulpit of St. Mark’s on Good Friday “saying that you could with a clear conscience take everything [Jews] have and drive them away.”<sup>18</sup> That Lovato would so quickly be granted another forum for his anti-Jewish musings, and the most visible religious stage in Venice, no less, points out the ambivalence of the Venetians. Venetian society was constantly conflicted during this period by the opposing concerns of the Church, which wanted to extol the legitimacy of Venice’s ecclesiastical tradition, and the government, which sought to establish the modern-leaning, humanistic tolerance that would culturally elevate Venice above its peers.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 189-190.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 228.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 189-190.

<sup>19</sup> The idea of Venetian “doubleness” in general is a recurring theme. de Sousa, *Shakespeare’s Cross-Cultural Encounters*, 71. John Gilles, *Shakespeare and the Geography of Difference* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 122-125. For helpful comparisons between the development of both Venice and Rome across a number of different categories, see Christopher F. Black, *Early Modern Italy: A Social History* (London: Routledge, 2001).

## Re-examining the Merchant of Venice

The struggle between orthodoxy and enlightened, communal self-determinism was at the forefront of many of the policies undertaken by the Venetians, especially in regards to Jews.<sup>20</sup> Even the oft cited argument that Jews were afforded acceptance and some recourse for civic protection because "their capital and commercial know-how made them a sought-after prize for governments bent on preserving or developing their economies," presages an Enlightenment world view that would attempt to draw boundaries upon lines of action and social good, rather than by pointing simply to ethnicity or religious affiliation as way of judging a person's fitness for inclusion.<sup>21</sup>

Coupled with Cantarini's observations, the cases of Stamler and Lovato substantiate some of the notions included in Shakespeare's tale while discrediting others. They do show Antonio's supposition to be correct, and they do hint at a prevailing sympathy for debtors, but they also undermine the most dramatic scene--the trial held under the jurisdiction of a disguised Portia.<sup>22</sup> Shylock is not brought before any magistrate that expressly deals with Jewish affairs, and though the court is merciful with Antonio, no additional sympathy is shown for Shylock's being a foreigner in general or a Jew in particular. In Portia's hands, Venetian justice becomes an evangelizing force that equates fairness with membership in the church and only rewards those who hold it. In the actual Venice it would not have been so.<sup>23</sup>

The most glaring weakness of Shakespeare's account is, ironically, the depth of the characters' perceptions of their place and time.<sup>24</sup> While

---

<sup>20</sup> Pier Cesare Ioly Zorattini, "Jews, Crypto-Jews, and the Inquisition," in *The Jews of Early Modern Venice* ed. Robert C. Davis and Benjamin Ravid (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2001), 105. See report of Doge Andrea Gritti complaining about the clergy inciting the public against the Jews.

<sup>21</sup> Pullan, *The Jews of Europe and the Inquisition of Venice*, 151. "The error seems not sufficiently eradicated that the operations of the mind as well as the acts of the body are subject to the coercion of the laws. But our rulers can have authority over such natural rights only as we have submitted to them. The rights of conscience we never submitted, we could not submit. We are answerable for them to our God. The legitimate powers of government extend to such acts only as are injurious to others. But it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no God. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg." Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. William Peden (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 159.

<sup>22</sup> Chambers and Pullan, *Venice: A Documentary History*, 169.

<sup>23</sup> Ravid, "The Venetian Government and the Jews," 26.

<sup>24</sup> Harold Bloom once suggested that Shakespeare himself invented human character. Charles Marowitz, "Shakespeare's Outsiders," in *Shakespeare and the Mediterranean: The Selected Proceedings of the International Shakespeare Association World Congress, Valencia, 2001* ed.

they do exhibit human passion and intensity, none seem to have any sort of internal conflict about believing what they believe. Rather they are absolutely certain that their perceptions are right. This could fit into the equation by showing two extreme sides within a moderate republic, but Shakespeare's characters certainly do not in themselves reflect the vacillation between competing social ideologies and values that historical records reveal as descriptive of Venetian society as a whole.

Informed by this historical perspective, we disabuse ourselves of the stereotypes of Venice mentioned previously and develop a more keen awareness of the need to temper our excitement for the play to fit its limitations. Revisiting the history of Venice vividly shows the resolutions of the play to be conditional rather than universal, and literary abstractions rather than directly connected to reality. This perspective informs our views and use of the text both in our personal and popular conscience.

### Textual Authority

Similar to the way in which historical sources supplement how we understand the significance of *The Merchant of Venice*, the characters in the play itself are also in a process of debating the importance of texts that define their world. In his work, *Shakespeare's Cross-Cultural Encounters*, Geraldo de Sousa argues that "Shakespeare recovers fragments of alien worlds through which he explores the distortions and caricatures that cultures create of one another. Repeatedly, Shakespeare represents cultures which define themselves as ideological opposites that are engaged in a dynamic yet subtle process of negotiation and confrontation."<sup>25</sup> In regards to *The Merchant of Venice*, the tensions between Jews and Christians are a function of their appeals to and interpretations of different authoritative texts that serve "as the archival [repositories of their respective cultures'] values, beliefs, prejudices, and practices."<sup>26</sup> Though de Sousa focuses primarily on the interpretation of texts presented within

---

Tom Clayton, Susan Brock and Vicente Fores (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2004), 206.

<sup>25</sup> de Sousa, *Shakespeare's Cross-Cultural Encounters*, 2.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 2. This is the quote used at the end of the sentence. *Ibid.*, 3,4,68,71. These are references to the idea of interpretation of texts as the "negotiation" of "ideological opposites." The suggestion that tensions between Jews and Christians actually result from "appealing" different texts to begin with is my own. See note 27.

## Re-examining the Merchant of Venice

the play itself, his model can be used effectively in a more historical examination by focusing on an important implication of his idea--the evidence that these tensions are born of theological and social grounding in the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible) for Jews, and in the New Testament for Christians.<sup>27</sup> These cultural loci created social norms and defined ethical concepts--in short created textual communities--for Jews and Christians and thus help give context to their interactions.<sup>28</sup>

Adapting de Sousa's argument this way shows that Shylock and Antonio's differences in interpreting justice result from each one's grounding in his own religious texts. Each side attempts to bind the other by citing or relying on what is to his opponent a foreign text and guiding principle. De Sousa accurately observes that in *The Merchant of Venice* "Italians confront aliens in the reading and interpretation of texts. Through cultural encodings, these texts provide an ideological shield for the Italians and codify the premise of cultural superiority. Aliens who attempt to interpret Italian texts generated in the play do so at their own peril."<sup>29</sup> So while a simple reading of Shakespeare's work suggests that in the end some kind of mercy wins out, it is only a nominal mercy that, in attempting to "codify cultural superiority," fails to see beyond its own community.

---

<sup>27</sup> De Sousa subtly hints at this idea in his introduction when he states that: "Foreigners attempt to generate, modify, decipher or interpret texts. Members of European cultures resist alien attempts to assert ethnic, racial, or religious difference." He does not, however, flesh it out as I attempt to do in this essay.

<sup>28</sup> A word of caution must be placed here, for even though the idea of textual communities is a helpful way of understanding this ideological conflict, to call it the principal or best way to look at it would be a misnomer. Doing so would blindly assume the religiosity, not to mention literacy, of all. It would also not give room for any kind of simplistic ethnic derision or even genuine dislike based on behavioral factors that might not have much to do with religious or ethnic groupings. Despite that warning, I find it both useful and legitimate to talk about these texts as a harbinger for cultural tension because they served as the basis for the preaching within each community. Such preaching, I believe, was a major factor in creating culture and conditioning behavior in both Jewish and Christian communities.

<sup>29</sup> De Sousa, *Shakespeare's Cross-Cultural Encounters*, 69.

Community bias of this kind permeates the play. Throughout its early stages, Antonio is critical of Shylock for lending money with interest. Antonio sees this as overly indulgent and a crime against a “superior” revealed word. He does not manage to acknowledge, however, the benefits of a social structure that grants him a more comfortable and profitable lifestyle as a Christian. Nor does he readily see his own folly in using select, behaviorally intense passages of his own scripture to justify his hatred of the Jew and entirely ignoring other passages, such as Jesus’ counsel to love one’s enemies.<sup>30</sup>

Such a characterization seems to corroborate the observations of William Bedell, an English Protestant visitor to Venice in 1608, about 10 years after Shakespeare’s play is to have taken place. According to Bedell, Catholic teaching in Venice was “wholly in a manner devolved to the Fryars,” who seemed more content to inspire or gain approval with their sermons. “Their whole intentions seem to be either to delight or to move: as for teaching, they know not what it means.” He goes on to emphasize their “wresting of the holy scripture” and their proclivity towards “saying very trivial things with much effort.”<sup>31</sup>

If Antonio was a subject to a school of thought that seemed so self-satisfied and little concerned with delineating principles, he no doubt would be painted accurately if he only saw in religion and scripture what confirmed his own “superiority” and what would benefit him. According to Bedell, the preaching of Venice was intended to make one feel proud of being Christian, console some fears, and enlarge the Church’s coffers.<sup>32</sup> It was not, at least by his account, to encourage sincere questioning about the ‘mysteries’ of God’s love and wrath, or introspection about one’s relationship to him. Bedell concludes, after observing the preaching of both Jews and Catholics, that “for my part I have found myself better satisfied (at least less cloy’d) with the sermons of the Jews, than with theirs [the Catholics]. And in one thing the very Jews contemne them, and not undeservedly, as merchants of Gods word.”<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup>Or avoid judging others and do unto them as you would have them do unto you.

<sup>31</sup> Chambers and Pullan, *Venice: A Documentary History*, 195-196.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. Bedell remarked that Catholic preachers had a proclivity for making “some petty occasion or other to fall into the common place of moving [their] congregations to alms.”

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

## Re-examining the Merchant of Venice

Bedell's articulation of the problems that Catholics may have had does not, of course, mean that Jews were immune from failing to see beyond their own textual community. Though they were not in a position of power, "alien[s]" still attempted "to assert ethnic, racial, [and] religious difference" as valid, even in the face of the majority's social composition.<sup>34</sup> Within the play this is captured by Shylock, whose recounting of stories from the prophets and his one-sided interpretations of them show his own failure to register the validity of other views.<sup>35</sup>

Since Christians also used the Old Testament, the point extrapolated from de Sousa's thesis, namely that Jewish-Christian tensions were a result of their groundings in different authoritative texts, must be qualified to include the widely accepted contemporary interpretations of those texts. This revision is in harmony with the observations of Howard Tzvi Adelman, who insists that it is "evident that the Bible and the Talmud were not the ultimate arbiters of Jewish experience and conduct in Venice but were mediated not only by later rabbinical views but also by the limits and opportunities facing [Jews] in Christian Society."<sup>36</sup> Though at first this statement may seem to contradict the idea of textual communities, Adelman's comments actually further validate the idea by extending its reach not only to scriptural texts themselves, but also to the contemporary interpretations of such texts, especially those given by leaders in each community specifically charged with that duty.<sup>37</sup> Thus the formation of textual communities takes into account the "later rabbinical views" on the Jewish side as well as "the limits and opportunities" that Christian society, itself based on textual interpretation by the corresponding Catholic clergy and Christian political leaders, imposed on Jewish life.<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> de Sousa, *Shakespeare's Cross-Cultural Encounters*, 2.

<sup>35</sup> Shylock mentions Jacob, Laban, and Daniel. 1.3.68-94;4.1.227-228.

<sup>36</sup> Howard Tzvi Adelman, "Jewish Women and Family Life, Inside and Outside the Ghetto," in *The Jews of Early Modern Venice*, ed. Robert C. Davis and Benjamin Ravid (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 143.

<sup>37</sup> See footnote 28 which explores this connection.

<sup>38</sup> Civic leaders sometimes had more power than church leaders in Venice, but since civic leaders were also Catholic, they were in some ways under the influence of said clergy. It is an interesting power sharing structure that merits further examination under other circumstances.

One particularly relevant example of how the interpretation of religious texts, and subsequently popular preaching, led to conflict between Jews and Christians is the association of Jews with the devil.<sup>39</sup> Historically it had been common to refer to Jews as related to the devil because of their role in killing Christ and their stubbornness in resisting Christian conversion. Within Shakespeare's own text, this controversial slur is alluded to almost every time that Shylock is mentioned by a Christian character in the play.<sup>40</sup> The characters, like their real life counterparts, failed to see that what they were doing was symptomatic of "the vexed familial relations between Judaism and Christianity... Christianity's simultaneous dependence on its literal and theological lineage in Judaism and its guilty disavowal of that inheritance... its chronic need to both claim and repudiate the Jew."<sup>41</sup> This most compelling association of Shylock with the devil occurs when Salerio and Solanio, friends of Antonio, believe that the presence of Shylock, "the devil... in the likeness of a Jew" will "nullify" their prayers on behalf of their friend. They never seem to consider that their God might be the same as Shylock's, or that there is anything congruous between the two faiths.<sup>42</sup> Rather they cast Shylock as the antithesis of all they believe. Notably, Shylock's daughter Jessica is never labeled demonic in any form. She is instead suspected of not really being Shylock's daughter or of having a Christian mother, else how to explain her kindness? <sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> Joshua Trachtenburg, *The Devil and The Jews: The Medieval Conception of the Jew and its Relation to Modern Antisemitism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1943), 199,140,141,203,215. Anna Foa, "The Witch and the Jew: Two Alikes that Were Not the Same," in *From Witness to Witchcraft: Jews and Judaism in Medieval Christian Thought*, ed. Jeremy Cohen (Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz, 1997), 361.

<sup>40</sup> The variations are many and include the following: 2.2.18-26. Launcelot explains how Shylock is devilish; 2.3.2. House is hell; 3.1.18-19. Prayer crossing, devil in likeness of Jew; 3.1.25-28. Shylock's judgment as devil's; 3.1.64-65. All Jews evil like devil; 4.1.4-6 Shylock as "inhuman wretch," "incapable of pity," "void of mercy"--characteristics of the devil according to Christian interpretation; 4.1.72. Antonio insinuates that Shylock is less than human when in fact he is very human, just less than God; 4.1.130-140 Emphasizes his nature--unbridled whereas the way to have humanity and gain acceptance into the community is to have an orthodox view of God that then makes you one of them; 4.1.81. Jewish heart --only reason offered for his views; 4.1.130. More wolf than human; 4.1.210. Christ killer allusion 4.1.221.; 4.1.295.

<sup>41</sup> Janet Adelman, *Blood Relations*, 4.

<sup>42</sup> 3.1.18-19. *see also* footnote 18 in Norton Critical edition referenced in bibliography.

<sup>43</sup> 2.3.10-13. and 3.5.4-11.

## Re-examining the Merchant of Venice

The juxtaposition of Shylock and Jessica, more complex than it might initially seem, accurately underscores the ambiguity in Venetian culture. On one hand it betrays its ignorance by putting a nearly infinite amount of weight on the religious affiliation of an individual. It suggests that no one of another faith can be virtuous and no one within the shared faith can lack such virtue. Christians are righteous; Jews are devils, and that is that. Allowing Jessica to be 'good' by her actions rather than by association with her community--even briefly--embraces a more modern, more secular, more humanistic worldview. It is this inclination, hinted at in the play but actually present in Venetian society, that allows Cantarini to observe that "there is no nation except Venice where strangers find better entertainment and live with greater securities."<sup>44</sup> It is also what allowed Jews to live with a measure of comfort if they didn't cause problems.<sup>45</sup> It was an inclination to determine acceptance based on tangible action, not intangible belief.

In that vein it is important to remember that even when Shylock famously enumerates all the similarities between Jews and Christians, he mentions physical commonalities--a shared humanity; but he does not mention spiritual ones--what would be the product of a shared textual community. His ideas are almost proto-Enlightenment, but in the play "texts... ultimately govern and determine the interaction between ... Shylock and the Venetians."<sup>46</sup> This is what causes Shylock's loan to Antonio, potentially an instance of mutually beneficial civic interaction, to be done carrying the tag "not as to thy friends... but rather to thine enemy," reinforcing the distinctions and distrust between their communities.<sup>47</sup> The communities created by these texts also control Jessica's fate. Shakespeare does not allow her to be both 'good' and Jewish, but rather seems to establish her goodness by joining her with the Christian community.

The tension Shakespeare captures in his descriptions of Jessica and Shylock is not foreign to historical accounts of that time. There are a number of examples of Jewish-Christian interactions that evidence a "shared humanity" and an increasingly "greater security," but that were broken up for "causing a scandal" according to the socio-religious mores of the day. I will recount two examples here. The first is the experience of

---

<sup>44</sup> de Sousa, *Shakespeare's Cross-Cultural Encounters*, 84.

<sup>45</sup> Chambers and Pullan, *Venice: A Documentary History*, 228.

<sup>46</sup> de Sousa, *Shakespeare's Cross-Cultural Encounters*, 84.

<sup>47</sup> 1.3.

Giuseppe, a Jew who “taught dancing classes to Christian children.” His classes and friendships with the families of those he taught were developing nicely until authorities discovered that he had, at the request of the parents of a pupil, taken one of his students on trips to perform both in the ghetto and in another city. Even though the boy’s parents encouraged what Giuseppe was doing, the Inquisition was worried about the impact he would have on young Venetian Catholics. The Holy Office consequently stepped in and banned him from teaching anyone under the age of 12. They also prohibited him from having any contact with that student or the student’s family.<sup>48</sup>

The second is the experience of Valeria Brunalesco, a Christian woman who worked in the ghetto teaching Italian to the children there. Instead of being praised for her good will, respectful service, and help in teaching skills that could more fully incorporate Jews into Venetian society, Valeria was investigated by the Inquisition for witchcraft and “forming overly close friendships with Jews.” She continued teaching, but was forced to leave the ghetto.<sup>49</sup> These examples mirror the fictional experiences of Shylock and Jessica in that they foreshadow a more modern integration and humanity, but are ultimately curtailed due to traditional fears of religious mixing.

### **The problem of Jessica: Conversion, Gender, and The Church**

The social interactions mentioned in the previous section, along with the authoritarian reactions to them, are a fitting prelude to the more nuanced discussion of interfaith relationships, conversion, Inquisition, and gender that figure here in relation to the experience of Shakespeare’s Jessica. Her conversion to Christianity is not only a significant subplot of the play, but also a historically fascinating case study that prompts questions about the permeability of religious and civic communities and the dynamics of male-female relationships within those distinct communities.

---

<sup>48</sup> Pier Zorattini, “Jews, Crypto-Jews, and the Inquisition,” 104.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

## Re-examining the Merchant of Venice

Shakespeare depicts Jessica as desirable and well-adjusted, a natural fit in her newly adopted Christian circle. This is especially true in the eyes of her lover, Lorenzo, who seems to have had few, if any, reservations about pursuing, converting, and marrying the girl. Ultimately Shakespeare seems to insinuate that the conversion was beneficial for both parties. Jessica is reborn by becoming Christian and Lorenzo is able to land his true love, much to his own delight and the approval of his closest friends. Most importantly, both benefit socially and monetarily by Jessica's escape from her father's home and her abandonment of his traditions. The historical sources that deal with conversion indicate that while the circumstances and manner of Jessica's conversion would be extraordinary, the social results would have been much the same.

As Natalie Rothman has shown, many who converted in Venice did so with the help of the Pia Casa dei Catecumeni (Holy House of the Catechumens) which provided not only religious instruction but also godparentage, opportunities for employment, and financial aid. These converts tended to be younger than Jessica seems to have been, but they are similar to her in a number of ways. Like Jessica, converts from Pia Casa often (though not always) entirely severed ties with their parents. Additionally, just as Jessica uses Lorenzo to legitimize her conversion and create new social networks, those from the Pia Casa were the beneficiaries of sponsorships and other patronage from more established Christians who would help integrate converts and validate their new identities.<sup>50</sup>

Conversion in the manner Jessica undertakes it, however, would have been more difficult and more likely to result in social and legal problems for both Jewish and Christian communities than those who went about it with institutional aid. Leaving the Jewish community for the Christian one through a clearly marked exit and not looking back minimized confusion, but in Jessica's case there seems to have been a long period of secret duplicity. Her apparent straddling of borders prompts questions about the interaction that Jews would have been able to have with Christians on a more personal, rather than institutional level and how these interactions could lead to conversion.

---

<sup>50</sup> E. Natalie Rothman, "Becoming Venetian: Conversion and Transformation in the Seventeenth-Century Mediterranean," *Mediterranean Historical Review* 21, (June 2006): 39-75.

In early modern Venice this kind of personal interaction was both facilitated by, and resulted in, a significant amount of ambiguity about the borders that defined one's place in society. Such uncertainties are evidenced by the aims of Venetian society in regards to religious others like Jews, the laws which governed interfaith interaction, and the disparity between the claims of those laws and the enforcement thereof.<sup>51</sup> Though it can be difficult to trace exactly how non-institutional converts dealt with these uncertainties, we can gain some understanding of their experiences by looking at the conditions themselves. Such an examination makes apparent Shakespeare's historical limitations in three ways. First, it calls to attention his failure to mention the efforts the authorities of Venice made to place limits on the social interaction between Jews and Christians. Secondly, and along the same lines, it points out his omission of any kind of suspicion toward Jessica by the Catholic community. Lastly, it discredits the Shakespeare-inspired notion that conversion from Judaism to Christianity freed women from social bondage.<sup>52</sup>

### Venetian Aims and Laws of Interaction

While Venetian authorities placed a high value on the economic benefits of allowing Jews in their city, "the Jewish presence in Venice was officially justified not merely by the services rendered by Jews as moneylenders to the poor, but also by the possibility of converting them to the Christian faith."<sup>53</sup> How exactly this was supposed to happen, however, was somewhat of a mystery as "the Venetian authorities were anxious to prevent scandals caused by the loose association of Christians with persons of other faiths."<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup> This particular issue is exacerbated by the apparent disagreements in the way different historians speak about such mixing and the enforcement of the laws that regulated it.

<sup>52</sup> Even if they could jump through all the hoops of an 'authentic conversion,' female converts would still have been subservient to husbands in their new communities, just as they were subservient to patriarchal authority in their old ones. Satya Datta, *Women and Men in Early Modern Venice* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2003), 162-163, 173-174, 176-177, 178-180.

<sup>53</sup> Chambers and Pullan, *A Documentary History of Venice*, 326.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 327.

## Re-examining the Merchant of Venice

*As persons set apart from Venetians by their religion and culture, [Jews] formed distinctive foreign communities regulated by Venetian law. These communities were generally both privileged and restricted. ... Restrictions were generally aimed at reducing competition between Venetian craftsmen and their foreign counterparts, and--especially in order to safeguard the dominant Catholic religion--at preventing completely free association on equal terms between Venetians and foreigners.<sup>55</sup>*

The most famous protectorates of this stratified interaction were the establishment of the ghetto and the legislation of clothing laws that would highlight aliens. The ghetto, a Venetian creation before it was implemented across Europe, was established in 1516. It was named ‘for a quarter known as the Geto, the site of a disused foundry’ where ‘Jews were compelled to live.’ The term, as is now universally known, came to signify ‘a separated place reserved by law for the accommodation of Jews.’<sup>56</sup>

The creation of a separate living space, however, was not in itself sufficient to quell what was seen as inappropriate intermingling between Jews and Christians. For years, the Church and ‘subsequently secular authorities’ had attempted to ‘regulate the status of the Jews in Catholic Europe’ and specifically curb ‘forbidden sexual relations between Christians and Jews’ by making Jews wear special clothing.<sup>57</sup> In early modern Venice this directive led to the adoption of a special head covering that distinguished Jews from other residents. Fynes Moryson, an Englishman who was among the first to observe the ghetto, noted in 1594 that ‘in the day [Jews] are bound to weare a yellow cap.’<sup>58</sup>

Others have observed, however, that despite this restriction, social standing could mitigate the pressures of the law and the wealthiest Jews ‘were permitted to have the same exterior aspect as the Christians. This was justified by the conventional wisdom that cast [aristocratic Jews] as mediators between Christians and [other] Jews.’<sup>59</sup> Perhaps this is one historically sound way to explain how Jessica could have seemingly extensive contact with Christians before her conversion. Regardless of

---

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 325.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 326.

<sup>57</sup> Benjamin Ravid, ‘From Yellow to Red: On the Distinguishing Head-Covering of the Jews of Venice,’ *Jewish History* 6, no. 1-2 (1992): 179.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>59</sup> Robert Bonfil, *Jewish Life in Renaissance Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 110.

circumventions like this, however, those at the top of Venice's hierarchies would not have appreciated much interfaith flirting, as it would only "[make] many Christians transgress" and "infect not only the souls of Christians but also their bodies..."<sup>60</sup> Flirting could also lead to potentially more egregious errors, like sexual relationships between Jews and Christians, which Venice had expressly outlawed over a century before Shakespeare's play. In 1424 the Venetian government forbade,

*...sexual relationships between Jewish men and Christian women... setting the penalty according to the status of the Christian woman. ... In 1443 the Senate also proceeded more severely against Christian men having sexual relations with Jewish women, closing the loophole in earlier legislation that, while requiring male Jews to wear a sign that could be recognized by Christians, had said nothing about Jewish women. To ensure that they should also be recognizable, so that Christian men would not have relations with them and produce a Jewish child, the Senate ordered all Jewish women also to wear the [the head covering].*<sup>61</sup>

The social control sought by the explicit wording of these laws, the clothing markers that Jews were required to wear, and the creation of the ghetto did not stop interfaith interaction, and sexual relations (as they tend to do) still occurred between religious groups. Writing about Christian-Jewish sexual relations during this period in Milan, and treating them as representative of the rest of Italy, Robert Bonfil observed that "... the one undeniable fact is that they led to judicial proceedings, a clear indication of how these relations were viewed by the mentality of the time: as deviations from the norm, which society was not in the least disposed to tolerate. The rare cases of sexual promiscuity, far from being evidence of a dynamic integration, demonstrate instead the existence of rigid social barriers."<sup>62</sup>

---

<sup>60</sup> Chambers and Pullan, *Venice: A Documentary History*, 345.

<sup>61</sup> Ravid, "The Venetian Government and the Jews," 6.

<sup>62</sup> Bonfil, *Jewish Life in Renaissance Italy*, 113.

## Re-examining the Merchant of Venice

### Inquisition & Enforcement

While he does not focus on sexual relations specifically, the historian Pier Cesare Ioly Zorattini disagrees that the limits of Jewish-Christian interaction were so clear cut. He instead sees them as “far more extensive and complex than might be expected.”<sup>63</sup> Citing the examples of Christians who lived and worked in the ghetto, Jews who were employed teaching Christians, those who had secretly married across religious lines without disclosing their identity even to their partners, and others who more openly pursued romantic relationships, Zorattini concludes that “the Inquisition records ... reveal that social relations between Jews and Christians in Venice were closer than official rhetoric might suggest, amounting to far more than the strictly utilitarian commercial and fiscal interchanges for which the Venetian government was ready to tolerate a Jewish presence in the city.”<sup>64</sup> This historical disagreement about interfaith social mixing draws attention to the dissonance between what was theoretically law and how the law actually worked. Even with the benefit of hindsight, it is still difficult to ascertain just what attitude permeated Venice’s view of these laws.

In relation to Jessica’s case, it is clear that intermarriage was of course prohibited by the state, but converting and then marrying was not. The government’s concerns about limiting romantic interaction would seem to eliminate, by extension, one of the most persuasive forms of making converts. More ambivalence is evidenced, however, by the condition, that if one did engage in interfaith sexual relations, he or she could commute the punishment by conversion to Christianity.<sup>65</sup> It seems safe to say that in order to have any kind of interfaith romantic interest, one or both parties were required to break Venetian law by either not correctly identifying themselves or developing “overly close friendships,” but the legal realities of such relationships were so convoluted and contradictory that it cannot be said with much certainty how such interaction would have been handled.

Taken together, these pieces of evidence about the purpose, function, and application of laws regarding social dealings across religious lines further substantiate the claim that Venice’s ambiguous stances both facilitated interaction and made the results of interaction uncertain. These

---

<sup>63</sup> Pier Zorattini, “Jews, Crypto-Jews, and the Inquisition,” 113-114.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 95-116. *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>65</sup> Ravid, “The Venetian Government and the Jews,” 6.

conflicting ideals suggest that Jews were supposed to be an integral part of the economy, but at the same time stay out of the way. It was hoped that they would convert to Christianity, but they were officially prohibited from interacting freely with any of that faith. When they did interact, responses from authorities were generally “lenient.”<sup>66</sup> Further complicating the mixed messages sent to Jews is Thomas Coryate’s observation that while Jews were “despised for not being Christians,” those who did convert would find that “all their goodes [were] confiscated as soone as they embrace[d] Christianity.” Supposedly this was done as a recompense that would “disclogge their soules and consciences” for having “raise[d] their fortunes by usury” and “gripping extortion.” But being “left even naked, and destitute of their means of maintenance” Coryate concludes “fewer Jewes [are] converted to Christianity in Italy, than in any country of Christendome.”<sup>67</sup> Coryate’s statement seems entirely at odds with Rothman’s depiction of a Venice that sought to ease conversion and thereby enhance its own “spiritual and civic claims.”<sup>68</sup> While this may have to do with the types of converts the two are talking about, it more readily serves to underscore the complexities and contradictions of conversion in Venice.

Assuming that one could navigate all the caveats of conversion, a fundamental concern about the sincerity of his or her conversion may still have arisen. Upon baptism, converts fell within the purview of the Inquisition and could attract attention or incur penalties from the Church if their behavior seemed suspicious or unorthodox. As a general institution, the Inquisition was notorious across Catholic Europe for constantly suspecting new Christians of Judaizing, or not completely abandoning Jewish traditions, beliefs, and practices.

The Venetian Inquisition was much more moderate than its counterparts in other states, however, and for much of its history “existed more in name than in effect.”<sup>69</sup> During the time in which Shakespeare wrote, the Inquisition of Venice was functional, “apparently free of any lay oversight but [was] nevertheless relatively powerless, since in order to make an arrest they had to obtain the assistance of the Council of Ten,

---

<sup>66</sup> Pier Zorattini, “Jews, Crypto-Jews, and the Inquisition,” 104.

<sup>67</sup> de Sousa, *Shakespeare’s Cross-Cultural Encounters*, 85.

<sup>68</sup> Rothman, “Becoming Venetian: Conversion and Transformation in the Seventeenth-Century Mediterranean,” 40.

<sup>69</sup> Pier Zorattini, “Jews, Crypto-Jews, and the Inquisition,” 97.

## Re-examining the Merchant of Venice

which was not always forthcoming.”<sup>70</sup> While the Inquisition in Venice may not have been as powerful or aggressive as in Spain or even Rome, there was still concern over and “sensitivity” to the presence of Marranos “in certain regions of Venice.”<sup>71</sup> Upon the expulsion of Marranos (but not Jews) in 1550, Hieronymo Feruffino, an ambassador to the Duke of Ferrara who was living in Venice, observed that:

*the lords of Venice have been advised that the Marranos are worse than Jews, because they are neither Christians nor Jews. All the Jews live together in the ghetto, separated from Christians, but the Marranos have to do with Christians and live in several parts of the city. The lords of Venice have been informed of this, and have been shown that such association is the cause of many errors, especially in making many Christians transgress. Furthermore, the Marranos lend money upon usury, and they may by their familiarity persuade our own people to do the same thing. And they are a malevolent, faithless people, up to no good, and they might suffice to infect not only the souls of Christians but also their bodies with some pestilential disease.<sup>72</sup>*

It should be noted that despite this apparent indignation toward Marranos, “when the Holy Office did aggressively pursue judaizing Conversos, its actions generally met the firm opposition of the Venetian authorities.”<sup>73</sup> The tension between Venice’s religious and secular leaders in regards to Jewish converts to Christianity is in line with the conflicting stances that each side took on Jewish-Christian relations in general.

While the nominal boundaries on the interactions between Jews and Christians may not have been as “rigid” as Bonfil contests, they were certainly more formidable than Shakespeare’s play would indicate. In his treatment there is no suspicion of Jessica by any ecclesiastical or civic leaders and no worry about her apparently familiar interaction with a group of Christian men.<sup>74</sup> She never faces scrutiny from the Christian community at any point, either for improperly associating with Christians before her escape or for any Jewish tendencies once she has left. Moreover, Jessica comes out of the experience with enhanced wealth,

---

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. For an explanation of the Venetian tribunal and its relation to civic authority see Christopher F. Black, *The Italian Inquisition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 31-40. An alternate consideration is offered in Stephen Haliczer, ed. and trans., *Inquisition and Society in Early Modern Europe* (London: Croom Helm, 1987), 34.

<sup>71</sup> Brian Pullan, *The Jews of Europe and The Inquisition of Venice*, 101.

<sup>72</sup> Chambers and Pullan, *Venice: A Documentary History*, 345.

<sup>73</sup> Pier Zorattini, “Jews, Crypto-Jews, and the Inquisition,” 112.

<sup>74</sup> Even after she becomes a thief by stealing from her father.

while leaving her father destitute. All of these social caveats would make a conversion like Jessica's not only uncommon, but bordering on unthinkable for early modern Venice. Shakespeare's dealings with the character indicate a level of simplicity that was not to be found in that time and place.<sup>75</sup>

### Gender & Social Bondage

Despite seeing the conversion of Jessica through rose-colored lenses, Shakespeare's account of her conversion is not entirely without its warnings and commentaries. Most notably, Shakespeare successfully suggests that Jessica's ultimate problem is not that she is Jewish, but that she is a woman. Within the play itself, it seems that she is ignorant of this larger societal issue and feels that if she can only escape the "hell" of her father's "tediousness," she can live a life "not to his manners" and will be happier.<sup>76</sup> But regardless of what civic custom or religious law may have said about her conversion, the fact that she was a woman is what would really limit her autonomy. Even in escaping the harsh, patriarchal traditions of her father, Jessica would have been unable to free herself. Instead she would have become entirely dependent on her husband to give her an identity as a Christian.<sup>77</sup> Her ability to independently define herself would not have improved at all, and given the circumstances of her conversion, it would certainly have been open to question whether she was a true convert. In his text, Shakespeare focuses more on Jessica's disdain for her father than on any sort of religious leaning as a reason for conversion, but in the historical Venice, there was no idealized Belmont to which she and Lorenzo could escape. There were instead, only confusing social reactions and the continued subservience of being a woman living under the authority of a man.

---

<sup>75</sup> This is especially provocative since in all the other aspects of his play, things are so difficult between the groups, the idea that it would be so easy for Jessica to jump between them seems misplaced.

<sup>76</sup> 2.3.

<sup>77</sup> Satya Datta, *Women and Men in Early Modern Venice*, 162-163, 169. Federica Ambrosini, "Toward a Social History of Women in Venice: From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment," in *Venice Reconsidered*, ed. John Martin and Dennis Romano (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 423.

## Re-examining the Merchant of Venice

### Shakespeare's Identity; Venetian Identity

While *The Merchant of Venice* is generally classified as a comedy, it offers something much richer in its representations of political, religious, and gender identity. Of course provocative scholarly debates about innumerable aspects of the story and Shakespeare's connection to it abound. Likewise, friends will continue to engage in good-natured discussion and analysis of the play's meaning. What has been attempted here, however, is not to enter that fray, but rather to investigate the accuracy and validity of Shakespeare's representations of Venetian society.

Regardless of Shakespeare's talent or the canonical nature of the play, his characters stand so easily in relief because his Venetian background is starkly black and white. Even Shakespeare is incapable of capturing the many shades of conflict, ambiguity, and ambivalence that manifest themselves in the historical sources of an early modern Venice that was navigating uncertain passages. These unsettled ideological spaces in Venice were between a modern and an ecclesiastically dominated society; between the economic prosperity of plurality and the cultural hegemony of homogeneity; and between religious dogma and humanistic philosophy.

Because of these ideological conflicts, the social, religious, and gender identities of early modern Venice were much more complex and unsettled than Shakespeare leads us to believe. The Venetian republic pursued its rules with mixed interests that bespoke a level of civic tolerance while still accommodating some of the Catholic incursions into that arena. Individuals saw glimpses of "greater securities" in a liberated future but were unable to extract themselves from the "subordination" of the present.<sup>78</sup> And, for the most part, tradition still trumped—though not resoundingly--a burgeoning and increasingly attractive modernity.

---

<sup>78</sup> de Sousa, *Shakespeare's Cross-Cultural Encounters*, 84. Satya Datta, *Women and Men in Early Modern Venice*, 162-163.

## Bibliography

- Adelman, Howard Tzvi. "Jewish Women and Family Life, Inside and Outside the Ghetto." In *The Jews of Early Modern Venice*, edited by Robert C. Davis and Benjamin Ravid, 143-167. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.
- Adelman, Janet. *Blood Relations: Christian and Jew in The Merchant of Venice*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.
- Ambrosini, Federica. "Toward a Social History of Women in Venice: From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment." In *Venice Reconsidered*, edited by John Martin and Dennis Romano, 420-453. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000.
- Black, Christopher F. *Early Modern Italy: A Social History*. London: Routledge, 2001.
- Black, Christopher F. *The Italian Inquisition*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009.
- Bonfil, Robert. *Jewish Life in Renaissance Italy*. Translated by Anthony Oldcorn. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.
- Chambers, David and Brian Pullan, ed. *Venice: A Documentary History, 1450 – 1630*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1992.
- Datta, Satya. *Women and Men in Early Modern Venice*. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2003.
- Davis, Robert C. and Benjamin Ravid. *The Jews of Early Modern Venice*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.
- de Sousa, Geraldo U. *Shakespeare's Cross-Cultural Encounters*. London: Macmillan Press LTD, 1999.
- Foa, Anna. "The Witch and the Jew: Two Alikes that Were Not the Same." In *From Witness to Witchcraft: Jews and Judaism in Medieval Christian Thought*, edited by Jeremy Cohen, 361-374. Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz, 1997.
- Gillies, John. *Shakespeare and the Geography of Difference*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Haliczer, Stephan, eds. and trans. *Inquisition and Society In Early Modern Europe*. London: Croom Helm, 1987.
- Hughes, Diane Owen. "Earrings for Circumcision: Distinction and Purification in the Italian Renaissance City." In *Persons in Groups: Social Behavior as Identity Formation in Medieval and Renaissance Europe*, Edited by

## Re-examining the Merchant of Venice

Richard C. Trexler, 155-182. Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1985.

Jefferson, Thomas. *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Edited by William Peden. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995.

Lazar, Allan, Dan Karlan, and Jeremy Salter. *The 101 Most Influential People Who Never Lived: How Characters of Fiction, Myth, Legends, Television, and Movies have Shaped our Society, Changed our Behavior, and Set the course of History*. New York: HarperCollins, 2006.

Marowitz, Charles. "Shakespeare's Outsiders." In *Shakespeare and the Mediterranean: The Selected proceedings of the International Shakespeare Association World Congress, Valencia, 2001*, edited by Tom Clayton, Susan Brock and Vicente Fores, 206-214. Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2004.

Pullan, Brian. *The Jews of Europe and the Inquisition of Venice, 1550 – 1670*. Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble Books, 1983.

Ravid, Benjamin. "From Yellow to Red: On the Distinguishing Head-Covering of the Jews of Venice." *Jewish History* 6 (1992): 179-210.

Ravid, Benjamin. "The Venetian Government and the Jews." In *The Jews of Early Modern Venice*, edited by Robert C. Davis and Benjamin Ravid, 3-30. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.

Rothman, E. Natalie. "Becoming Venetian: Conversion and Transformation in the Seventeenth-Century Mediterranean." *Mediterranean Historical Review* 21 (June 2006): 39-75.

Shakespeare, William. *The Merchant of Venice*. Edited by Leah S. Marcus. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006.

Trachtenberg, Joshua. *The Devil and The Jews: The Medieval Conception of the Jew and its Relation to Modern Antisemitism*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1943.

Zorattini, Pier Cesare Ioly. "Jews, Crypto-Jews, and the Inquisition." In *The Jews of Early Modern Venice*, edited by Robert C. Davis and Benjamin Ravid, 97-116. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.