



Anti-Semitic Aesthetics: An Inter-Religious and Inter-Cultural Conflict in William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (1596-98)

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Abstract - The representation of anti-Semitism dominates the dramatization of the inter-religious conflict that opposes Christian and Jewish characters in *The Merchant of Venice*. This study aims at showing how Shakespeare uses various literary devices to develop an aesthetics that dramatizes the hatred that fuels the conflict between the Jews and the Christians of the Renaissance period in the play. The Marxist literary theory based on Antonio Gramsci's cultural hegemony serves as the basis of this study. Through the analysis of the aesthetics of anti-Semitism, the study has found that the happy resolution of this inter-religious and inter-cultural conflict has helped to restore peace in the Venetian society. This denouement of the conflict in the play can serve as a strategy for mediation that can lead to a peaceful resolution of conflicts in society. This type of resolution serves the purpose of peace building and the living together in the world.

Key words: anti-Semitism, conflict, religion, resolution, peace.

Résumé - La représentation de l'antisémitisme domine la mise en scène du conflit inter-religieux qui oppose les personnages chrétiens et Juifs dans *The Merchant of Venice* de Shakespeare. Cette étude vise à montrer comment Shakespeare plusieurs procédés littéraires pour développer une esthétique qui met en scène la haine qui alimente le conflit entre les Juifs et les Chrétiens de la période de la Renaissance. La théorie marxiste basée sur l'hégémonie culturelle d'Antonio Gramsci sert de soubassement à cette étude. A travers l'analyse de l'esthétisation de l'antisémitisme l'étude montre que le dénouement heureux de ce conflit inter-religieux et interculturel a abouti à la restauration de la paix dans la société de Venise. Ce dénouement du conflit dans la pièce peut servir de stratégie de médiation qui peut déboucher sur la résolution pacifique de conflits. Ce type de résolution contribuent à l'édification de la paix et du vivre ensemble dans le monde.

Mots clés : antisémitisme, conflit, religion, résolution, paix.

INTRODUCTION

The aesthetics on anti-Semitism is remarkably featured in Shakespeare's tragedy *The Merchant of Venice*. Anti-Semitism remains a much-debated contemporary issue in relation to world peace. Critics such as Phyllis Joyce Cohen Levy recall that throughout the history of English fiction the Jew has had a double image, that of an isolated man living at the periphery of the Christian society, never integrated or accepted because of his lack of Christian beliefs and the practice of usury that has set him further apart from his Christian fellowmen. (Levy 1968:1) On his part, Harold Bloom holds that "[t]he play is both a romantic



comedy and a marvellously adequate version of a perfectly Christian, altogether anti-Semitic, of a kind of fused into Christianity by the Gospel of John in particular." (Bloom 2010: 1)

Today, many scholars try to determine whether, with a Christian education and belief, Shakespeare was anti-Semitic or not when he published the play more than four hundred years ago. Harold Bloom addresses the complexity of the issue by writing that: "... every time I teach *The Merchant of Venice*, my students rebel at my insistence that Shylock is not there to be sympathized with, whereas Antonio is to be admired, if we are to read the play that Shakespeare wrote." (Bloom 2010: 4) This testifies to the aesthetic value readers continue to derive from the dramatization Shakespeare made of the tension that exists between Jews and Christians. For Harold Bloom "*Shakespeare after all wrote what might well be called *The Jew of Venice*, in clearly rivalry with his precursor Marlow's *The Jew of Malta*."* (Raffel 2006: 152)

On the whole, there is a unanimous tendency among critics who establish the fact that Shakespeare produced an aesthetic piece on a crucial and sensible issue known as anti-Semitism. It is in fact the dramatization of an inter-religious and inter-cultural conflict that oppose Christians and Jews in the same way as Christopher Marlow did before him in *The Jew of Malta* or what Geoffrey Chaucer did in "Prioress Tale" as highlighted by Hermann Sinsheimer (1947: 5) and quoted by Phyllis Joyce Cohen Levy (1968:4).

The study argues that Shakespeare's aesthetics of anti-Semitism is based on the inter-religious and inter-cultural conflict between Jews and Christians. The conflict highlights how the social peace had been breached before being restored in the Venetian City by the end of the play. The study examines particularly the religious and cultural factors that contributed to the outbreak of the conflict between Christians and Jews. It also underscores that the resolution of the conflict in the play has forced the Jewish characters to abandon their religion and traditions in order to embrace the religion of the Christian characters by the end of the plot.

The lenses of the Marxist literary theory based on Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony are used in this study to shed light on anti-Semitism in the play. Gramsci emphasises the necessity to "develop the political consciousness of the proletariat to enable its emergence as a 'hegemonic force' in its own 'right to rule'." (Ives 2004:70) The proletariat's cultural forms and ideologies had to be respected and incorporated into the strategy of revolution. The necessity to develop a political consciousness to revolt concerns the characters that are victims of persecution and various forms of oppression. It will be used to highlight aspects such as religious and cultural dominations or hegemony developed by Christian characters against Jewish characters who also developed



a political consciousness in the form of revenge fuelling the conflict as it is dramatized in the play.

The genesis of the conflict that breached the peace as well as its manifestation and contributing factors are explored in the first place. The analysis of the process for a peaceful resolution of the conflict which led to the restoration of peace and social harmony between the two religious communities in the City of Venice is conducted in the second.

1. The Genesis and the Manifestation of the Inter-religious and the Inter-Cultural Conflict

The play dramatizes the inter-religious and inter-cultural conflict which has nothing to do with race. (Loomba & Burton 2007) The comedy falls under pre-holocaust literature on the basis of the fact that it was published many centuries before the outbreak of the 20th century holocaust perpetrated against Jews in Europe and in other parts of the world. This anti-Semitic attitude on the part of Christians reached its highest degree in terms of the cruelty of human beings against their fellows in the world when it took the form of the holocaust during the Second World War

The various forms of persecutions, and even the murder of Jews, are known as anti-Judaism or anti-Semitism. The causes of the conflict are based on religious and cultural differences that exist between Jews and Christians. It is fundamentally a conflict between Judaism and Christianity from its inception. In clarifying this type of inter-religious and inter-cultural conflict, Steven Beller posits that it is:

a hatred of Jews that has stretched across millennia and across continents; or it is a relatively modern political movement and ideology that arose in Central Europe in the late 19th century and achieved its evil apogee in the Holocaust; or it is the irrational, psychologically pathological version of an ethnocentric and religiocentric anti-Judaism that originated in Christianity's conflict with its Jewish roots - and achieved its evil apogee in the Holocaust; or it is a combination of all of these. (Beller 2007: 1)

The quote above helps to set the scope of the dramatization Shakespeare made of anti-Semitism in *The Merchant of Venice* which is based on religious, cultural and ethnic factors.

1.1. The Religious and the Cultural Factors of the Conflict in the Play

The conflict stems from a circumstantial and coincidental fact created by Shakespeare in the play to dramatize a serious world problem in the form of a tragi-comedy. This tragi-comedy reflects the realities about the conflict between Jews in England and Christians or English people in Renaissance Europe which



recorded the manifestation of the hatred Christians developed against Jews and the counter hatred the latter levelled against Christians. The playwright dwelled on factors such as religious beliefs and the cultural practices that are different between Jews and Christians to dramatize them in the form of a conflict in the play.

The conflict is rooted in the hegemonies that originates from various factors such as different religions, antagonistic cultural practices, traditions, business activities etc. that can be seen through the portrayal of Christian characters such as Antonio, Bassanio, Portia, Lorenzo, The Duke of Venice, Nerrissa, and Balthazar who are in conflict with characters that are Jews like Shylock, Jessica, Tublal. The inter-cultural and inter-religious conflict which history has recorded across many millennia is ignited in the play by the bankruptcy in which Antonio found himself all of a sudden. The author used it as the ignition point in order to set the conflict in motion in the play. Shakespeare used these factors based on opposite religious beliefs, cultural differences and the want of money to set the stage for the conflict to ignite between Christian and Jewish characters in the plot.

The conflict between Jews and Christians in *The Merchant of Venice* can be explained from the fact that the two parties belong to two different religions, namely Christianity and Judaism. The two religions trade hegemony and counter hegemony fuelled by mistrust and hatred that has established them in a situation of perpetual conflict throughout history.

These two factors based on religion and culture are used in the play by the dramatist to set the foundational ground on which the two parties in conflict will confront each other in a bid for each one to dominate the other. In addition, Shakespeare created Shylock as the typical representative of the Jewish religion and culture. He made Antonio to be the archetype of the Christian religion and culture. Both characters are businessmen with divergent beliefs as well as antagonistic traditions and cultures.

The main conflict in the plot of *The Merchant of Venice* is based on the mistrust and the mutual hatred that exist between Jews and Christians because the two communities belong to two different religions and cultures. The conflict can be understood on the basis of the fact that Jews and Christians are ideologically opposed to each other in a hegemonic confrontation based on doctrinal and religious differences, right from the beginning of the Christendom.

In fact, Christians developed a hostility against Jews because of their refusal to convert to Christianity at its beginnings. Steven Beller qualifies this inter-cultural and inter-religious conflict as being based on "*a centuries-long heritage of Christian doctrinal hostility to Jews.*" (Beller 2007: 11) The fact that Shakespeare made the Jewish characters live in a predominantly Christian community in the play is an



illustration of the domination of the English culture and tradition over the Jewish culture and tradition. This is shown through the creation of the two settings in the play particularly the cities of Venice and Belmont in Renaissance Italy.

Shylock as a Jew appears in the play as the other in the eyes of his neighbours who are predominantly Christians. The Jewish manners of Shylock which reflect in fact the Jewish culture are even challenged by his own daughter. She happened to declare that she is ashamed of her Jewish origin, as if it were a sin to be a Jew. Shakespeare develops an aestheticizing perspective that presents a negative image of the culture of Jews throughout the play and this is contributing to building of the conflict.

The two settings which are predominantly Christian predispose the Jewish characters who are a minority ethnic group in the Venetian society to be persecuted by Christians because the precepts of the religion of the Jews is contrary to the Christian doctrine as delineated in *The Merchant of Venice*.

Shakespeare created this conflict on purpose in the play to serve as a strategy to bring the Christians like Bassanio and Antonio into close contact with Jews, represented by Shylock, Jessica, etc. Despite the religious and cultural differences that oppose the two parties, Shakespeare made them enter forcefully into a financial transaction that would provoke the conflict between Jews and Christians. The conflict inevitably broke out because of the hegemony of Christians over Jews who in turn also develop a counter hegemony over Christians.

It must be underlined that this hegemonic confrontation places the Christians like Antonio and Bassanio in a disadvantaged position at this stage of the play because they were compelled to go and borrow the money which he needed under whatever terms and conditions the Jews like Shylock might have set for them.

To make the conflict plausible, Shakespeare created the conditions which made it that the only person in the City of Venice who could lend the needed money to Antonio and his friend Bassanio, is Shylock, a Jew. The main business of Shylock is to lend money to people on usury which, in fact, is contrary to the culture, the beliefs and the faith as well as the doctrine of Christians all over the world and the English Christians in particular as illustrated in the created space.

For Christians, Jews are not good people. They are misbelievers or non-believers. Shakespeare made Christians use the metaphor of a dog to describe Jews. Their intention is to show that Jews do not believe in Jesus Christ and above all they are 'Christ's killers.' (Cohn-Sherbok 2003)



These factors are used by Shylock to fulfil his hegemonic ambition to turn the table in his favour in order to dominate the Christians he hates and who also hate him in their turn. To this effect, Shakespeare suddenly makes his audience or readership discover Antonio and Shylock without any other prior process discussing the amount Bassanio wanted to borrow from him. The conflict is clearly revealed to the audience when Bassanio invited Shylock to eat dinner with them, the Christians. Shylock did not only turn down the invitation, but he also used it as an opportunity to proclaim the superiority of the Jewish religious and cultural values over the Christian cultural values by saying in an unequivocal way that he will interact in many activities with Christians, before stressing that will never eat any food with them because of the religious and cultural differences.

Yes, to smell pork, to eat of the habitation which
your prophet the Nazarite conjured the devil into. I will
buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you, and so following. But I
will not eat with you, drink with you,
nor pray with you. (I. 3. 28-32)

This quote clearly shows that Shylock decidedly refused to socialise with Christians like Bassanio and Antonio with whom he nevertheless transacts business. On his part, Antonio against his own faith and culture, accepted the idea that Bassanio could borrow some money from Shylock. Antonio as a Christian also proclaimed that "*I neither lend nor borrow/ By taking nor by giving of excess/Yet to supply the ripe wants of my friend/I will break the custom (to Bassanio).*" (I. 3. 55-58) Furthermore, Shakespeare developed a mimesis of his time as far as the mutual hatred between Christians and Jews is concerned in relationship with money lending business. To justify his hatred, Shylock revealed to Antonio that the Jewish tribe has suffered persecutions in the hands of Christians before disclosing his intention to revenge. This marks the starting point of the conflict.

1.2. The Dramatization of the Inter-Religious and Inter-Cultural Conflict in the Play

Shakespeare dramatizes in his play the manifestation of anti-Semitism as the inter-religious and inter-cultural conflict that opposes Christians and Jews on various grounds. Under the Marxist's perspective developed by Antonio Gramsci, Shylock is made to hold a position of hegemony or superiority in his relationship with his partners like Antonio and Bassanio when they went to borrow money from him. This stance gave him a hegemonic attitude over Christians in his business relationship with them. Shylock asked Antonio "*Methought you said you neither lend nor borrow / Upon advantage.*" (I. 3. 62-63). The dramatist allowed Shylock to express his visceral hatred against Antonio simply



because he is a Christian. He further proclaimed that Christians are bad for the sacred nation of Jews because they lend money without taking higher interests on it.

I hate him for he is a Christian,
But for that in low simplicity
He lends out money gratis and brings down
The rate of usance here with us in Venice. (I. 3. 36-39)

Shylock hates Antonio because he is a Christian and more importantly because Antonio lends money without taking any interests and this jeopardises the business of the Jew. Shylock would further call him a fool by telling the Jailer that: *"This is the fool that lends out money gratis."* (III. 3. 2) The hostility between Shylock, the representative of Judaism and Antonio who represents Christendom is clearly dramatized by Shakespeare at this stage of the plot. This hatred against Antonio is by extension a hatred of Jews against all the Christians in the world.

Shakespeare created a dramatic irony in order to let his audience discover the long-held hatred Jews harbour against Christians. He satirizes both Christians and Jews by empowering Shylock and disempowering Antonio. Shylock used the temporary bankruptcy of Antonio to unleash his counter hatred against Christians. This is an illustration of a hegemony and a counter hegemony. (Adamson 1980)

The theory of cultural hegemony prescribes that the oppressed people should develop a political consciousness when they are victims of oppression like the persecution Jews had been victims of. In the play the oppression manifest itself in the form of religious and cultural persecution of Jews who develop a cultural hegemony by hating Christians in their turn. Shylock hates Antonio simply because he is a Christian. The hatred Jews have developed Christians is the result of the persecution they have been victims of throughout history. Shylock also revealed that Christians hate the sacred nation of Jews.

If I can catch him once upon the hip,
I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him
He hates our sacred nation and he rails
Even there where merchants most do congregate
On my bargains and my well-won thrift
Which he calls "interests." Cursed be my tribe
If I forgive them. (I. 3. 40-46)

The playwright makes it possible for the audience or the readership to clearly perceive vengeance in the behaviour of Shylock who vowed that his Jewish tribe would be cursed if he forgave Christians for the persecutions they had perpetrated against Jews over many centuries. Seen under the Marxist aesthetics, it is obvious that the playwright represents Jews in the play as the proletariat or the oppressed people. Because they had been persecuted by Christians over



many centuries, Jews had then decided to develop a political consciousness to defend the interest of their tribe as prescribed by the theory of cultural hegemony promoted by the Marxist Antonio Gramsci.

To express his revenge, Shylock mocked Antonio and Bassanio who needed his money by using a rhetorical language. Shylock took this opportunity to remind them the wrongs Christians committed against him, and indirectly against Jews all over the world. Shylock revealed to Antonio and Bassanio how he has suffered in the hands of Christians by keeping patiently his calm:

Still have I borne it with a patient shrug
(For sufferance is the badge of all our tribe)
You call me misbeliever, cutthroat dog,
And spit upon my Jewish gabardin
And all for use of that which is mine own
Well then, it now appears you need my help (I. 3. 103-108)

Shakespeare created this incident on purpose to make the Christian characters be in need of a financial help from Shylock. This revenge is revealed to the audience through Shylock who said that Christians have wronged him by spitting on his beard as if he were a worthless dog. As the play is a comedy, Shakespeare gave Shylock, through a flashback, the opportunity to criticize Christian values and traditions. The rhetorical questions Shylock had asked Antonio and Bassanio was for them to tell him if they really wanted to receive some money from a dog like him on whom they had spitted when they were not in need of money.

To mock the Christians, Shylock, in a bid to express his revenge against Christians, asked them if a low-bred dog like him can lend some money to human beings like them. This is a metaphor to create irony in order to show from the Marxist point of view that the Christian characters at this stage of the plot are in the upper position and the Jewish characters in the lower one. As the play is a comedy, this is a comic satire Shakespeare develops about Christians and their behaviour.

You that did void your rheum upon my beard.
And foot me as you spurn a stranger cur
Over your threshold, monies is your suit.
What should I say to you? Should I not say,
Hath a dog money? Is it possible
A cur should lend three thousand ducats? Or
Shall I bend low, and in a bondman's key
With hated breath, and whispering humbleness.
Say this: Fair sir, you spat on me on Wednesday last,
You spurned me such a day, another time.
You called me dog, and for these courtesies
I'll lend you thus much monies? (I. 3. 111-122)



The playwright made Antonio reply to these hegemonic claims based on the denigration of Jews and their religion by letting him say that he is ready to call Shylock all these names. He said this because for him, as a Christian deeply rooted in his Christian beliefs, Jews are like dogs. The word dogs used by Antonio can be interpreted as a metaphor that means that Jews are inferior to Christians in the same manner as a dog is considered as being inferior to a human being.

The conflict takes a complex turn when Shakespeare made Antonio retaliate to the revengeful strategies put in place by Shylock. Antonio then stated what follows to warn Bassanio about the true motivations of Shylock after the latter had tried to quote *The Holy Bible*, especially in the Genesis, Chapter 27 despite the fact that he belongs to Judaism.

The devil can cite the Scripture for his purpose.
An evil soul producing holy witness
Is like a villain with a smiling cheek.
A goodly apple rotten at the heart
O what a goodly outside falsehood hath. (I. 3. 92-96)

By making Antonio once again call Shylock by the metaphorical name of the devil, Shakespeare exhibits his faithfulness to the reality of the Elizabethan time in his dramatization of anti-Semitism. He represents Shylock as an archetype of the Jews suffering from the persecution of Christians for various historical, cultural and religious reasons related to the Jews' rejection of the Christian faith. Sofia Ricottilli rightly substantiates that:

It is by now ascertained that during Shakespeare's [sic] time, the stereotype of [sic] „the Jew“ was already well established in England. As with most of his plays, Shakespeare drew heavily on legends, ballads and tales of his time and it is in these works that he found stock representations of the Jew, on which he formed Shylock's [sic] character. (Ricottilli 2015: 18)

An analysis of the whole play reveals that Shakespeare made all the characters, including Jessica, Shylock's own daughter, his servant Lancelot Gobbo as well as his friend Tubal, develop a negative perception against his Jewish manners or culture. The proof is what his own daughter, Jessica, said about him in a conversation with Gobbo, before her elopement with Lorenzo:

Alack, what heinous sin is it in me
To be ashamed to be my father's child?
But though I am a daughter to his blood,
I am not to his manners. (II. 4. 15-18)

It turns out that no character in the play says anything that is positive about the behaviour of Shylock as well as his business. Lorenzo, who marries Jessica by the end of the play, had said that she was born to a faithless father (II. 3. 38) despite the fact that Shylock himself considers his daughter as his flesh and blood. (III.1.32) In a conversation with Salario after he had eloped with Jessica, Lorenzo



confided "*The villain Jew with outcries raised the Duke*" (II. 8. 4.) before adding that "*As the dog Jew did utter in the streets.*" (II. 8. 14)

It must be underscored that Shakespeare portrays Shylock as a character who is despised by others because of his religious beliefs and his cultural practices, and particularly his business as a usurer. To deceive his Christians partners in business, Shylock falsely promised that he would become one of their friends. It is after this false promise that Antonio accepted to sign the bond to borrow his money.

I would be friends with you, and have your love,
Forget the shames that you have stained me with,
supply your present wants, and take no doit
of usance for my monies, and you'll not bear me,
this is kind I offer. (I. 3. 131-135)

According to Burton Raffel (2006) a doit is a very small Dutch coin, a metaphor used by Shakespeare to make Shylock mean that he would take no interest on the money he would lend to Antonio. W. H. Auden explains the economic situation in relationship with the Elizabethan society under which the hostility between Jews and Christians that was observed by Shakespeare by insisting on the fact that:

Unlike a feudal society, which is based on land, the basis of this society is money coming from speculative trade, not from production, as in industrial society. It is possible to become suddenly rich or suddenly poor, and money has commodity as well as exchange value. As a money lender, Shylock is guilty of usury (Bloom 2010:145)

The condemnation of Shylock for practicing usury in the play is a strategy designed by Shakespeare to develop a satire on Christians who despise usury because of their beliefs and culture, but who at the same time need that money to address their financial problems. This is how W. H. Auden further explains the issue by writing that

[i]n a society where money becomes generally needed, a conflict arises between the abhorrence of usury and the necessity for it. The hypocrisy is that though moneylending will be condemned and the lender despised, men still go to the moneylender. (Bloom 2010: 148)

Knowing very well that Christians despise him and considering the hostility that exists between Christians and Jews, Shylock used his position as a moneylender to roll out his revengeful plans against Christians like Antonio and Bassanio who came to borrow money from him.

The audience can perceive that the terms and conditions of the bond proposed by Shylock to Antonio are not fair to him. The readers or the audience, for ethical reasons can conclude that the terms of the bond are motivated by a kind of revenge.



Despite all these reasons, Antonio decided to sign the bond even if it was against the will of Bassanio who made his mind clearer to him. But Antonio he would not heed whatever his friend said: *“You shall not seal to such a bond for me, / I will rather dwell in my necessity.”* (I. 3. 147-148) This would prove later that Antonio had deceived himself in believing in the kindness of Shylock. The dramatic irony created at this level of the conflict by Shakespeare shows that the playwright made Antonio believe that Shylock is kind to him, but the audience knows very well that Shylock used this strategy to trick Antonio in order to mislead him into signing a legal document that would prove detrimental to his life.

If you repay me not on such a day,
In such a place, such a sum or sums as are
Expressed in the condition, let the forfeit
Be nominated for an equal pound
Of your fair flesh, to be cut off and taken
In what part of your body it pleaseth me. (I. 3. 139-144)

The pound of flesh that Shylock wanted to cut off from the body of Antonio creates a situation in which Antonio can be easily likened to a goat, a sheep, a cow, or simply an animal by Shylock. In the same vein, Christians like Antonio and Bassanio also compare Jews to dogs. The two sides reached in so doing a level of bestiality in their respective behaviour.

To criticise the bad behaviour of Christians, Shakespeare dramatically revealed their deep thinking or their deep beliefs they hold against Jews. To do this, he used a dramatic irony by making Shylock appear to the eyes of Antonio as a very kind person. But his deep thinking reveals the contrary. Shakespeare, at this point, makes the audience access the mind of Christians through the characters of Antonio and Bassanio. Antonio revealed that, it is only Christians that are kind and not Jews. Antonio would later confess to Bassanio what follows: *“Hie thee, gentle Jew. This Hebrew will turn Christian, he grows kind.”* (I.3.171-172) Shakespeare developed a false consciousness in the behaviour of Antonio in order to mock the behaviour of Christians in the world who still ultimately believe that Jews are not kind to them.

2. The Happy Resolution of the Conflict and the Restoration of Peace and Harmony

At every instance in the play, Shylock is the subject of derision and mockery because of his behaviour and culture as a Jew. All these negative perceptions are conducive to the conflict which take the form of persecutions and discriminations against Shylock. The Jew in his turn adopted a revengeful position which culminated into a conflict which peaceful resolution is based on the interpretation of the law before the Court of the Duke of Venice. It is at the level of the trial before the court that the climax is reached paving the way for the



falling action and the subsequent resolution of the conflict. This resolution will restore peace and harmony in the Venetian society.

2.1. The Peaceful Resolution of the Conflict through the Interpretation of the Law in Court

In the play, Shakespeare conducted a peaceful resolution of the conflict through a strategy that brings the protagonists to be involved in an exquisite interpretation of the law in the Court of the Duke of Venice. This conflict entailed a potential tragedy that might have led to the death of Antonio if it came out that a pound of his flesh was really cut off, especially near his heart. Shakespeare resorted to the court trial based the terms and conditions of the bond signed between Shylock and Antonio to peacefully resolve this dispute opposing two businessmen from two different cultures and religions

His insistence on the adherence to the terms of the bond by the parties involved implies that Shylock was deeply motivated by revenge which is considered as a counter hegemonic strategy or a counter revolution against Christians. This insistence is supported by the fact that Shylock had realised that the power relationship at that moment of the conflict was in his favour. To use the terms of Gramsci, Antonio is in the position of subalternity and Shylock in that of domination. Shylock used this advantage to satisfy his taste for revenge as a strategy to develop a political consciousness against the Christian hegemony. In substance, Shylock says that *"To bait fish withal. If it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge."* (III.1.45-46) This is ample evidence that Shylock was really motivated by revenge against Christians in the business he transacted with Antonio.

In addition, when Tubal, his friend of the same tribe, had informed him that a ship of Antonio had been wrecked during its sail from Tripolis, Shylock then expressed his joy by declaring how grateful he was to God. *"I thank God, I thank God. Is it true?"* (III.1.88) before adding that: *"I thank thee good Tubal, good news, good news. Ha, ha, heard in Genoa."* (III.1.90-91) Shylock once again used this opportunity to declare that he would be glad to torture and plague Antonio. *"I am very glad of it, I'll plague him, I will torture. I am glad of it."* (III.1.98-99) Shakespeare, once again, created a dramatic irony that allows the audience to perceive how Shylock was happy to the prospects of avenging himself against Antonio. The readers or the audience of the play can see that Antonio, at this stage of the plot, did not know that Shylock was preparing a revengeful action against him. Shakespeare used this technique of situational irony to reveal to his audience the deep hatred that exists between Christians and Jews.



This real enmity between Christians and Jews is once again revealed when Bassanio told Portia that he had pushed Antonio into the hands of his enemy. *“For indeed I have engaged myself to a dear friend, / Engaged my friend to his mere enemy.”* (III.2.59-61) It is against this backdrop that the conflict between Antonio and Shylock must be understood as a conflict between Jews and Christians. The conflict becomes ripe when it is finally established that the business of Antonio has gone bankrupt. The reason is that his ships at sea had miscarried and he could not pay the debt which was then forfeited. To let the audience know that Antonio became bankrupt, Shakespeare made him send to Bassanio a letter in which he had expressed his last words before availing himself to be put to death by the Court of justice.

Shakespeare created a melodrama by letting Bassanio receive a bad news from Antonio at a time when he was celebrating the good choice he had made to marry Portia. The letter sent to Bassanio clearly evidences that Antonio’s bond was really forfeited and he was then left with one possibility only. To subject himself to death in accordance with the terms of the bond he had signed with Shylock. Antonio then concluded, out of despair, that it will be impossible for him to remain alive, should he pay the bond with a pound of his flesh.

By insisting on fact that the law enshrined in the contract be enforced, Shylock used the opportunity to quench his thirst for revenge. He said that the only thing he wanted at this level of the conflict was to have his pound and nothing else even if it meant the death a person like Antonio. The audience can notice that Shylock said this out of revenge. Clarifying the revengeful motivation of Shylock, W. H. Auden in Harold Bloom (2010) explains:

Part of the reason is that his revenge is in excess of the injury – a characteristic of revenge plays. But he mainly alienate our sympathy because he tries to play it safe and use the law, which is universal, to exact a particular personal revenge. A private quest for revenge may have started a feud, but would be forgivable. What is not forgivable is that he tried to get revenge safely. (Bloom, 2010:146)

The law, at this stage of the conflict, is in favour of Shylock. He plainly used it as an advantage to exercise his vengeance on Antonio, who was pleading for mercy in order to have a peaceful and soft resolution of the dispute. Knowing that the bond had been forfeited and Antonio was in the weaker position because he could no more pay his debt, Shylock insisted that the law be applied, rejecting in the process any other possibility of mercy for Antonio.

I’ll have my bond, speak not against my bond,
I have sworn an oath that I have my bond.
Thou call’ d me dog before thou hadst a cause,
But since I am a dog, beware my fangs.
The Duke shall grant me justice. (III.3.4-7)



Shylock insisted that the law be fully enforced to demand the pound of the flesh of Antonio because of his revengeful motivations. His insistence can be justified by the fact that he had realised that the law was in his favour. As a result, he was in a position to rise against those who had hitherto persecuted his fellow Jews. Deep in his heart, he was not ready to forgive Antonio. He neither wanted to listen to him, nor heed any plea from anyone involved in the litigation. For Antonio, it is forgiveness from Shylock that can save him from the fangs of the Jew.

Revolution in the behaviour of a person can be considered as an illustration of the precepts of the Marxist theory. These precepts posit that it is the duty of the oppressed people to rise up against their oppressors and claim their rights for better living conditions. It is a revolution that can be conducted through any action that can help them bring their oppression to an end. The Marxist precepts do not promote revenge. They rather prescribe a revolution that can be cultural, political or ideological. The Marxist revolution appears to be a strategy which the oppressed people can use to rise up against their oppressors. The revenge that is observed in the behaviour of Shylock during the court proceedings in the play is an illustration of the endeavour of the oppressed people like Jews to stage a revolution in order to stop the oppression imposed on them by Christians. In bringing Jews into a direct confrontation with Christians before the court, Shakespeare opposes two concepts: revenge and mercy, or evil and good. In the play, Christians like Antonio stand for mercy and tolerance and Jews like Shylock stand for revenge and intolerance. These two stances in the conflict breached the peace in the city of Venice and the need to restore it through a peaceful resolution of the conflict became unavoidable.

2.2. The Restoration of Peace and Harmony between Jews and Christians

To restore peace and harmony in the City of Venice, Shakespeare brought the main protagonists into a court room for the settlement of the conflict which is motivated by revenge. In the court room, the enforcement of the law proved difficult to Shylock because the lawyer of Antonio, Balthazar, had insisted on seeing the terms and conditions of the bond fully met with. Balthazar, is in fact Portia who disguised herself as a young lawyer from Rome. She was sent by old Lawyer Belario to represent him in court. Balthazar, showing his legal skills in court, developed an intricate interpretation of the law that prevented Shylock from proceeding further with his claim that a pound of the flesh of Antonio must be cut off from his body.

All the pronouncements Shylock made in court show that he was not ready to forgive Antonio, or accept any other alternative for mercy. The proof is that he declared before the court that he stands for the law and nothing else.



Despite the explanation provided by Portia/Balthazar about the virtue of mercy, Shylock remained firm and adamant in his position: *“My deeds upon my head, I crave the law. The penalty and forfeit of my bond.”* (IV.1.203-204) He rejected in so doing the plea for mercy demanded by Balthazar, the lawyer of Antonio: *“When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew, / Though justice be thy plea, consider this, / That in the course of justice none of us / Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy.”* (IV.1.194-197) To this plea for mercy, Shylock responded *“By my soul I swear that / There is no power in the tongue of man / To alter me. I stay here on my bond.”* (IV.1.237-239)

The course of events turned against Shylock when, after he had rejected any possibility of mercy, Portia/ Balthazar asked him to proceed before the court to cut off the pound of the flesh of Antonio. Balthazar warned that must do this on the strict condition that no drop of a Christian blood is shed because the bond did not make any provision for blood to be shed. Shylock was then warned that his land and goods would be confiscated by the laws of the state of Venice if failed to cut the exact amount of flesh. The lawyer also added the condition that Shylock must cut exactly one pound, not less or not more. Portia told him this:

Therefore prepare thee to cut off the flesh,
Shed thou no blood, nor cut thou off more
But just a pound of flesh. If thou tak'st more
Or less than a just pound, be it so much
As makes it light or heavy in the substance,
Or the division of the twentieth part
Of one poor scruple, nay if the scale do turn
But in the estimation of a hair
Thou diest, and all thy goods are confiscated. (IV.1.321-329)

It is at this point that Shylock had finally realised that under the strict enforcement of the law, it was not possible for him to avoid shedding the Christian blood. He consequently changed his mind and his political consciousness became low. Consequently, he began to beg for mercy which he had earlier on refused to grant to Antonio by saying *“Give me my principal and let me go.”* (IV.1.333) Portia replied that *“Thou shall have nothing but the forfeiture.”* (IV.1.340) It is from this stage that Shakespeare made Shylock lose all his properties, including his faith for having contrived according to the Court of the Duke against the life of a Christian of the City of Venice.

The audience can see that the mood of Shylock has completely changed into the mood of someone pleading for mercy. He is now back to the lower class or lower position to use the Marxist terms because he has no more any power to exercise his hegemony over Christians. Explaining the theory of Gramsci, Perry Anderson explains the fact that *“hegemony means the ideological subordination of the working class by the bourgeoisie, which enables it to rule by consent.”* (Thomas 2009) The fact



remains that Shylock had declared before the court that he is ready for his life to be taken because he has lost everything in life, including his daughter: "*Nay, take my life and all. Pardon not that! / You doth sustain my house. You take my life / When you do take the means whereby I live.*" (IV.1.371-374) This turn of the events implies that Shylock finally gave his consent to be ruled by Christian bourgeoisie. Shakespeare used such a dramatic device as *deus ex machina* to reverse the roles of the two protagonists in conflict, creating in so doing a turning point in the hegemonic attitude observed in the behaviour of Shylock. This turning point marks the beginning of the peaceful resolution of the conflict motivated by religious and cultural hegemonies. It does not take much insight to note that Shakespeare made him earlier on reject any possibility of mercy and forgiveness in favour of Antonio.

The readers or the spectators know that with the enforcement of the law in the Court of the Duke, a pound of the flesh of Antonio will be cut off following the requirement of the law. The direct consequence of the enforcement of this law is his death. Instead, Shakespeare made Antonio narrowly escape death through an exquisite application of the terms of the law to serve the purpose of a comedy in which no death of a character is allowed to occur. This application of the law led to a peaceful resolution of the conflict that could provoke the death of Antonio if the play were meant to be a tragedy. At least the death of one character must be recorded if the Aristotelian tradition is adhered to. The fact that Shakespeare used his genius to prevent the death of Antonio or any other character like Bassiano in the play helped him to create a tragi-comedy which must not end with death, but with reconciliation or marriage like the two marriages registered by the end of the play. As this play is a comedy, specifically a romantic tragi-comedy, the plot must register marriages instead of the death any character for fear of having a sad ending to take place.

In order to restore peace and harmony between Jews and Christians involved in the conflict, Shakespeare resorted to two marriages to reconcile the two communities belonging to two different religions in the Venetian society. The romantic sub-plot that is embedded in the main plot features happy marriages. It is created by Shakespeare as a dramatic device in order to resolve the conflict in a peaceful way. In doing this, he respected the principles of a comedy or a tragi-comedy. In this vein, Marjorie Boulton recalls the principle of Aristotle by explaining that

[...] tragedy has a sad ending and comedy a happy ending. For dramatic purposes this usually means that tragedy ends with at least one death and comedy with at least one marriage or reconciliation, though in real life death may often be a liberation from suffering and marriage may sometimes be the beginning of long-drawn-out misery. (Boulton 1960: 146)



The two marriages in the play constitute a bedrock for peace and happiness to prevail in the Venetian society. The marriage between Bassanio and Portia and that between Lorenzo and Jessica are illustrations of the happy ending a comedy or a tragi-comedy must have. This arrangement in the play brought Jonathan Gill Harris to develop a Marxist point of view that supports the arguments that *“Comedies like The Merchant of Venice fantasize a happy marriage between the old feudal wealth of Portia and Bassanio’s (or Antonio’s) new merchant capital, which dispatches ships around the globe in search of ‘spices’ and ‘silks’”* (1.1.33, 34) (Harris 2010: 9) The same idea can be extended to the marriage between Lorenzo and Jessica. She also brought to Lorenzo while eloping with him the riches of her father.

The audience can notice that the end of the play is not completely negative to Shylock simply because he has lost all his property. It must rather be underlined that there is a positive side in the peaceful resolution of the conflict in the sense that Shylock is finally integrated into the Christian community in the Venetian society. His life is spared by the Duke of Venice who declared in court to grant him pardon: *“That thou shall see the difference of our spirit, I pardon thee thy life before thou ask it.”* (IV.1.365-366)

It is true that Shakespeare developed an aesthetics on anti-Semitism. If Shakespeare wanted to develop an anti-Semitic aesthetics that is negative to Jews only in the play, he should not have integrated them into the Christian community through a reconciliation process. This aesthetics on anti-Semitism is not totally detrimental to Jews. If it were, Shakespeare could make Shylock become an outcast of the Christian community after the latter had realised that he could not fully complied with the terms and conditions of the bond in court.

Concerning the forced conversion of Shylock into Christianity, it can be concluded that it is a form of reconciliation with the Christian community which he hitherto hated. His daughter Jessica has also been integrated into the Christian community through marriage. It is also a form of peaceful resolution of the conflict.

Shakespeare also brought Antonio to reconcile with himself and with his business because he also registered a happy resolution of his financial problems that had provoked his temporary bankruptcy. The fact is that, all his ships unexpectedly returned home safely just after the end of the court proceedings in which his life was saved thanks to the talented lawyer Portia/Balthazar and the mercy of the Duke of Venice. Upon the announcement of the good news about the safe return of his ships, Antonio then declared that he is dumb, which is an indirect way of expressing his positive surprise and happiness. Shakespeare used once again a situational irony which shows a reversal of roles or a situation in which *“the discrepancy is between appearance and reality, or between expectation and*



fulfilment, or between what would seem appropriate" (Arp & Johnson 2006: 336). The fact is that Shylock, who wanted to avenge himself on Antonio up to the point of taking out his life, is the one who finds himself under the threat of being sentenced to death, had it not been the talent of Portia and the spirit of forgiveness of the Duke by the end of the play. Shylock was then obliged to ask for forgiveness from the very Christians to whom he denied mercy earlier on because of his hatred against them.

CONCLUSION

This study has found that the causes of the inter-religious and inter-cultural conflict dramatized as an aesthetics on anti-Semitism are based on an antagonistic and hegemonic confrontation. The religious beliefs and the cultural practices between Christians and Jews are the root causes of the conflict in *The Merchant of Venice* in which Shakespeare forced Christians like Antonio and Bassanio and Jews like Shylock to transact financial business despite their opposite beliefs, traditions and culture.

The study has shown that Shakespeare used *The Merchant of Venice* as a satire that ridicules both Christians and Jews in their antagonistic confrontational destinies. The study has shown that Shakespeare satirizes the English culture and traditions which are characterised by Christianity and the culture as well as the traditions of the Jews. In addition, the study has also recorded that Shakespeare's comic plot has resolved peacefully the conflict through the use of various ironies that brought Shylock to abandon his revenge and his hatred against Christians who in their turn also forgave him his revengeful and hateful actions.

This happy ending in the plot has helped to restore the social peace and the harmony as dramatized in *The Merchant of Venice*. Furthermore, the Duke of Venice also decided to integrate Shylock as well as his daughter into the Christian community in order to let peace and harmony prevail in the City of Venice. The analysis of the behaviour of Shylock reveals that he actively contributed to the conflict between Christians and Jews through his revengeful activities. Despite this, the life of Shylock is spared and he is integrated in the Christian community. In addition, despite the hatred and the revenge that Shylock developed against Christians, he rather received in return from them, through the Duke of Venice, mercy and forgiveness. All these solutions show that Shakespeare's comedies or tragi-comedies can be used as inspirational strategies for a peaceful resolution of conflicts in order to foster a living together of different religious, cultural or ethnic communities in the world at large.

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