

# Jewish Representation in English Theater

## Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* and Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*

By: Ramon Alarcon

Department of History, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

### Abstract

This poster seeks to examine the reception of English characters in English theater, particularly in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* and Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*. Although both works have been accused of promulgating antisemitic thought, this poster seeks to explore the idea that the plays were a product of their time, and the history of Jewish involvement in England radically alters the perception of Jewish characters. Marlowe was heavily influenced by the dual nature of the *marrano*, while Shakespeare actually developed Shylock as a literary character similar to his other villains, although still heavily influenced by popular perception of the day.

### Shakespeare and the Jews

- "Hath not a Jew eyes?". Tell most people that quote, and they will tell you it's Shakespeare's, and some will even know it's from *The Merchant of Venice*.
  - Ask most people what that quote means, and you will get so many different answers. They will range from a denunciation of Shakespeare for creating a parody of a human being, to a defense of Shakespeare against antisemitism.
- Like Marlowe's work this play makes use of the culture of the time in order to flesh out a Jewish villain that is heavily influenced by the time he is from. This play seems to be more of a character study, a means of creating a compelling narrative, no matter what. To attempt to understand Shakespeare, one must attempt to look at this play first as a dramatist, then as the audience, and lastly as a modern viewer.

This is the ware wherein consists my wealth: And thus, methinks, should men of judgement frame Their means of traffic from the vulgar trade, And as their wealth increaseth, so enclose Infinite riches in a little room. (I. I. 33-37)

So can I give no reason, nor I will not, More than a lodged hate and a certain loathing I bear Antonio, that I follow thus A losing suit against him. Are you answered? (IV.I.43-61)

### Reception Of Shylock and Barabas

As a modern audience, we can identify, and even empathize with Shylock, because of the way that he is treated. Abused and often denigrated by the Christian characters, Antonio in particular, Shylock nonetheless attempts to act fairly. When everything is taken from him, by a Christian nonetheless, is when he is driven to extremes. Shylock's pursuit of Antonio could almost be seen as religious persecution, as in cutting off his flesh, he is emasculating his Christianity. Shylock is eventually defeated, and this seeming disregard for Shylock is what modern readers find most jarring. Barabas, unlike Shylock, is more a caricature. He represents all the stereotypes that so deeply harmed the Jewish people during the medieval period, and this is still present in his interpretation today. Whereas Shylock is most often portrayed as a sympathetic character, Barabas revels in his wickedness, and holds no repentance to the bitter end. Barabas has remained a villain, whereas Shylock has become a much more complex character.

### Conclusion

Both Shakespeare and Marlowe present a view of Judaism that is tempered not only by the Elizabethan times, but by their own views on the subject of Judaism. For Marlowe, *marranismo* was a means to study questions of identity, ethnicity, and a growing sense of growing secular identity. *Marranos* were an anomaly in a time where this identity was burgeoning, and people were starting to look outside of religion as a means to distinguish one another. As such, Englishness and Jewishness, the idea that one could co-exist with the other, was being explored. Marlowe, in exploring self-transformation, created Barabas, who is transformed into the ultimate "revenger" after he is wronged. Shakespeare, on the other hand, seemingly created Shylock the same way he created most of his memorable characters: he set out to write a compelling play examining human nature. Indeed, Shylock is a much more fleshed out character, who can access the extremes that Barabas lives in, but that is also tempered by a degree of calm that Marlowe's Jew does not possess, and this in turn colors the reception of these characters.

#### Works Cited

- Berek, Peter. The Jew as Renaissance Man. *Renaissance Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (1998), (accessed September 17, 2015).  
 Logan, Robert A. *The Jew of Malta : a Critical Reader*. London: Arden Shakespeare, 2013.  
 Moreyski, Avraham. *Shylock and Shakespeare*. Fireside Books, 1967.  
 Shapiro, James. *Shakespeare and the Jews*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.

This is a picture of the Iberian Inquisition, the main reason so many *marranos* fled to other European countries.

Is Barabas truly evil? Although he does represent the worse of the Jewish stereotypes that abounded during the medieval period, Barabas is a reactionary character, who does what he does because he is wronged by others, and it is the only way in which he knows how to react.

Here, we are able to see two depictions of Barabas, both as a sympathetic character suffering abuse, and a bloodthirsty and greedy in pursuing Antonio, showing that how the character is read and portrayed influences how we perceive him

### Shylock: Victim?

- Shakespeare does not focus on the duplicitous nature of *marranismo*. Shakespeare, due to the expulsion of the Jews, is left creating a Jewish character that is based mostly on rumors and hearsay.
- However, unlike Barabas' evil personage, who is the culmination of every bad stereotype being brought to the fore due to his treatment, Shylock is a much more sympathetic character.
  - Modern audiences can relate with, and even understand why Shylock seeks revenge, even if at the end he takes it too far.
  - The play ends with a Christian victory, in which everything is resolved. Or at least, everything is resolved for the Christian characters. In forcing his conversion, Shylock has lost everything, from his identity, to his fortune, and even his friends. This treatment might seem callous to modern day audiences, but to Shakespeare and his audience, conversion was probably something that they considered good Shylock.

### Marlowe and Marranismo

What is Marranismo?

- *Marranos* were crypto-Jews from Iberia, who professed to be either Catholic or protestant in order to avoid being expelled from their country of choice, or who were hiding from the Inquisition meant to ferret them out
- Marranos were caught in between two world, the Jewish and non-Jewish one.
- Marlowe was incredibly interested in the idea of self-transformation and identity. Both *Tamburlaine* and *Doctor Faustus* are works deeply concerned with changing one's nature, and *Jew of Malta* is no different. Barabas' nature is duplicitous because no one truly knew what *marranos* wanted, whether they identified with the country that they left, or the country that they inhabited. In a world that was fast becoming centered on race and nationality, the crypto-Jew was a being that did not fit in. Thus, you have Barabas, turning from a merchant into a "revenger", forgoing all these socio-cultural rules and becoming "ultimate evil".