

Shylock and the Anti-Shylock: Showcasing Antisemitism in the Theatre

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Introduction/ Thesis

My paper examines Gotthold Lessing's Enlightenment play *Nathan the Wise* (1779) and William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (1596). **Although Lessing seeks to preach tolerance through his character Nathan, casting him as the anti-Shylock, he ultimately subverts the tolerance he wants to preach, continuing elements of Shakespeare's antisemitic precedent.**

Different appeals to Humanity

In each work, both characters appeal to universal humanity in specific scenes: **Shylock's monologue is an appeal to humanity to show the commonality of man Nathan's parable echoes the sentiments of Shylock's monologue, but in a different context,** referring to ideals of the Enlightenment, unlike Shylock's twisted desire and entitlement to exact revenge and cause harm to a fellow man to honor a contract. **Both men want their fellow characters to see themselves as man before Christian or Jewish.** These connections show Lessing's dialogue with Shakespeare's work.



Production of *Nathan the Wise* in Durham, NC in 2011. Deep Dish Theatre Company, Chapel Hill, NC Pictured: Joseph Henderson, Jason Peck, and Lucas Campbell (photo by Jonathan Young)

Shylock and the Anti-Shylock

Shylock and Nathan are both Jewish merchants, powerful in their communities. Shakespeare wrote his Jew from the eyes of an anti-Semite in the Elizabethan Era. **Shylock is a negative stereotype: usurus, bitter, and intolerant in business and religion.** Lessing wrote *Nathan the Wise* in the Enlightenment Era in proximity to Jewish Emancipation in Europe. **Nathan is the opposite of the negative Jewish stereotype and is tolerant of others and a sage within his community, the opposite of Shylock.**

Daddy Issues help Define Characterization

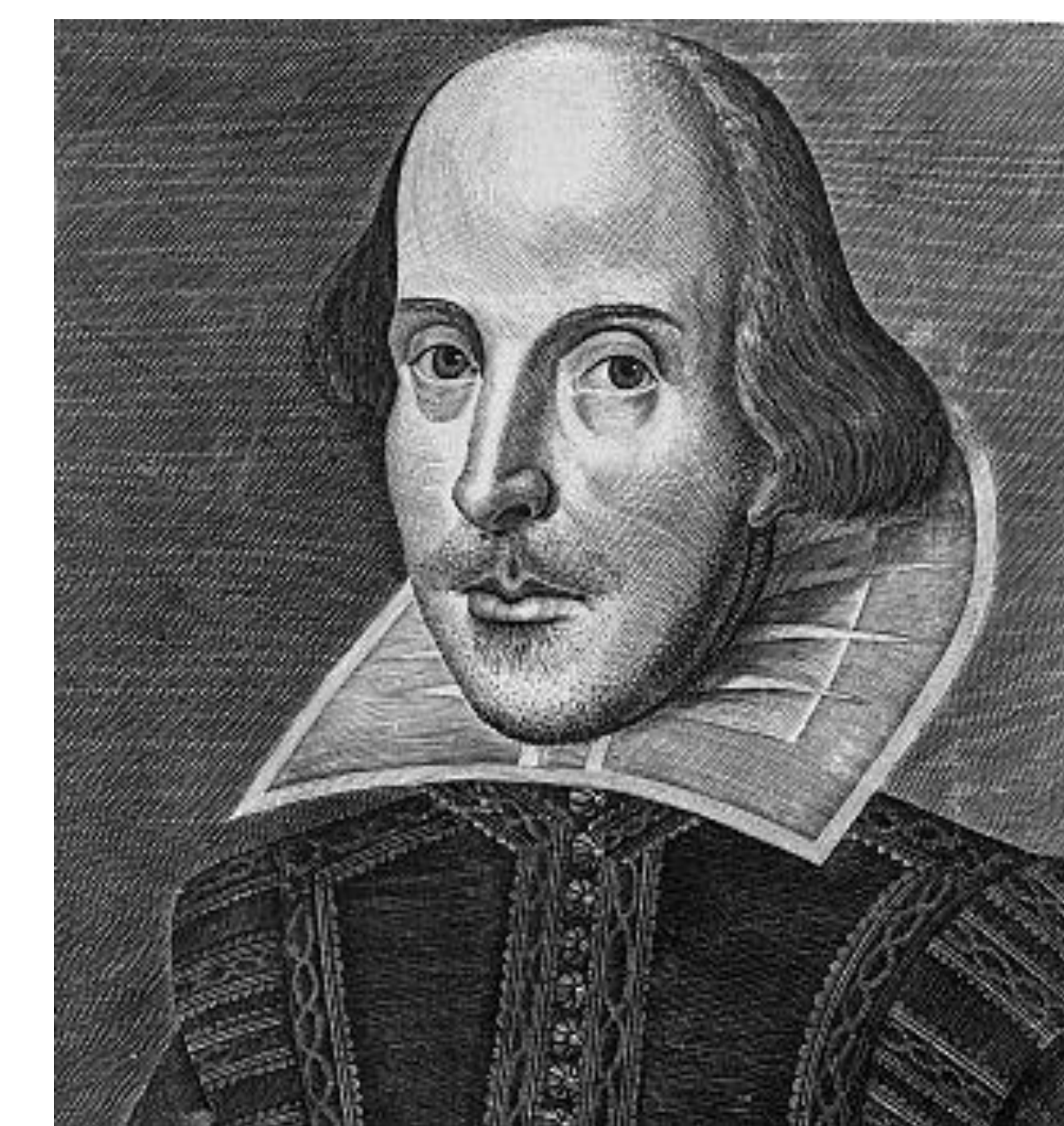
Both characters are widowers with a single daughter. Shylock's daughter, **Jessica, leaves Shylock to convert to Christianity and elope because she's ashamed of him and his Judaism.** Recha and Nathan have a near opposite relationship; even as it's revealed that **Recha is neither Nathan's daughter, nor a Jew, she longs to stay with him and remain his daughter.**

"Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is?"
Merchant of Venice: Act III; Scene I

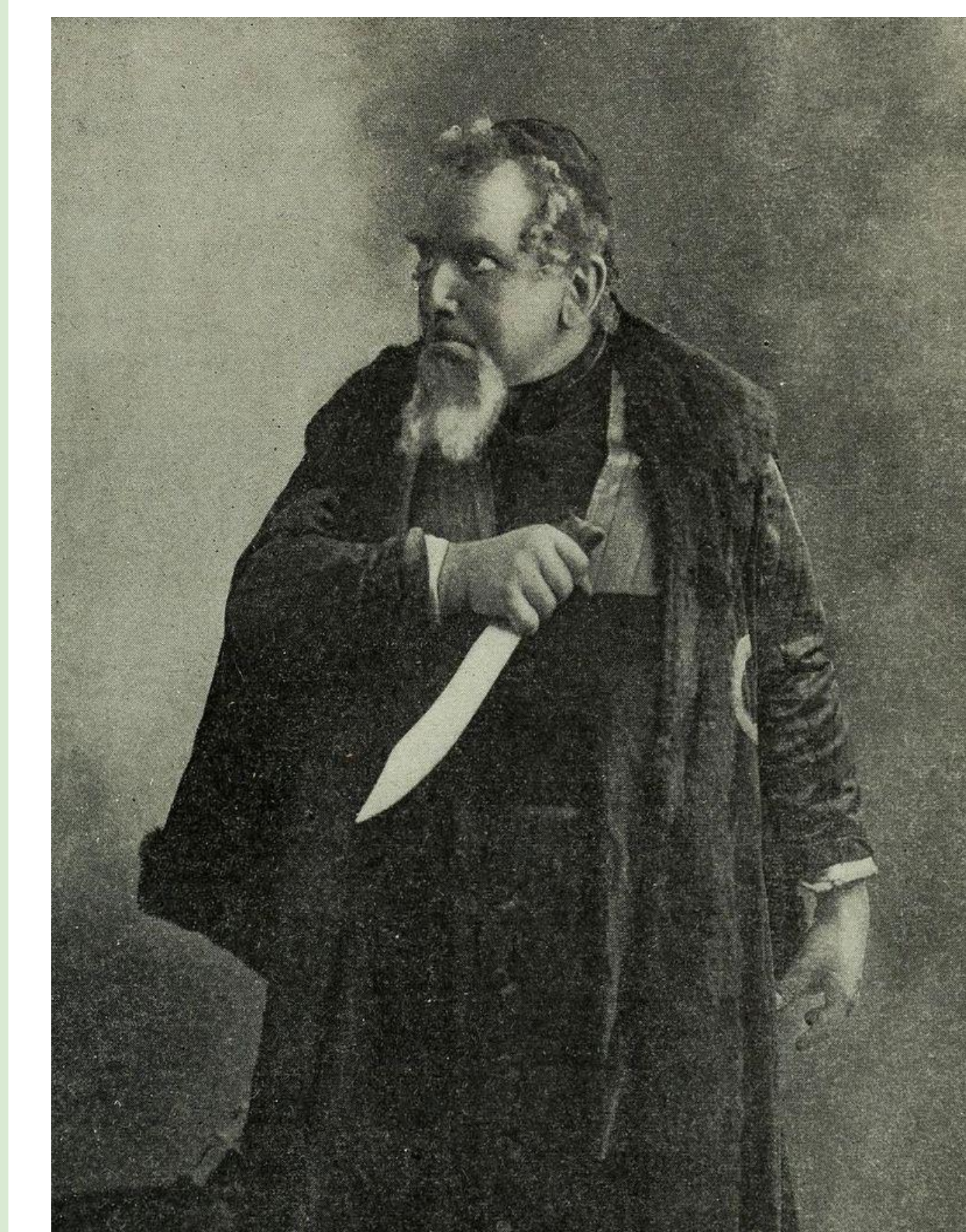
Conclusions

The men's interactions with other characters, namely their daughters, and the different atmospheres in

which they were written all serve to show **Nathan as Shylock's literary opposite,** and shows the dialogue between the two plays.



Engraving, Martin Droeshout, printed 1622



Ernst von Possart as Shylock



Maurycy Gottlieb

Recha Welcoming Her Father



Production of *The Merchant of Venice* in Los Angeles at Theater Banshee in 2012, Photo: Daniel Kaemon, from left, Time Winters, Brett Mack, Barry Lynch, Kirsten Kollender. Credit: Donald Agnelli.

Portrait of Lessing by Anna Rosina Lisiewska (1767/1768)

"What does 'people' mean? Are Christians and Jews more Christians and Jews than human beings?" *Nathan the Wise: Act II; Scene VI*

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