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The Merchant of Venice as a Lens for Analyzing the Religious and
Cultural Attitudes of Early Modern Venice

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Abstract

This study explores the intersection of historical events and literary representations concerning persecution of religious minorities in sixteenth-century Venice. It focuses on the Venetian approach to its Jewish inhabitants—the establishment of the Ghetto in 1516, the Inquisition, and Italian views towards Judaism. It evaluates how these events as well as the attitudes associated with them travelled to the rest of Europe and to Elizabethan England, where Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice*. The study will begin with an historical analysis of the events and prevailing sentiments surrounding Jewish-Christian relations in Venice, and continues with a literary analysis of *Merchant of Venice* within its historical context in England, employing a New Historicist theoretical approach. It aims to draw connections between the duality of both the Jewish experience in Venice and of its representation in Shakespeare's work.

Abstract in Italian

Questa tesi esplora l'intersezione tra eventi storici e rappresentazioni letterarie riguardanti la persecuzione delle minoranze religiose nella Venezia del Cinquecento. Si concentra sull'approccio veneziano nei confronti dei suoi abitanti di origine ebraica—l'istituzione del ghetto nel 1516, l'Inquisizione, e il dibattito italiano sul giudaismo. Valuta in che modo questi eventi e i relativi atteggiamenti si siano diffusi nel resto d'Europa e nell'Inghilterra elisabettiana, dove Shakespeare scrisse *Il Mercante di Venezia*. La tesi inizia con un'analisi storica degli eventi e dei sentimenti prevalenti intorno alle relazioni giudaico-cristiane a Venezia, e continua con un'analisi letteraria del *Mercante di Venezia* nel suo contesto storico in Inghilterra, utilizzando un'approccio teorico noto come *New Historicism*. Si propone di creare collegamenti tra la dualità dell'esperienza ebraica a Venezia e la sua rappresentazione nell'opera di Shakespeare.

Introduction

The early modern period was a time of profound transformation in Europe, marked by religious and political turmoil. Venice was a city that stood out in this period, existing as a defining feature of early modern commerce, known for its large foreign merchant population. Among the many transformations of the sixteenth century, Venice established its ghetto in 1516, the first official ghetto in Europe, housing Jewish merchants in a quarter separated from the rest of the city. Jews were permitted to practice their professions but were not permitted to intermingle with Christians. And sometime roughly eighty years later, William Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice*, a complicated play portraying a loan-related conflict between the Christian characters and the most notorious Jewish character in English drama, Shylock. What connects these two events?

The relationship between the Venetian Ghetto and Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* is richer and more intertwined than expected. It is not simply a matter of setting, and Shakespeare choosing to set his plays in Italy. There is a clear chain of events and phenomena that connect from the Venetian Ghetto to Shakespeare as he wrote this play. Like any work of literature, *Merchant of Venice* was influenced by the historical, cultural, and political context of the time in which it was written. Shakespeare in particular embodies the contemporary moment in a subtle yet striking way that has provoked centuries of heavy and unprecedented scholarship dedicated to his work. With *Merchant*, countless instances can be discovered that connect to the Venetian ghetto—not just the location itself but the attitudes that shaped the landscape of religious tolerance and intolerance in Italy, the interactions between Christians and Jews, the experience of Marranos under the inquisition, and how those ideas travelled to England to be absorbed by Shakespeare. This project fuses both historical study and literary analysis to investigate how these ideas and historical processes influenced and are therefore reflected in *Merchant of Venice*. It will analyze the ways in which Italy confronted the presence of Jews following the diaspora due to the Spanish Inquisition, how they felt about religious tolerance with the onset of the Protestant Reformation, and how this played a role in the construction of the ghetto and creation of the inquisition in Venice. I emphasize the complex nature of Venice and how it handled religious persecution because it was a balance of tolerance and anxiety. This especially applies to the inquisition records of the tribunal of Venice, something that is analyzed throughout the study. Meanwhile, Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* is also complicated and portrays Shylock in a way that could be seen as antisemitic at times but sympathetic at times. Through bridging the history of religious persecution in early modern Venice with the complexities of the play, this study will find that

Merchant of Venice is, in essence, a literary representation of the Venetian Ghetto and the attitudes that surround it, portraying the elaborate character of not only Venice but also the rest of Europe in the early modern period as it is grappling with drastic transition in many aspects of society.

This is not to say that Shakespeare's plays are realistic depictions of historical events. I am arguing that *Merchant* is shaped by the events and the contemporary views surrounding those events, forming a sort of metaphorical amalgamation of cultural and religious ideas as well as collective experiences. Shakespeare's personal beliefs are never crystal clear, and in his work he manages to encapsulate the views of his time while simultaneously challenging them, urging his audience to think more about their beliefs or other social issues. In *Merchant*, Shakespeare raises questions about antisemitism, conversion, biblical differences between Jews and Christians, and many other issues. The ambiguity of his depictions leaves room for contemplation and individual interpretation, something countless scholars have attempted to sort out over the years. With this play in particular, the historical processes that led up to its creation as well as the cultural transformations in both the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation are apparent and have a clear effect on the characters' choices and interactions, and most importantly, their words.

Although Shakespeare is arguably the most studied writer of all time, it is important to continue evaluating his work with various perspectives that have evolved overtime and using different lenses to study him. This study will be both analyzing history with a Shakespearean lens, and analyzing Shakespeare with an historical lens, and will contribute to the interdisciplinary side of Shakespearean studies. It is crucial to do so because it allows for a deeper understanding of how literature both reflects and shapes contemporary social and cultural attitudes, and how those reflections change over the years depending on the historical context. Additionally, providing such a rich historical analysis as a backdrop to discussing Shakespeare provides for a more nuanced analysis that uncovers the ways in which religious identities were constructed and negotiated in this period. Understanding Shakespeare within this context broadens the potential for a more well-rounded approach to comprehending the intricacies of his work. Since I am using the Venetian ghetto as a specific focal point, the thesis is centered around a symbolic place, where Jews were confined and restricted, but at the same time free to trade and practice their religion openly. The addition of examining the inquisitorial sources provides further examples of how Venice approached religious tolerance. Focusing on this offers a new depth to the study by highlighting the importance of space in the experiences of religious intolerance. Overall, this topic is important to study because it reveals how literature can serve as a valuable historical

source, if the history is appropriately analyzed. And since Shakespeare's work is timeless, studying it within an evolving historical context as I am doing will broaden our understanding of the cultural forces at work in not only early modern Europe, but in our contemporary moment, and how we currently perceive Shakespeare and *his* moment. There is always space for new perspectives on *Merchant of Venice* because its interpretations are constantly evolving.

State of the Art

This topic is not lacking scholarship, in both the Shakespearean realm as well as the historical. This section is an overview of the relevant literature and scholarship on this topic, that have been utilized throughout the thesis. From what I have read, there seems to be a general consensus among historians studying Venice that the experience of Jews was quite complicated. This is because the Venetian Republic was known for welcoming and tolerating foreign populations and religions other than Christianity because these groups were so vital for their commercial prosperity. Without the foreign merchants, Venice would not have been such a thriving and well-connected mercantile city. At the same time, it was a Catholic state that did not tolerate religious co-mingling and was still threatened by the presence of Jews and Muslims. Therefore, while Venice was more relaxed than most other European cities that hosted non-Christian populations, it still attempted to practice some form of control and separation, hence the compromise of the Ghetto. Ultimately, Venice prioritized order, and heresy was a threat to order. But so was losing the vital merchant population, so Venice sought to find a balance. Most of the historians I read for this study agreed with and emphasized this statement.

One of the most utilized historians for this project is Brian Pullan and his book *The Jews of Europe and the Inquisition of Venice, 1550-1670*.¹ This book is an in-depth overview of how the Venetian Republic approached the inquisition, and the complex relationship between state and inquisitorial authorities and the Jewish and Marrano inhabitants of Venice. His main argument throughout the book is that Venice prioritized the economic benefits brought on by the Jewish inhabitants, and how the processes of conversion and fear of crypto-Judaism of converts was a dominant fear. Pullan begins with a detailed explanation of the structure of the Venetian inquisition, and how it was organized. He emphasizes that Venice did not derive its authority directly from the Pope but from God and balanced their own Venetian elements as well as Roman ones. Pullan then analyzes many various examples of trials, punishments, and what forms of heresy the inquisition was

¹ Brian Pullan, *The Jews of Europe and the Inquisition of Venice, 1550-1670*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983.

usually drawn to. Throughout the chapters, Pullan argues how the inquisitorial authorities were not harshly punishing people based on hearsay, like the Spanish Inquisition for example. It was an orderly process and attempted to seek evidence, the punishments being on the lighter side, like service in the galleys. The remaining chapters discuss one of the more contested issues of the inquisition, the Marranos or New Christians. Much of the Jewish diaspora that came to Venice was from Spain or elsewhere who were forced to convert to Christianity, or even those who chose to convert for protection. There were also instances of Italian New Christians. This was even more concerning to the tribunal than open Judaism because of their Jewish blood and the fear that they were secretly practicing Judaism. Mixing the two religions like that was heresy, and New Christians of Venice were under much more scrutiny. Pullan even discusses the conversion tactics of Venice, how they rewarded Jews who converted to Christianity.

Overall, Pullan's book is crucial to this study because it highlights so many important aspects of tolerance and inquisition in Venice that no other historian previously had done. It is a treasure trove of information to refer to throughout the project, applicable to every chapter and argument. He manages to depict the intricate balance that Venice was trying to achieve with its approach to religious tolerance. His book is a significant contribution to the study of early modern religious tolerance, Venetian Jewry, and inquisition. So, it was extremely helpful to this study and provided the background information necessary for me to understand the inquisition records themselves and expand on my own ideas, connecting them to how these attitudes expressed in the trials diffused all around early modern Europe and how *Merchant of Venice* represents some of those ideas.

The most vital primary source to the historical study was a book full of inquisition records from Venice in the sixteenth century, titled *Processi del S. Uffizio di Venezia contro ebrei e giudaizzanti*, gathered by Pier Cesare Ioly Zorattini.² Adding this source to the study really enhanced the depth of analysis of the inquisition, showing how exactly these interrogations were handled, what type of heresies were the Holy Office mostly concerned with, and the type of punishments received by those being questioned. Ioly Zorattini makes sure to portray a wide range of different cases, with various defendants and results. Most of the defendants were New Christians being questioned for activities or evidence of crypto-Judaism. The interrogations were thorough and detailed, asking the accused very specific questions regarding their daily life, things that may seem unimportant to most people. But for

² Pier Cesare Ioly Zorattini, *Processi del S. Uffizio di Venezia contro ebrei e giudaizzanti*, Firenze: L. S. Olschki, n.d.

the most part, if there was not enough evidence, the defendants were often released. Punishments were never too severe either. Many of the descriptions of the motions of the trial were written in Latin, which was a challenge as I have zero knowledge of Latin, making that a bit of a barrier for comprehension. Fortunately, my knowledge of Italian sufficed to understand and properly translate the dialogue of the trials into English. The *Processi* were key to providing a glimpse into the process of inquisition in Venice, but it also reveals a lot about the attitudes and anxieties held by Venetians regarding conversion, the identity of New Christians, and monitoring their behavior.

In Chapter 1 I employ a comparative study of the Jewish experience in Florence and Venice, as I worked with the Medici Archive Project in Florence and had access to plenty of archival volumes depicting the lives of Jews in Florence. The scholarship surrounding that topic is rich, but recent, and Piergabriele Mancuso is one of the leading scholars of that field, somebody I had the pleasure of working with. The MAP has managed to compile all of these archival sources from the *Archivio di Stato di Firenze* into an online database, and these were paramount in my analysis of the Ghetto of Florence. The floor plans and maps of the Florentine Ghetto made for a fruitful analysis and revealed a lot about the daily life. Contrasting the two different approaches of ghettoization and the experiences of the residents in sixteenth century Italy helped put the Venetian Ghetto into a more well-rounded perspective. I found significantly less secondary literature on the Ghetto of Florence compared to Venice, but it was not lacking primary sources. The MAP's work with the Ghetto archives is an ongoing project with a plethora of information. Another scholar in regards to Tuscany is Francesca Trivellato, whose book *The Familiarity of Strangers: The Sephardic Diaspora, Livorno, and Cross-Cultural trade in the Early Modern Period*,³ reveals the unparalleled city of Livorno, built by Ferdinando I. It was important to consider Livorno as well in the comparative analysis because Jews were invited to live and trade freely as citizens. The religious freedom there was unmatched to anywhere else in early modern Italy. Her work on Livorno added another layer to the complexities of this study, providing a fascinating investigation.

Regarding the Shakespearean and literary aspect of this study, there are countless scholars who have analyzed *Merchant of Venice*, as one of his more problematic plays. There is so much depth and nuance that scholars have plenty to debate about. Naturally, Stephen Greenblatt and his work is crucial to anybody who studies Shakespeare, especially this thesis as it will be using the lens of New

³ Francesca Trivellato, *The Familiarity of Strangers: The Sephardic Diaspora, Livorno, and Cross-Cultural trade in the Early Modern Period*, Yale University Press (2009).

Historicism. He will be discussed in the Methodology section. When it comes to scholarship of Shakespeare and *Merchant of Venice*, I have come across a vast amount of relevant secondary literature, especially concerning how Shakespeare reveals the religious attitudes of his contemporary time. It is nearly impossible to articulate a general consensus among Shakespearean scholars about *Merchant of Venice* or any of Shakespeare's works for that matter. Throughout the study, I came across many contradictions and disagreements, each scholar conveying their own interpretations and ideas about Shakespeare. This is just how literature works, especially given how ambiguous Shakespeare can be. Many scholars supplied proper context of the religious turmoil of Elizabethan England and how the Protestant Church was transitioning and developing overtime, as well as examples of this in Shakespeare's works. *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Religion* contained a few articles by various authors that were utilized in the second and third chapters. One article that became increasingly relevant throughout my study was of Thomas Betteridge, titled "Shakespeare and the Elizabethan and Jacobean Church."⁴ Betteridge argues that among the various sects and identities developing throughout the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Shakespeare's work reflects and challenges the society and community of England and its church. He is pondering on the issues of confessionalism and doctrinal absolutism without declaring some sort of allegiance to any denomination, Catholic or Protestant. Betteridge's article opened up a lot of avenues of research because it emphasizes the relevance of the Protestant Reformation to Shakespeare's work. And even if it is not totally explicit in *Merchant*, I was able to find some connections, which goes back to the overall theme of this study about how the cultural and religious changes of the sixteenth century influenced his work.

Some other scholarship relevant to *Merchant* include Frances Yates' *The Occult Philosophy of the Elizabethan Age* which discusses how the Christian Cabala, a form of Jewish mysticism, grew in relevance in Shakespeare's England, and that is evident in *Merchant*.⁵ It is important to analyze how Judaism played a role in the play, as the tension between Jews and Christians is one of the largest plots. Additionally, Dennj Solera examines Shakespeare's ideas for the character of Shylock, claiming that Dr. Roderigo Lopez, a Marrano doctor to Queen Elizabeth who was hanged for accusations of conspiring to poison her, was likely the inspiration. His trial and execution were well-known in

⁴ Thomas Betteridge, "Shakespeare and the Elizabethan and Jacobean Church," Chapter In *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Religion*, edited by Hannibal Hamlin, 1–17, Cambridge Companions to Literature. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

⁵ Frances A. Yates, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*. London [etc: Routledge & Kegan, 1979.

Shakespeare's time, which explains how he came to know about it.⁶ And for the section in which I analyze how *Merchant of Venice* has been remembered and produced throughout the centuries, Shaul Bassi's book "The Merchant in Venice: Shakespeare in the Ghetto" reviews in detail the process of producing a version of *Merchant of Venice* performed in the actual Venice Ghetto in 2016, also going over the historical context of it all. This was relevant to the study by bringing together the historical, literary, and theatrical aspects of *Merchant*, and also conveying its contemporary importance. Lastly, the scholars Daniel Vitkus and Lieke Stelling are important to the section in Chapter 3 about conversion because of their discussions of religious conversion in *Othello*. They have some different takes, but overall both describe the Elizabethan views on Turks, Islam, and conversion, which is certainly relevant and can be connected to the issues of conversion in *Merchant*. All of these various sources on both *Merchant* and *Othello* effectively highlight contemporary issues on Protestant ideologies, religious tolerance, antisemitism, and conversion.

In reviewing the historical scholarship about early modern Venice and the Jewish Ghetto and inquisition, as well as the literary discourse on the ideas and attitudes present in *Merchant of Venice*, several key themes and debates emerge. On the historical side there is plenty of study dedicated to the Jewish ghetto in Venice, the inquisition, and conversion. The largest takeaway is that the Jewish experience in Venice was a stark contrast to many other cities in Europe that hosted Jewish populations, and it was more complicated than just the fact that there was a higher level of tolerance. The ghetto is presented by many historians as a compromise between economic interests and the interests of the Church. This could also apply to the inquisition, as inquisitors were careful not to punish Jews or New Christians too harshly, but still kept an eye out for crypto-Judaism. Meanwhile Shakespearean scholars highlight the complex and problematic nature of both *Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*, discussing how Elizabethan attitudes towards religion and conversion have infiltrated into Shakespeare's work. There is a plethora of varying perspectives and interpretations of *Merchant* specifically, and the character of Shylock. Many scholars manage to connect it to its historical context.

What is missing from this research in both fields is a synthesis of the overall Renaissance ideas on religious persecution, conversion, and Jewish-Christian interactions, how they transferred from Italy to England, and how they are reflected in Shakespeare's work. Furthermore, there is a lack of detailed

⁶ Dennj Solera, "The Merchant of Padua? The Doctorate of Roderigo Lopez and its Importance for the Shakespearean Shylock," in "Annali di Storia delle università italiane, Rivista semestrale," 2/2021, pp. 203-221.

analysis of the *Processi*, the Venetian inquisition records and how it relates to ideas in Shakespeare. This study fills the gaps between history and literature by analyzing the specific ideas of Renaissance cultures and attitudes, including those related to humanism and the Protestant Reformation, and their diffusion throughout Europe. It emphasizes the mobility of those cultural ideas through increased early modern interactions, and how this contributed to expressions in the literary canon. Additionally, utilizes the primary sources of the *Processi*, seeking to connect specific cases of inquisition against Jews and New Christians to *Merchant of Venice*, evaluating how the societal views are presented and challenged by Shakespeare. This approach fills a gap in scholarship by directly connecting the practices of religious persecution in Venice with the literary representations of the period. It takes it a step further with comparative studies to the Jewish experience in Florence and Livorno, which help differentiate Venice as a unique space for its Jewish inhabitants. The analysis of *Othello* next to *Merchant* in the final chapter further synthesizes the concepts of conversion and how those narratives were shaped by the many religious and political changes in early modern Europe. Overall, this interdisciplinary study is a more integrated analysis of how literature is shaped by historical phenomena and cultural ideas, specifically regarding Venetian Jewry, conversion, ghettoization, and inquisition.

Methodology: New Historicism

This study, which is both literary and historical in nature, views literature from an historical lens and history from a literary lens, determining that neither can be separated from the other. They are, in a way, reciprocal. I argue that applying the Shakespearean lens to historical analysis and vice versa provides a more comprehensive picture of the period. The method of New Historicism, coined officially in the 1980's by Stephen Greenblatt, is what will be employed for this study. It is a lens that emphasizes how literature is a direct product of its social and historical context, and the text itself is a prominent part of the social process. Greenblatt's speech "Towards a Poetics of Culture" in 1986 discusses how this literary theoretical framework came to be, arguing that texts are not autonomous, but deeply embedded in the social, political, and cultural contexts in which they are produced. Literary works are part of a system where meanings and ideas influence and are influenced by each other. Greenblatt explains that:

"the work of art is itself the product of a set of manipulations, some of them our own...many others undertaken in the construction of the original work. That is, the work of art is the product of a negotiation between a creator

or class of creators, equipped with a complex, communally shared repertoire of conventions, and the institutions and practices of society.”⁷

In other words, literature is an active form of cultural expression that is directly shaped by its context, the historical events, the institutions, and the society at large. This form of literary criticism challenges previous notions that literature is isolated from history. Greenblatt also emphasizes the importance of power structures, especially economic ones, by relating to a Marxist lens to examine the negotiations of power structures present in literature. New Historicism is not a Marxist theory, but it often refers to and analyzes class struggle and power dynamics. New Historicism is, in a nutshell, “the reading and writing of texts, as well as the processes by which they are circulated and categorized, analyzed, and taught are being reconstructed as historically determining and determined modes of cultural work.”⁸ This theory has been applied to Renaissance studies for decades now, especially in the field of Shakespearean studies. This entire study places Shakespeare within his historical context and analyzes how societal practices, attitudes, power structures, and historical events are reflected in his work. And then it uses this lens to deploy a more well-rounded investigation of early modern European religious history.

Integrating New Historicism into Renaissance and Shakespearean studies means exploring how society and literature affected each other in that period, and how those interpretations have evolved over time. A work that is also important to New Historicism, and to this study is also by Greenblatt, titled *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*.⁹ He introduces this term “self-fashioning,” meaning the process of individuals constructing and presenting their identities based on the social landscape of their respective time. Greenblatt observes that the sixteenth century in particular was characterized by “an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process.”¹⁰ Self-fashioning is not just an internal process, but a process shaped by external forces of society, then reflected in literature. It also explores how specifically sixteenth century England was a time where people fashioned themselves in contrast to something “Other.”

⁷ Stephen Greenblatt, “Towards a Poetics of Culture,” Text of a lecture given at the University of Western Australia, Perth, 4 September 1986.

⁸ Harold Aram Veesser, *The New Historicism*, New York London: Routledge, 1989, 15.

⁹ Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.

¹⁰ Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 2.

“Self-fashioning is achieved in relation to something perceived as alien, strange, or hostile. This threatening Other—heretic, savage, witch adulteress, traitor, antichrist—must be discovered or invented in order to be attacked and destroyed.”¹¹

This is a particularly important concept to this study because of the way in which Christians at this time distinguished themselves from Jews and Muslims, differentiating the latter religions as Other. Throughout the study, this will be seen frequently in the historical and literary side of things, especially how the Christian characters in both *Merchant* and *Othello* view non-Christian characters. They are fashioning themselves and reflecting upon how in reality Christians viewed other religions and cultures and differentiated themselves from them. It also connects to Orientalism, another way in which Westerners separate themselves from the Orient and create a narrative of Otherness.¹²

Another commentary on the New Historicism that integrates an additional facet is of Jonathan Dollimore, who emphasizes the importance of cultural materialism in this theoretical approach. Cultural materialism analyzes how certain systems and power dynamics impact a text. It is similar to New Historicism in that it recognizes the inextricable connection between text and the society in which it is produced. It just takes it a step further by aligning more with Marxist theories, focusing on economic conditions and class struggle. By adding this new dimension to the criticism, Dollimore is highlighting the necessity of looking at ideological and social structures of the time when reading its literature. Cultural materialism is especially applicable to Renaissance studies because, according to Dollimore, it evaluates Renaissance drama’s tendencies to either affirm current authority or totally subvert it.¹³ It is more analytical of ideologies and how power is distributed, something applicable to Shakespeare. Dollimore specifically wants to hone in on what New Historicism has done in terms of power structures and expand on it in the context of Shakespeare, saying that:

“An analysis by the new historicism of power in early modern England as itself deeply theatrical—and therefore of the theater as a prime location for the representation and legitimation of power—has led to some remarkable studies of the Renaissance theater as well as of individual plays, Shakespeare’s included.”¹⁴

¹¹ Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 9.

¹² Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, 1st ed. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978. Note: This will be evaluated in more detail in Chapter 3.

¹³ Jonathan Dollimore, “Shakespeare, Cultural Materialism, and the New Historicism,” in *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1985, 9.

¹⁴ Dollimore, 2.

That is what makes New Historicism relevant to Renaissance and Shakespearean studies—when on stage, Shakespeare’s plays can be performed in ways that represent power structures. Cultural materialism essentially wants to dive more into the economic and class dynamics that are reflected in texts and other cultural objects. It is certainly vital to keep cultural materialism in mind as we approach this study because it investigates the power dynamics in terms of religious communities. But this is more aligned with simple New Historicism, as I am not applying much of a Marxist lens nor discussing the concepts of class with this study.

Using the New Historicist method is beneficial to this study because it properly understands the inextricable connection between history, society, and literature while not abandoning certain factors. In order to understand how these historical processes influenced and are reflected in literature, we must look at text as directly linked to its contemporary moment, and we cannot sufficiently analyze literature without knowing how it embodies its context. In the case of this study, I will be examining how ideas regarding religious tensions have evolved in the sixteenth century and how they travelled from one place to another, ending up in Shakespeare’s work. It is a process of cultural mobility that seeps into the literary canon. With this theoretical method, I will contextualize the early modern Venice that Shakespeare attempted to depict, the history of their ghettoization and inquisition as well as the attitudes of the period. I will also investigate how these themes emerged in Elizabethan England among a time of radical religious transition. This way, we can appropriately understand how these ideas are reflected in *Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*. In turn, we can use Shakespeare’s work as a frame for analyzing historical phenomena because literature and history are reciprocal after all.

This study will consist of three chapters. Chapter 1 is largely historical, first analyzing the background of the Jewish diaspora as well as attitudes of Renaissance humanism and the Counter Reformation, both factors that influenced religious persecution in Venice. Then it discusses the beginnings of the Venice Ghetto, and how Venice viewed their Jewish merchant inhabitants. This chapter also looks at the origins of paranoia against Jews and how that was manifested in the inquisition. This is where the bulk of the *Processi* from the Venetian Inquisition are analyzed. A comparative study of the ghetto and Jewish experience of Florence wraps up Chapter 1, utilizing maps and floor plans of the Florentine Ghetto from the *Archivio di Stato di Firenze*. It also discusses the Port of Livorno and their welcoming of Jewish merchants.

Chapter 2 is more literary, first delving into Shakespeare’s contemporary moment and the Elizabethan views on religious differences and Judaism, and how Shakespeare’s work portrays this

period of confessionalization and the development of various denominations and religious identities within Protestantism. It also searches for connections between history and Shakespeare, and what inspired him to write this play, including some of the literary sources that he used. Next, I analyze Shylock as an allegory for the Jewish Ghetto, and how one of Shakespeare's most complicated character was created and portrayed. The final section of Chapter 2 describes how *Merchant of Venice* and Shylock have evolved in cultural memory throughout the years and taken on their own form. It discusses a few different performances of *Merchant* and how it changes drastically depending on the historical context of the performance.

Chapter 3 goes deeper into themes of conversion and religious identity, integrating *Othello* and the treatment of Muslims in early modern Europe. It first briefly summarizes the history of Ottoman merchants in Venice, how they were regarded and treated, and how that compares to the experience of Jews. I then analyze the sentiments towards the concept of conversion, and how they are expressed in both *Merchant* and *Othello*. This chapter highlights how converts to Christianity from religions like Islam and Judaism were often treated with a certain anxiety. Overall, this study identifies key themes present in Shakespeare's work that reflect historical sentiments, events, and cultural and religious ideas, and uses literature as a lens through which to analyze history of religious persecution in the Renaissance, and the historical contexts to analyze literature.

Chapter I: Jews in Italy and Ghettoization

I.1. Jewish-Christian Relations and the Establishment of the Venice Ghetto

In the early modern period among the growth of religious turmoil and persecution around Europe, Italy was seen by many Jews as an ideal location to migrate to and settle down in because of the degree of semi-toleration practiced in many Italian cities, especially compared to their former homes. This was due largely in part to the mercantile benefits brought about by foreigners and other religious groups, which in turn gave the Jewish diaspora more reason to come to Italy, especially the Venetian Republic. One of the largest Jewish diasporas in Italy came from the Iberian Peninsula after a century of violent discrimination and forced conversions in the kingdoms of Castille and Aragon, becoming more prominent in the 14th, and especially the 15th century. Many Jews were forced to choose between conversion to Christianity or death, producing a new group of the population called *conversos*, or Marranos. However, converting to Christianity did not save them from persecution, as they were constantly under scrutiny for their Jewish past or bloodline.

A major turning point of Jewish mobility was in 1492 when Ferdinand and Isabella issued an edict of expulsion, the Alhambra Decree. Due to the intense fear of Judaism under the strictly Catholic crown and the distrust of the sincerity of converts, the edict cracked down on Jews by expelling them completely from Spain. The decree stated:

“Every day it is found and appears that the said Jews increase in continuing their evil and wicked purpose wherever they live and congregate, and so that there will not be any place where they further offend our holy faith, and corrupt those whom God has until now most desired to preserve.”¹

The language in the decree explicitly demonizes the Jewish population, and it is important to note one of the biggest fears the Christians in Spain had at this time, which was specifically the comingling of Jews and Christians. There was such a strong anxiety prevalent regarding the assumption that Jews would corrupt Christians with their beliefs and spread it to them. This concept will remain relevant as we investigate the treatment of Jews in Venice, because this was also one of the main concerns of the inquisitors and Christian Venetian citizens alike as they wanted to prevent the integration of Christians and Jews.

¹ “Edict of Expulsion of the Jews,” Translation by Edward Peters based on the fullest version of the text, *Documentos acerca de la expulsion de los Judios*, edited by Luis Suarez-Fernandez (Valladolid: C.S.I.C., 1964), no 177 pp. 391-395.

The numbers report that, as a result of the Alhambra Decree, from 40,000 to 350,000 Jews immediately left Spain, though historians have not been able to place the exact amount. And about 200,000 are estimated to have converted to Christianity to avoid expulsion.² Those that left Spain usually went to either the Ottoman Empire, North Africa, or Italy. One of the more common locations for the Jewish diaspora to Italy was the city of Venice, the main focus of this research. It is vital to recognize the severity of the conditions for Jews under the Spanish Inquisition because it places Venice into perspective as a city where Jews could live with comparatively less religious persecution. Venice was indeed the city where the first ghetto was established, where Jews had to adhere to a strict curfew, avoid too much interaction with Christians, wear identifying clothing to distinguish themselves, and were subject to inquisitors. However, the fact that Jews, along with many other religious minorities, were tolerated to a much higher extent in Venice than in other parts of Europe makes for a unique and fascinating case. Because it was a mercantile and trade city with solid connections to the Ottoman Empire and many posts in the Mediterranean, it was only natural that the Venetian Republic would shape up to be an amalgamation of various ethnicities and religions all mingling together on one little island.

This did not necessarily mean that Venice was a paragon for religious coexistence, but in the 16th century with the onset of the Protestant Reformation and the Roman Inquisition, Venice was a bit of an outlier. The Venetian Republic had the challenge of finding a delicate balance between punishing heresy and embodying the values of the Roman church but also tolerating other religious groups to a certain extent due to economic interests. They also did not want to be fully allegiant to the papal states and having their own autonomy. The exact parameters of the Venetian Inquisition will be discussed at length in the following chapter, but it is necessary to highlight the complicated nature of the experiences of religious minorities in early modern Italy. Views on the subject often varied, but in order to fully understand how Jews were regarded in this time, we must first analyze the sentiments of the Renaissance humanists of the 15th century. The Renaissance, with its emphasis on humanism and the rediscovery of classical knowledge, allowed for not only gradual secularization of certain intellectual fields, but also discussions of religious differences and acceptance of various traditions. Jewish mystic tradition was taken up by some Renaissance humanists in Italy, causing the Jewish Cabala to infiltrate into Christian intellectual circles, even finding its way into Shakespeare, as we have

² Joseph Pérez, *History of a Tragedy: The Expulsion of the Jews from Spain*, Translated by Hochroth, Lysa, University of Illinois Press, 2007, 89.

seen. This is a significant mobility and transformation of ideas that embodies the transitional landscape of the sixteenth century that Shakespeare also captures in his writing.

The Jewish Cabala was incorporated into the Florentine humanist movement by Pico della Mirandola, a founder of Renaissance Neoplatonism, in the fifteenth century. Basically, Mirandola used the Cabalist wisdom of Hebrew to justify Jesus' existence as the true Messiah. He applied this wisdom to Christian beliefs and it proved itself to be quite compatible with humanism.

“Since Cabala was believed to be an oral revelation to Moses which had found literary expression only in the second century A.D., its study provided arguments that Christianity and Greek philosophy had indeed a common origin. To the elite coterie of Florentine Platonists, no search for secret wisdom was more attractive than one which promised reconciliation between Christianity and classical culture.”³

Christian Renaissance humanists found themselves drawn to the Cabala wisdom as it connected to their obsession with ancient Greek ideas. Despite Jewish mysticism's heavy presence in humanism, Erasmus of Rotterdam was not necessarily an advocate for it—many Italian humanists supported it, however.⁴ Erasmus was one of the most important figures in the Northern Renaissance, being a humanist and Catholic theologian among other things. When it came to the Reformation, he advocated for peaceful reform while remaining in the Catholic Church. His opinion on these matters is relevant to the discussion of the Cabala in humanist discourse.

In 1518, Erasmus proved his distaste in a letter, listing a few of the Hebrew traditions that have been combined with humanism and writing, “Italy has many Jews, Spain scarcely any Christians. I am afraid that by this opportunity the head of the plague formerly stifled may rise up.”⁵ I suppose his reference to having “stifled” this “plague” refers to the Spanish Inquisition, and the proceeding inquisitions in other countries. He seems to have a fear of Judaism becoming too relevant and mixing with Christianity, a fear we have witnessed time and time again throughout this study. The level of Erasmus' fears, however, was that Judaism would have some sort of revival, as this time was full of different intellectual and religious rebirths. So, one of the primary leaders of humanism rejected the Cabala, showing a pushback in these ideas, which did not seem to stop Cabala from influencing the movement anyways. According to Robert Bonfil, “It was the deflowering of Neoplatonism coupled

³ Werner L. Gundersheimer, “Erasmus, Humanism, and the Christian Cabala,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 26, no. 1/2 (1963): 38–52, 38.

⁴ Robert Bonfil, *Jewish life in Renaissance Italy*, 1st ed. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994, 173.

⁵ P.S. Allen, *Opus Epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterodami*, Oxford, 1906-58, III, Ep. 798, cited in Gundersheimer, “Erasmus, Humanism, and the Christian Cabala,” 40.

with the cult of Antiquity which determined the success of the Kabbalah.”⁶ This syncretism was the optimal mixture for Renaissance humanists, and why it thrived among many scholars at the time, even among antisemitism. This antisemitism is seen not only in Erasmus and other scholars of northern Europe, but also of the Venetian humanists like Ludovico Foscarini and Paolo Morosini.⁷ These old-school patrician humanists had a more rigid approach when it came to religion, and rejected Jewish beliefs. Morosini’s writing in particular shows his knowledge of the Old Testament and “offers a case study in the way that broader Christian concerns about Jewish faithlessness and denial of the Trinity could be presented with a Venetian patrician-humanist accent.”⁸ Through his knowledge, he sought to disprove Judaism, but not through Cabalistic measures. This is not to say that Renaissance humanists that *did* emphasize the Christian Cabala accepted Judaism—not in the slightest. They simply used Hebrew mystic tradition to prove the existence of Christ. But Erasmus saw this as dangerous to Christianity, and I imagine Morosini and Foscarini would say the same due to their use of humanism to reject Judaism.

Nevertheless, Erasmus also demonstrates that there are limits to this rejection, not supporting persecution of Jews. In a messy and complicated dispute among other Dutch and German humanists through letters, Erasmus tries to mediate the controversy, pointing out how it is not necessary to be “stirring up such agitation over the Jews”⁹ when Christianity is already so divisive in this period. Erasmus says,

“Who is there among us that does not sufficiently detest that race of men? If it is Christian to hate Jews, we are all Christian enough in this regard.”¹⁰

This sort of defines the limits that Erasmus had with his opposition to Jewish beliefs and the Christian Cabala, and that he prioritizes keeping matters civil. He was not close-minded, but skeptical of this belief system. Erasmus’ thoughts on the Cabala are just an example of some of the Northern humanists and how they received and perceived aspects of religious syncretism. But it is important to further analyze Giovanni Pico della Mirandola’s ideas because of how influential they were to Italian Renaissance thought, and the rest of Europe. An educated young nobleman of Italy, Pico was the

⁶ Bonfil, 173.

⁷ Stephen Bowd, “Civic Piety and Patriotism: Patrician Humanists and Jews in Venice and Its Empire,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 69, no. 4 (2016): 1257–95.

⁸ Bowd, 27.

⁹ Gundersheimer, 48.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, II. 139-141: “An quisquam est nostrum qui non satis excretur hoc hominum genus? Si Christianum est odisse Iudaeos, hic abunde Christiani sumus omnes,” Cited in Gundersheimer, 48.

founder of the Christian Cabala when he was tutored by a rabbi in Perugia. As mentioned earlier, he was in search of the truth of Christ from the Old Testament, and his learning of the mystical side of Hebrew teachings allowed him to find that.

“While the Mosaic account of creation is a truth revealed by God in the Hebrew scriptures, Pico argues that Moses’s writings contain hidden references to the advent of Christ, the increase of the church, and the calling of the Gentiles”¹¹

This revelation is carried out through much of Pico’s work, and he therefore uses a syncretism of Judaism with Christianity to further justify the truth of Jesus Christ as the Messiah. This syncretism had such an influence on Renaissance humanism that spread throughout Europe. It is important to acknowledge all of this because of its profound implications for the development of not only humanist thought but also religious transformation in a time like the Reformation, which followed a few decades after Pico’s death. It also accelerated the relevance of Jewish belief and tradition in the Renaissance landscape, allowing Christians and Jews to have more access to one another’s systems. This allows for a new exposure to other religions, and the evidence of this is prominent in Shakespeare’s work, something we will discover through *Merchant of Venice*, *Othello*, and many of his other works. Furthermore, “The Kabbalah performed a mediating function between the Christian and Jewish worlds by providing the catalyst for the reinsertion of the New Christian converts into the Jewish contexts,” and it was “a bridge for them to return to Jewish thought.”¹² This is especially relevant to the topic of conversion because those New Christians that had left Iberia due to inquisition were now exposed more to Jewish mystic ideas, helping them connect back with their former Jewish identity. And it was often the case that in their new homes, like Italy, being openly Jewish and separated into a ghetto was easier than being a New Christian. Livorno was a unique exception because there was no ghetto, but it applies to the Cabala concept as well because Jews were welcomed as free citizens of Tuscany to practice without persecution. And reverting back to Judaism was preferred for Livorno because “The ambiguous identity of Iberian Jews and New Christians, however, jeopardized the cohesion of the Sephardic world.”¹³ In other words, the Tuscan state much preferred their inhabitants to stick to one religion rather than convert to Christianity and secretly practice Judaism, because this was a danger to the sanctity of Christianity. This explains why Erasmus was concerned with the application of the

¹¹ M.V. Dougherty, *Pico della Mirandola : new essays*, Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 67.

¹² Bonfil, 176.

¹³ Trivellato, 40.

Christian Cabala to humanism; the mixing of religious beliefs provoked anxiety for many in early modern Europe.

This integration of the Cabala into both Christianity and humanist thought helped usher in an increase in intellectual, and even spiritual, relations between Christians and Jews. Chapter 2 went over how this phenomenon was also relevant in Elizabethan England. Francis Yates, in *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*, argues that the occult was a dominant philosophy in this period, alongside Christianity. Elizabethan inhabitants believed in all sorts of magic, demons, fairies, etc. and mixed those occult beliefs with Christianity.¹⁴ This includes the Christian Cabala, which at this point had made its way to England as well. It especially developed among exiles who were expelled from Spain who eventually found themselves in England as New Christians, sometimes still practicing Judaism privately. This whole concept can even be found reflected in Shakespeare's writing, and Yates makes a point to argue that the constant tension between Old Testament law and New Testament law, and how in many moments, like Portia's mercy speech can be an allegory that fuses both laws. This alludes back to the mystical aspects of the Christian Cabala as she says, "earthly power doth then show the likest God's when mercy seasons justice."¹⁵ Her appeal to mercy over strict justice echoes the mystical idea of balancing judgement with compassion, a key concept of Cabalistic thought. Her speech, therefore, can be seen as an intersection with Renaissance humanism, showing how these intellectual ideas have transferred and transformed throughout early modern Europe.¹⁶

The Christian Cabala notions in *Merchant of Venice* are sort of a mirror of the fact that Shakespeare is neither anti- nor philo-semitic in the writing of this play. His careful balance between portraying Shylock in a negative light and the Christian characters in a positive light is suggestive of the complexity of Jewish-Christian relations. Kaplan says that "While the play offers a nuanced and complex representation of a range of Jewish and Christian identities, ultimately ideas about Jews serve the interests of the dominant Christian culture that creates them."¹⁷ This is vital to remember—though we have seen some religious syncretism in this culture and therefore in *Merchant*, we must not forget that this image created by the English and by Shakespeare is based off of mostly assumptions. They only know the ideas about Judaism as *opposed* to Christianity, having little contact with Jews in the

¹⁴ Yates, 2.

¹⁵ *Merchant of Venice*, 4.1.191-192.

¹⁶ Yates, 128.

¹⁷ M. Lindsay Kaplan, "The Merchant of Venice, Jews, and Christians," Chapter In *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Religion*, edited by Hannibal Hamlin, 168–83, Cambridge Companions to Literature, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, 181.

first place. And this is all taking place during a time of rapid religious changes based on the Protestant Reformation, as new religious denominations were forming, and people were working to create a certain identity based on their beliefs.

Overall, the argument that the views of the Christian Cabala are present in Shakespeare has merit because, as we know, Shakespeare always manages to capture the prevailing attitudes and belief systems of his time and challenging them to make his audience contemplate. This ultimately shows how intellectual movements and ideas are mobile—from Pico della Mirandola to Erasmus to Elizabethan England—and when they diffuse from culture to culture, they can have a profound impact on the literary canon.

Circling back to the Venice humanists in particular, we can see a lot of negative opinions towards Jews. In his article “Civic Piety and Patriotism: Patrician Humanists and Jews in Venice and Its Empire”, Stephen Bowd demonstrates that the debates about Jews in Venice have deep roots in the Venetian humanist ideals that dominated in the Renaissance, especially regarding their views on service to the state. According to Bowd, humanists—specifically focusing on Paolo Morosini and Ludovico Foscarini—often had discussions about Jewish beliefs and were up to date on the current anti-Jewish literature, even learning Hebrew “as a way of gaining access to supposedly Christian truths in Hebrew scripture, rebutting Jewish claims, and promoting the superiority of Christian wisdom and religion.”¹⁸ There was an apparent effort by these humanist groups, as they recovered ancient and classical texts and studied philosophy and religion side by side, to assert the ideals of Christianity as opposed to Judaism. This elevated the characteristics of Venetian humanism, which seeped into the ideologies of Renaissance Venice. Foscarini and Morosini, like many Western Europeans in the 15th century, were also fearful of the Ottoman advances west, especially after the fall of Constantinople in 1453.¹⁹ And when there was a peace treaty between the Ottomans and Venice in 1454, humanists were concerned about the threat of the Turks, even desiring some form of crusade. They were another minority group in Venice that was integral to the economic and maritime standing of the republic, like the Jews, but still feared and questioned. This feeling against the Ottoman Turks was also a prominent part of the general views of western Christians in the early modern Period, and influenced how the Venetian Republic treated their Muslim population.

¹⁸ Stephen Bowd, “Civic Piety and Patriotism: Patrician Humanists and Jews in Venice and Its Empire,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 69, no. 4 (2016): 1257–95, 1263.

¹⁹ Bowd, 1267.

Ludovico Foscarini, a humanist politician of the Venetian Republic, is emphasized by Bowd to have written many letters containing overt anti-Jewish language. Bowd highlights a letter to Antonio Gradenigo, discussing his alleged report of a Jewish ritual destroying Christian images in Crete. He writes that Foscarini “attacked the Jews as ‘dogs’ who had crucified Christ, lived in darkness, and never tired of causing harm to Christians. He then pivoted to the Jews’ supposed thirst for Christian blood.”²⁰ These harsh words are nothing new in the history of religious conflict and persecution. The Christian theory of Jewish deicide had been around for centuries, cited in the New Testament when a crowd of Jews, in response to the authorization by Pontius Pilate of Jesus’ execution, cried “‘His blood be on us and on our children.’”²¹ This verse unfortunately has influenced much of early modern and modern antisemitism, which can be viewed in Foscarini’s writing. Bowd also notes some medieval anti-Jewish literature that had an impact on Foscarini’s opinions.²² Foscarini’s contemporary, Paolo Morosini, was also influenced by medieval texts, and specifically used examples from the Old Testament in his writings to emphasize the way in which Jews denied the Holy Trinity and refused to accept Jesus Christ as the son of God.

Bowd’s case studies of Morosini, Foscarini, and other patrician humanists in Venice help provide us a broader understanding of the way in which Christian Venetians were threatened by the presence of Judaism as well as Islam in the republic. Though they do not embody the views of everybody, their rhetoric suggests that the relations between Christians and Jews were strained, despite Venice being known for its toleration. There was an inherent desire to “defend Christendom,” as Bowd puts it²³, and many other examples from the following century point to this as well.

Following the construction of the Jewish Ghetto in Venice and the onset of the Venetian Inquisition—and in the time Shakespeare was writing *Merchant of Venice*—much of the clergy was discussing their fears about Jews living amongst Christians and potentially harming their faith, as if Christians needed protection from them. Cardinal Lorenzo Priuli, who was a patriarch of Venice and then became a cardinal in 1596, had a sharp opinion that he declared to the Venetian Senate. He said that “The fraudulent treachery of the Jews must be feared all the more because these are domestic

²⁰ Bowd, 1270.

²¹ Mt 27:24-25 NRSV.

²² Bowd, 1274.

²³ Bowd, 1286.

enemies who can have dealings with every simple and unwary person.”²⁴ To Priuli and many others, Jews were seen as a threat from within. Since they were technically outsiders, but living in the same area as Christians, it was like they were seeping into the lives of Christians, which provoked much anxiety for the latter group. This anxiety was also reflected in the values of the Venetian Inquisition.

Priuli’s rhetoric shows how religious authorities not only used fear of the “other” to maintain religious uniformity but also to manipulate the dynamics of the republic. By framing Jews as “domestic enemies” the clergy could justify stricter control, even though these alleged enemies were an integral part of the republic’s society and economy. The patrician humanists like Morosini and Foscarini also used their wide knowledge of religion to justify their demonization of Jews. The Alhambra Decree framed Jews as a corruption to the purity of Christianity and took the most extreme measure of expelling them. This language is seen time and time again, not only in the views of humanists and religious figures, but also in the various edicts and papal bulls studied in this section. The characterization of Jews by Venetians in this manner is a paradox—Venetians relied on Jews for their contributions to the economy while at the same time being afraid of their presence and mixture with the rest of the inhabitants. The vilification of Jews is also a recurring theme in *Merchant of Venice*, which I argue is a representation of the general attitudes of Christians towards Jews. But Shakespeare is not consistent in the depictions giving us the message that he is not totally aligned with the attitudes of these humanists and other religious authorities. It will be covered in subsequent sections, but an overall theme to keep in mind is the goal of protecting their citizens from and stopping heresy. This is because heresy was seen as a threat to public order and peace.

Paolo Sarpi, a prominent Venetian scholar and statesman, was known for his advocacy for the separation of church and state. He also stood up for the Venetian Republic when the Pope condemned it for not fully following his orders from Rome. His comments on the inquisition are interesting because he was multifaceted and had some bold stances for the time. In 1613, regarding the inquisition, he said, “Inquisitors must strive to keep the people free of heresy for the service of God alone; the magistrate [must do so] both in the service of God and for the sake of good government.”²⁵ To Sarpi and many others, the prevention of heresy (which also includes Protestant values) was something instructed by God that the Venetian Republic must fulfill. Though, Sarpi was often deemed a controversial figure by

²⁴ A.S.V., S.T filza 141, 31 Jan 1596.

²⁵ Paolo Sarpi, "Sopra L'ufficio dell'Inquisizione," *Scritti giurisdizionalistici*, ed. G. Gambarin (Bari: Laterza & Figli), 19

his contemporary Catholics because of his criticism of the Catholic Church and the advocacy for separation of Church and State, which could also be considered heretical to many at that time. He himself was even questioned before the inquisition a few times.²⁶ Many considered him to be a crypto-Protestant due to some of his criticisms of the Catholic Church, and some even have assumed that he was an atheist.²⁷ That claim does not have much merit, as Sarpi had certainly expressed to be a believer, but his views were more nuanced due to his mix of interests—religion, science, philosophy, Venetian republican values. In 1622, he expressed a satisfied opinion on the overall results of the Inquisition; “By the grace of God there are no heretics in this city [Venice], and for decades there have been no trials for formal heresy.”²⁸ Sarpi saw that the Inquisition was a balanced and orderly system that did a fine job at controlling heresy, at least according to Sarpi’s definition of heresy. Sarpi’s particularly unique point of view reflects the dynamics of the Venetian Inquisition and the debates about religious authority and state control in early modern Venice.

Though the Venetian ghetto had already been established for decades, the papal bull of 1555 under Pope Paul IV also indicated the early modern attitudes towards Jews, especially coming from Rome itself. The Venetian Republic balanced the way it handled the Roman church’s jurisdiction because on one hand, they were an autonomous republic. But on the other hand, they still perceived their authority as derived from God. The inquisition consisted of:

“the elaborate machinery for procuring compromise and regulating conflict which enabled Church and state, as two claimants to ultimate sovereignty, not only to coexist but actively to aid each other in matters of common concern.”²⁹

So, Venice attempted to mix their own style with the Roman style of harsh and enforced Catholicism. Because of this, the authority of the Pope was not always relevant to them. However, it is still relevant to this discussion of the attitudes of the period to analyze the language of this papal bull as it reflects the antisemitic views of the Church. Titled *cum nimis absurdum*, or “Since it is absurd,” this bull criticizes the absolute anger that the Church had about the presence of Jews in Rome, since they

²⁶Brian Pullan, *The Jews of Europe and the Inquisition of Venice, 1550-1670*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983, 24.

²⁷ Nicla Rivero, “Paolo Sarpi: A Baroque Chameleon,” *MLN* 129, no. 1 (2014): 62–78.

²⁸ Paolo Sarpi, “In materia di crear novo inquisitor di Venezia,” in *Opere*, ed. Gaetano e Luisa Cozzi (Napoli: Ricciardi, 1969), 1210.

²⁹ Pullan, 35.

had “insolently invaded our City Rome and a number of the Papal States, territories, and domains.”³⁰ The Pope condemns the mixing of Jews with the Christian population, saying that they “are so ungrateful to Christians, as, instead of thanks for gracious treatment, they return contumely, and among themselves, instead of the slavery, which they deserve, they manage to claim superiority.”³¹ The scathing language deployed in the papal bull sets the tone for the treatment of Jews in Rome, which was undeniably more harsh than how they were treated in Venice. Overall, this papal bull embodies the views of the Catholic Church on Jews in the 16th century and had a significant effect on the building of ghettos throughout Renaissance Italy.

But why did this paranoia about Jews, specifically in Venice, become so prevalent in this period? There was of course a deep-rooted anti-Jewish sentiment among Christians for centuries due to the aforementioned reasons about their religious biases, but there had to have been more of an explanation for the surge of suspicion which ultimately led to the establishment of the first Jewish Ghetto in Europe. The context of the War of the League of Cambrai is of relevance in order to understand the origins of the suspicion, according to Robert Finlay in “The Foundation of the Ghetto.”³² This war, from 1509 to 1517, was between Venice and the League of Cambrai which consisted of the Holy Roman Empire, the papal states, France, and Aragon. When the Venetian Republic experienced many military defeats, they searched for a reason to blame their misfortunes. And since the war began around the same time Jews were allowed to settle on the island of Venice, many Venetians decided that correlation must equal causation, especially after their defeat at the battle of Agnadello in 1509. It was not uncommon for Christians in early modern Europe to equate unfortunate events like battle losses with God’s divine intervention. Therefore, they felt that God was punishing them for letting Jews into the city by causing them to lose in the war. By co-habituating with those who were heretics for denying that Jesus was the son of God, the Venetians were receiving God’s wrath. So, their solution to this was to create the Ghetto, a quarter in which the Jewish population had to reside behind separate walls from the rest of the city, with a curfew at night.

³⁰ Paul IV, *Cum Nimis Absurdum*, Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations, July 14, 1555.

³¹ Paul IV, *Cum Nimis Absurdum*, Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations, July 14, 1555.

³² Robert Finlay, “The Foundation of the Ghetto: Venice, the Jews, and the War of the League of Cambrai,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 126, no. 2 (1982): 140–54.

“The segregation of the Jews was accomplished within this providential perspective: it was an attempt to regain God’s favor at a critical time by expiating a sin—the freedom of Venice for the Jews—committed immediately after Agnadello.”³³

Keeping track of how the knowledge of the war arrived in Venice, Finlay argues that in 1515, there were already talks about segregating the Jews, proposed by a politician by the name of Giorgio Emo. However, there was not enough sense of crisis to provoke such a measure. But after the defeat 1516, amid much more apprehension, Emo’s proposal was discussed again at the Collegio.³⁴ Franciscan sermons from those days also prove that many of them were speaking about Jews and what to do about them. And the Senate approved of the ghetto on March 29. And of course, a few days later, the Venetians received news of success in the war again.³⁵

Given this situation, it can be concluded that the decision to build the ghetto was already a long time coming, and the defeats in the war were the final straw to launch the idea into reality. This is true; antisemitism was growing in this period, especially following the expulsions from Spain. But it is not like Venice was simply looking for a reason to discriminate against a religious minority. It’s easy, as a modern secular student of history that may not understand the perspective of a religious person in the 16th century, to see ghettoization as some sort of wicked measure to practice some form of control towards and hatred against the Jewish population, and that Venice used the war as an excuse. However, it is really important to remember that the anxiety that the Venetians felt about the war and God’s hand in it was genuine. At this time, religion was the explanation for most phenomena in life, so we cannot discount religious fear because it was very real. This does not justify ghettoization, but it does account for the domination of religious beliefs and how they drove nearly every decision made in this period.

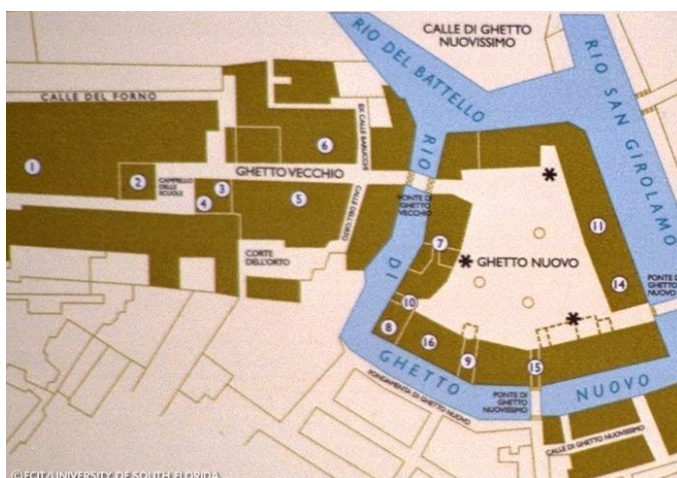
The Venetians assumed that the timing of Jews entering the island and the military loss at Agnadello was not a coincidence. And as a result of this foreboding wrought by the war, the ghetto was established, a quarter that is undeniably historically significant because it represents so much. It represents the nuanced approach that Venetians took with the treatment of religious minorities like the Jewish population. That is, they heavily relied on them for moneylending and trade, but felt like they were failing God by allowing them in their city, and that “to tolerate the Jews in their midst was

³³ Finlay, 145.

³⁴ Finlay, 151

³⁵ Finlay, 153.

sinfully to accommodate those who bore hereditary guilt for crucifying the Savior.”³⁶ The solution of confining the Jews into a separate space made it so that they were invisible and kept away, but still participating in the economic activities of the city. The ghetto was built on the edges of the city in the Cannaregio neighborhood, so that they were displaced, on the margins, as seen in Annex A. his distinguished the Jews socially and physically from the rest of Venetian society, and “if the ghetto was central to the built environment of Venice, it was a center of Jewish life decentered from the larger Christian community.”³⁷ Essentially, the establishment of the ghetto symbolized the complex dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in early modern Venice, and it marked the beginning of many other Jewish quarters to be built.



Map of Jewish quarter in Venice, with Ghetto Vecchio and Ghetto Nuovo, Florida Center for Instructional Technology, 2005.

The stability and ideals of the Venetian Republic were often reflected through the architecture of the island, and Dana Katz makes an interesting point about the contrast of the general architecture versus the architecture of the ghetto. The usual wide-open northern Italian piazza structure is seen in Piazza San Marco, which is a “metaphor for the city’s virtue and as a visual demonstration of the republic’s stability.”³⁸ Meanwhile, the Jewish ghetto was a contrast to San Marco, with gates and curfews to close it off from the rest of the city. Jews had to be back in their quarter by dusk before the gates closed. According to the edict in 1516 by the Venetian Senate, they wanted to build doors on the bridge that enters the Ghetto to close and lock at sunset and then be reopened by Christian guards at

³⁶ Finlay, 149.

³⁷ Dana E. Katz, *The Jewish Ghetto and the Visual Imagination of Early modern Venice*, New York Cambridge: Cambridge university press, 2017, 33.

³⁸ Katz, 50.

sunrise, “To prevent Jews from going about all night, provoking the greatest discontent and the deepest displeasure on the part of Jesus Christ.”³⁹ The Senate did not hesitate to allude to the disdain that many Christians possessed for the Jews, something heavily repeated as well in *Merchant of Venice*; “Certainly the / Jew is the very devil incarnal.”⁴⁰ The constant comparison of Jews to the devil or to dogs by the characters in *Merchant of Venice*, this one being Launcelot, Shylock’s servant, is something to keep in mind as it exhibits some of the values that Venetians might have had when imposing these restrictions on Jews. Launcelot’s words are obviously a more extreme version of the general consensus of Venetian Christians and does not embody everybody’s views. But it does give us a glimpse into the attempts to demonize the Jewish population due to the long-standing antagonism between the two religions. We can especially connect this to the language in the papal bulls and other various decrees where they usually sought to highlight the supposed evil nature of the Jews. The “greatest discontent and deepest displeasure” mentioned in the edict implies that their existence was a great obstacle in achieving harmony as a society.

Enclosing and surveilling was the republic’s physical way of distinguishing the Jewish community and attempting to keep them under watch twenty-four hours a day. The edict of ghettoization continues, “If by chance any Jew is found by officials or public servants outside the Ghetto after the hours specified above, they shall be bound to arrest him at once for his disobedience.”⁴¹ This made the Jews particularly vulnerable at night and excluded them from the many nighttime activities and action that filled the island of Venice. Despite being marginalized from the rest of Venetian society and tucked away in a closed-off neighborhood, the Jews in Venice still found a way to claim agency amongst religious tensions. The republic confined them to such a small space, but they populated it quite heavily, building families and creating a community where they practiced their religious traditions openly. Within the confines of the Ghetto, they could practice without fear of persecution. Additionally, they had to continue building more housing for their growing community, and the only direction they could build was up. So, even though they were hidden away, the Jewish community reclaimed their importance by constructing elevated housing and therefore being visible from afar. Katz emphasize that, “Given the ghetto’s visibility within the Venetian skyline, the Jews acquired an agency from their elevated optical placement that provoked a disordering of the Venetian

³⁹ ASVe, Senato, Terra, registro 19, fols. 78r-79r, March 29, 1516.

⁴⁰ *The Merchant of Venice*, 2.2.22-23.

⁴¹ ASVe, Senato, Terra, registro 19, fols. 78r-79r, March 29, 1516.

order of things.”⁴² Having this separate area was empowering, and looking at how it’s doing now shows how when a certain group settles all into one quarter, the culture and community thrive and grow throughout history, giving the neighborhood its own distinct identity to embrace.

For the Venetian Republic, seen as a symbol of early modern stability, a lot of these concerns seemed to boil down to *order*. The co-existence of two religious groups who loathed one another was a major threat to the peaceful order that La Serenissima was renowned for. Establishing the ghetto was an attempt to thwart the disruption to the peace that was present in their government. Yes, it was also due in part to the general antisemitic attitudes present amongst early modern Christians, and for the “ancient grudge”⁴³ they had against Judaism. That was not a new concept, and it unfortunately continued for centuries and led to more extreme and violent measures. But the theme of carrying out an anti-Jewish process, like creating the ghetto or facilitating the inquisition, for the sake of order has come up countless times throughout the course of this study. The apprehension that Venice faced amidst their losses in the War of the League of Cambrai was also a disruption of their order, so they coped with it by attempting to control something, which was the Jews’ placement within the city. Because usually, “Venetians enjoyed a remarkable stability of government and were supremely confident that God had special concern for the destiny of their state.”⁴⁴ The establishment of the ghetto reflected the city’s concerns about maintaining public order amidst religious tensions, in order to reflect the stability that characterized their governmental structure. It also embodied the concern about the overall belief in their fate being in the hands of God.

Not only did the Jewish population of the ghetto assert their agency through building vertically and creating a community, but they also often communicated their needs with the Senate and advocated for themselves. As their quarter grew in population, they experienced overcrowding and therefore asked the Senate for additional space in 1541, as a reaction to a customs exemption which explicitly mentioned Jewish merchants. The new space was granted in the adjacent neighborhood, the *Ghetto Vecchio*. Additionally, the merchants asked to extend their period of stay from four months to two years, which was also accepted, so “the role of the Jewish Levantine merchants in the Venetian marketplace was officially recognized.”⁴⁵ Benjamin Ravid, in “The First Charter of the Jewish

⁴² Katz, 63.

⁴³ *The Merchant of Venice*, 1.3.42.

⁴⁴ Finlay, 144.

⁴⁵ Ravid, Benjamin C.I., “The First Charter of the Jewish Merchants of Venice, 1589,” *AJS Review* 1 (1976): 187–222, 191.

Merchants of Venice,” explains that there was a particular Jewish merchant named Daniel Rodriga who was extremely important for the following charter established in 1589.⁴⁶ He negotiated that Venice build a port at Spalato (modern-day Split), which was owned by the Venetian Republic, and allow foreign to live there, which would include Jews. This would be strategically helpful, and the Senate agreed, but not to the part about foreign merchants because “the granting of commercial privileges to non-Venetians ran counter to Venetian policy.”⁴⁷ There were many more thwarted attempts by Rodriga to grant more rights and privileges to Jewish merchants regarding residence and customs duties. Despite not accepting these petitions, there was still a de facto lenience and toleration anyways.

However, Rodriga’s charter in 1589 was finally passed, with five points all relating to the rights and safety of Jewish merchants in Venice. The official charter read:

“For the coming ten years, safe-conduct is to be granted to any Levantine or Ponentine Jewish merchant to be able to come to dwell in this city of ours with his family, to reside and to do business freely, wearing the yellow hat of the Jews and making his residence in the *ghetto nuovo*.”⁴⁸

The Venetian Senate would still not allow the Jewish merchants to live outside of the ghetto, but nonetheless they took a step towards official toleration of Jews, specifically the merchants, in their city. It would definitely help the republic strategically for its commercial endeavors throughout the Mediterranean, and it was an unexpected advancement in terms of trading rights for non-Venetians in Venice. Essentially, Rodriga’s charter granted limited rights and safety to the Jewish merchants, and the Venetian Senate was practically accepting of it, which displays a small evolution of opinion surrounding the acceptance of Jewish and non-Venetian merchants. However, Venice seemed to be quite unwavering when it came to confining its Jewish citizens to the ghetto, which relates back to its strong desire to keep public life in order by separating religious groups from each other.

Shakespeare explores the religious tensions of early modern Venice (and Europe in general) by depicting the tensions and interactions between the characters in *Merchant of Venice*, which contributes to our cultural understanding of the ghetto and the daily life of this period. Strangely enough, Shakespeare probably did not know about the ghetto because it is not depicted at all in the play. He simply writes about interactions between the Jews and Christians, which, to an Elizabethan audience

⁴⁶ Ravid, 192.

⁴⁷ Ravid, 194.

⁴⁸ ASV, CSM, reg. 138, 99r-100v, cited in Ravid, 204.

who probably never saw a Jewish person before, was already something foreign to them. Nonetheless, the play is a cultural allegory for the Venetian ghetto and studying it alongside historical processes gives us a broader understanding of religious hatred. Historically, Venetians were certainly engaging in business matters with Jews and other non-Venetians, but that was the extent of it. Personal and social interactions between the different religions were not acceptable. Interestingly enough, many of the Inquisition trial documents in my research have shown that many of the people are questioned for some sort of religious intermingling (often of converts), like dining together. Shylock adamantly refuses to dine with Antonio and Bassanio.

“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.”⁴⁹

One of the major differences in diet between Jews and Christians is pork, which Jews consider unclean according to Mosaic Law, so naturally Shylock did not want to eat with the Christians for that reason. But additionally, their religious differences led to an antagonism that could not be easily solved. This divide between Shylock and the others embodies the overall tensions of this period in Venice—a complicated and only semi-tolerant relationship between the two religions as they resided on an island where they had to work together for the mercantile interests of a powerful republic, but the Jewish community was never fully and unconditionally welcomed.

I.2. Paranoia and the Venetian Inquisition

The Inquisition in Venice was particularly unique, operating in the context of the Counter Reformation and the influence of the Roman Inquisition. An era-defining event in the creation of the Counter Reformation was the Council of Trent, in which recurring meetings of the papal authorities took place in Trento from 1545 until 1563. This was a reaction to the spread of Protestantism initiated by Martin Luther where the Church sought to reorganize their structures and define their stance against Protestantism and heresy. Pope Paul III’s papal bull of 1542, *Licet ab initio*, declared that the Roman Church would do what they could to regulate and punish heresy, and Protestant beliefs were defined as heresy. Its intention was “to maintain and defend the integrity of the faith and to examine and proscribe errors and false doctrines.”⁵⁰ From here, the Holy Office and appointments of inquisitors began. Of course, this was in response to Protestantism, which, to them, was an overt dissent of the Catholic

⁴⁹ *The Merchant of Venice*, 1.3.29-34.

⁵⁰ Paul III, *licet ab initio*, 1542.

Church. But it also grew to encompass other religious minorities in Catholic states, like Jews and Muslims, who were also considered heretics.

The papal bull of 1555 that was mentioned earlier, which initiated stronger force against Jews and the establishment of the ghetto in Rome, was more literal in its condemnation of Judaism. But Pope Paul III, shortly after *Licet ab initio* in 1542, was said to have “urged the Venetians to take stronger action against heretics and their books. He had heard that Venice harbored open dissenters, and he recommended strong action lest these rebels against God become traitors to Caesar.”⁵¹ He was still referring to Protestants, but his implication of the fact that Venice was very open to all types of people around the world revealed his fear. This fear was that there would easily be heretics from other religions among the Catholics of the republic. Venice was indeed more accepting than most other Catholic states of their time, and this is vital to remember as we explore the aspects of the inquisition and the trials themselves. The multifaceted and careful way in which the Venetian Republic handled religious persecution was complicated, similarly to the complex nature of Shakespeare’s depiction of Shylock and the ghetto. Analyzing these parallels between history and literature provide us a richer insight on the matter.

How did the Venetian Republic approach such a topic? They were concerned about order, and generally, the Venetian nobles were in agreement that heresy would not be tolerated in their God-given state. But they did not fully trust the Roman papacy. They even prevented papal relatives from being appointed to their governmental and inquisitorial agencies. Venice wanted to remain an autonomous republic, not completely under the authority of the Pope.

“The papacy was a foreign political power whose policies frequently ran contrary to the Republic’s best interests, but the church within Venetian borders was essentially a state church to be managed for the benefit of the Republic and the profit of the nobility.”⁵²

Venice was looking out for its own political and religious interests as a state, but at the same time, upholding the values of the Roman Catholic Church. So often, the motives of Venice were similar to those of Rome anyways, especially in relation to the Counter Reformation and their view on taking action against heretics.⁵³ Also, both states prioritized order. And for Venice, maintaining order meant

⁵¹ P. F. Grendler (1977), *The Roman Inquisition and the Venetian press, 1540-1605*, Princeton university press, 36.

⁵² Grendler, 29.

⁵³ Grendler, 35.

refraining in some areas because they did not want their Inquisition to cause more chaos and upheaval than before. It was a delicate balance to punish and prevent heresy but also keep their economy running and prosperous. Their power often varied over the years, but “where Jews were concerned, the Inquisition was no menace to public order, but it could inadvertently threaten the economic interests of the Venetian state”⁵⁴ because of its heavy reliance on the Jewish population for their large role in mercantile activity, moneylending, and other trades that should not be taken for granted for the contribution to the growth of the republic.

This also provides another explanation for why Venice created the ghetto. It was a compromise between their values of tolerating religious minorities for economic purposes and upholding the tenants of the Church, to placate God. Rather than resorting to expulsion, like Spain, Venice chose to move them to a walled-off ghetto in the margins of the city. Therefore, Jews could technically continue living and practicing Judaism while not “disturbing” the peace of the Christian residents on the island. According to Pullan, “After the 1580s the Inquisition seldom invaded the Ghetto, and indeed it did so only in cases where there was at least a presumption of Christian baptism.”⁵⁵ And when looking at the records of Venetian Inquisition, one can see that they did not solely try people who were Jews living in the ghetto. Often, they tried “baptized Christians who flirted with Judaism, who mingled Judaism with Christianity, who alternated between Christianity and Judaism, or who withdrew from Christianity altogether and transferred their allegiance to the Jewish faith.”⁵⁶ The types of heresy that Venetian inquisitors took seriously had to do with some sort of outright dissent of Christianity, or a combination of religions. Basically, those who were subject to Christian rules were those baptized Christian, making them more harshly subject to the Inquisition. So, Spanish and Portuguese immigrants who were of Jewish descent but practiced Christianity were targeted, or those who converted for their own safety but still practiced secretly, or Jews who socialized with Christians. Basically, what concerned Venice more was the cross-over of religious customs and beliefs. If Judaism and Christianity were kept separate, that was something they could manage. But if a New Christian showed signs of reverting back to Judaism, that was much more threatening.

There was great concern about Jews committing some sort of attack against Christianity, and how their alleged heresy would tempt Christians to come to the wrong side. Early modern Christians in

⁵⁴ Pullan, 25.

⁵⁵ Pullan, 88.

⁵⁶ Pullan, 58.

general were quite worried about their own kind being corrupted by some “other.” This also applied to Muslims, especially with the expansion of the Ottoman Empire after 1453. When it came to Jews, among these fears were fear of blasphemy, proselytization of Jews towards Christians, and the spread of Jewish books. Censorship of books was a concept that existed for centuries, but it became more relevant during the Council of Ten in 1549 as they drafted a list of prohibited books, those that went against the Catholic Church, called the *Catalogo di Diverse Opere*.⁵⁷ Not only did it apply to Protestant literature; there was an increasing fear of the spread of Jewish press because “From 1515 to 1553, the Hebrew press in Venice flourished,”⁵⁸ thanks to Daniel Bomberg of Antwerp, who was not Jewish but enjoyed studying the religion, and initiated the spread of copies of the Talmud in Venice. Meanwhile, Rome was also condemning the distribution of Jewish writing, issuing a decree in 1553, stating:

“Wishing to punish and eradicate all things with those that are appropriate, having, through the mature advice of the prefect’s expert in the sacred letters as well as in both laws, all the aforementioned books of the Talmud...we have committed our sentence that they are publicly burned in Campo Fiori of this holy city.”⁵⁹

Rome encouraged the Venetians to follow suit, which they did without hesitation, burning copies of the Talmud in Piazza San Marco on 21 October 1553. After some pushback from the Jews, Venice decided to permit the Talmud, but require them to remove blasphemous material from it. Either way, Hebrew publishing halted for about ten years, migrating to other northern Italian cities instead. This was an economic loss for the republic as it affected their revenue, but “on this occasion, guarding the faith was more important than money.”⁶⁰ This case of heavy censorship in the republic not only indicates a moment in which Venice followed Rome’s actions, but also how Venice decided how and when to discriminate against its Jewish residents. It was a selective decision, but this was certainly a case where it favored taking more extreme measures against them. This again reveals the complex nature of early modern Venice’s carrying out of religious persecution. Given the semi-tolerant nature of Venice—they wanted Jews separate but did not disturb them in their ghetto—this move seems out of character. Sudden censorship to this degree is dramatic. It could be likened to the hasty decision to

⁵⁷ Grendler, 86.

⁵⁸ Grendler, 90.

⁵⁹ *Eleven Documents Concerning the Condemnation and Burning of the Talmud in Venice*, various hands, 1553–1555, Ketsetnbaum New York (2003), lot 227; Raz-Krakotzkin 2007, pp. 1-56. Doc 6, 9 September 1553, Rome. “Desiderando punir et stirpar con quelle pena che si conviene, havuto per il maturo consiglio delli prefati periti cosi nelle sacre lettere, come nell’una e l’altra legge, tutti i predetti libri del Talmuth...e nostra sentenza habbiamo commesso che siano pubblicamente bruciati in Campo Fior di questa alma citta.” This is from a copy of the letter that was sent to Venice, translated from Latin to Venetian-Italian.

⁶⁰ Grendler, 93.

create the ghetto in the first place, but this time the motivation came from Rome, something Venice did not always care to take example from.

Regarding the Inquisition, cases of heretical blasphemy usually applied to former Jews who “denied, even implicitly, some article of faith.”⁶¹ Most of the Jews or New Christians punished for heretical blasphemy said something against the name of God and experienced a form of tongue cutting or removal, according to most of the reports from Pullan. Overall, the overarching theme of most of the records that I have gone through involved former Jews baptized Christian, or Christians with Jewish descent who have been accused of engaging in Jewish activities, possessing Jewish books, or socializing with Jews.

One example that I found to be of relevance is that of Francesco Colonna in 1553, who, fearing some sort of punishment due to his actions, came to seek absolution, advised by his attorney. This actually happened one month after the burning of the Talmud in Piazza San Marco. Francesco was around nineteen years old, from Mantua, and he was born Jewish but baptized with his brother and father in Rome at age nine;⁶² so he practiced Christianity most of his life. He recalled a story of him meeting a Jewish man in the Ghetto Vecchio of the name Isaac Coen, who heavily criticized him (Francesco) for being Christian and having converted from Judaism at age nine. According to Francesco, Isaac also said many reproaches against Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary.⁶³ Interestingly, Isaac and other Jews even mentioned to Francesco the situation about their Talmud being burnt, blaming the former Jews who converted Christian for it. Next, one of the Jews said to Francesco, “Son, if you want to be a good Jew we will not fail you and we will send you to the Levant on a ship of a Jew who cannot wait.”⁶⁴ From his story, it seems that he was persuaded to join them on this journey, though he was reluctant. Francesco proceeded to dine with all of them in the Ghetto Vecchio before joining them on a boat that would eventually sail for Constantinople. On the boat, they covered him with a blanket and made him wear a yellow beret that all of the Jews had to wear, pretending to be Jewish in order to continue on the journey. Before even fully departing from the Lagoon, somebody found out that Francesco was Christian, not Jewish so they dragged him away and took him to the police in San

⁶¹ Pullan, 81.

⁶² Pier Cesare Ioly Zorattini, *Processi del S. Ufficio di Venezia contro ebrei e giudaizzanti*. Firenze: L. S. Olschki, n.d., 95. “Mio padre et un mio fratello e in Roma et esso mio padre si chiama don Felippo Errera et e prete et mio fratello Bata Colonna et fossemo baptezati tuti in un di.”

⁶³ Ioly Zorattini, 97. “Et dettomi molte vellanie et biasteme contra de Cristo benedeto et di Maria Virgine sua madre.”

⁶⁴ Ioly Zorattini, 97. “Figlio se tu voi esser bon iudeo noi non ti mancheremo e ti manderemo in Levante sopra un navilio di un iudeo che non aspetta altro che il tempo.”

Marco.⁶⁵ Francesco asked the inquisitors for “absolution without danger and to punish the Jews of this bad operation, that is, so another time, they do not dare to seduce some other simple man.”⁶⁶ All that was written after Francesco’s testimony was that he was granted absolution and pardoned. It would be interesting to know if the Jewish men who attempted to kidnap him were ever tried or punished, but there was unfortunately no further information about them in the report.

This story brings an interesting aspect to the discussion of interactions between former Jews who were baptized Christian and practicing Jews. Francesco felt that due to his socializing with and dining with Jews, even entering the Ghetto, the inquisitors would have punished him because he was subject to the laws of the Catholic Church, being baptized Catholic himself. However, it seems to be unclear whether he joined the Jews at first by his own will or if he was simply forced. Perhaps he was painting the narrative as if he was forced in order to cover up and avoid punishment, because it was possible that he wanted to explore that other part of himself. It was common for Marranos to have identity crises especially in adolescence, being part of two different religions.⁶⁷ But if we take Francesco’s story at face value, it seems like he was possibly coerced to accompany them, and he wanted the Jews who did so to face punishment. Either way, he felt guilty enough to come forward himself, assuming he would have been brought to the inquisitors anyways—and punished more—if he tried to hide it. This was a move by Francesco to evade a harsh sentence, and it clearly was successful, demonstrating that the Inquisition often valued when questioned people just confessed to their alleged sins rather than denying it.

Shakespeare even puts forward his commentary about conversion and the identity crisis it often brings about. Through the character of Jessica, the daughter of Shylock, we are presented with a scenario in which a Jew character decides to convert to Christianity to be with a romantic interest. She is also much more accepted by the Christian characters compared to her father, due mostly in part to her condemnation of her father and her no longer wanting to be a part of the Jewish faith. After Jessica declares her desire to leave her father and the house, Launcelot remarks, “Most beautiful pagan, most sweet Jew! If a Christian did not play the knave, and get thee, I am much deceived.”⁶⁸ By juxtaposing words like “beautiful” and “pagan,” Launcelot is describing Jessica as still heretical in nature for being

⁶⁵ Ioly Zorattini, 100.

⁶⁶ Ioly Zorattini, 100. “...l’absolution senza pericolo et far castigare li Hebrei di questa male opera accioche un’altra volta non habino ardir de sedur qualche altro semplice.”

⁶⁷ Pullan, 211.

⁶⁸ *Merchant of Venice*, 2.3.10-13.

Jewish, but she is different because she wants to leave behind her Jewish life. To Launcelot, and the others, she is an exception to their general disdain for Jews like Shylock. Meanwhile, Jessica is determined in her desire to leave behind her father and her religion to marry Lorenzo, saying that “though I am a daughter to his blood, I am not to his manners”⁶⁹ and that she will baptize into Christianity, then marry Lorenzo. Launcelot, with his usual audacity, comments on this conversion at the end of Act III, and Jessica reports to her lover:

“He (Launcelot) tells me flatly, there is no mercy for me in heaven, because I am a Jew’s daughter: and he says you are no good member of the commonwealth; for in converting Jews to Christians, you raise the price of pork.”⁷⁰

To Lorenzo, this is unimportant, and he proceeds to engage in some problematic jokes with Launcelot about impregnating an African. Shakespeare employs Launcelot’s constant irreverent comments for comedic relief, but there is a secondary function of these, whether intentional or not, that disclose the attitudes towards Jews and conversion in his time. Many Christians tended to believe that Jews who converted to Christianity would never truly reach salvation, and often questioned their authenticity, hence the inquisitorial trials against Marranos in Venice. This subplot of Jessica is also an example of a younger person leaving the faith they were raised in for another, though it seems here like it is mostly for love. Jessica even steals money and jewelry from her father as she escapes, making this the ultimate form of religious rebellion. Experimentation with and even conversion to another religion occurred especially to those in early modern Europe who came from a background of both Judaism and Christianity. That is because this double background caused them to question their identity and faith.

The inquisitorial case of Odoardo Gomez in 1555 is an example of the classic questions asked to those who are Christians with Jewish descent, accused of Judaizing. Odoardo was a Portuguese merchant, who has been Christian since birth, but with parents who were Jewish but baptized Christian at some point in their lives. Additionally, his brothers were all still Jewish.⁷¹ He was questioned alongside Agustino Enriches, another Portuguese merchant. They were brought to trial for accusations of Judaizing, as many had seen them doing business with Jewish merchants, especially being of Jewish descent. However, in his testimony, Odoardo made it clear that “we had trade negotiations with

⁶⁹ *Merchant of Venice*, 2.3.18-19.

⁷⁰ *Merchant of Venice*, 3.5.28-33.

⁷¹ Ioly Zorattini, 230.

Levantine Jews and people of Ancona to do our mercantile business and not for anything else.”⁷²

Alongside his testimony, many other witnesses spoke, all asked about certain actions that would distinguish him as secretly Jewish, like if he went to mass, or if he ate pork, or if he was circumcised.

Most of the reports confirmed that Odoardo was indeed a good Christian: A Jesuit man reported of the two merchants. “I doubt that they are Jews (although being baptized Christians).”⁷³ Others reported having dined with him and witnessed him eating foods prohibited to Jews⁷⁴, and others somehow figured out that he was indeed uncircumcised. The only seemingly incriminating report was from a Spanish witness, who said, in reference to both Odoardo and Agustino,

“I do not believe that they are such good Christians like they should be and many times we had conversed about Christian, Turkish (Islamic), and Jewish ceremonies, I was saying that the Christian ceremonies are much more beautiful than the others and they did not respond anything.”⁷⁵

Somehow, this was the witness’ evidence to demonstrate that Odoardo and Agustino were not trustworthy Christians. From reading all of these inquisitorial documents, I have noticed that many of the evidence brought to attention about possible Judaizing is usually something arbitrary like this. It might be difficult to understand why these small things—the previous comment, dining or conversing with other Jews, or diet—were discussed so thoroughly, but it goes to show that the Jews and Marranos were under heavy scrutiny in this time in Venice, for seemingly insignificant things. In the end, Odoardo was pardoned and released, but not after a lengthy interrogation and multiple witness testimonies. This trial demonstrates the specific nature of the inquisitorial process, and how important it was for a Marrano to prove himself a “good Christian.”

The two cases I have chosen to break down have been those where the defendant has been found not guilty because they were able to prove that they were indeed staying true to the Christian faith, however true or false that was. This is because comparatively speaking, the Venetian Inquisition was not incredibly harsh on suspecting Judaizers or crypto-Jews. However, there were also a few cases in this record where the defendants *were* found guilty and punished in some way. The typical sentence was a number of years of service in the galleys. Francesco Olivier, for example, who was a Jew alleged

⁷² Ioly Zorattini, 232. “Havemo commertio con Giudei levantini et anconitani per far le nostre mercadantie et non per altro.”

⁷³ Ioly Zorattini, 226. “Io dubito che siano giudei (benche sono christiani battezzati).”

⁷⁴ Ioly Zorattini, 238.

⁷⁵ Ioly Zorattini, 228. “Non credo che siano cosi buoni cristiani come dovriano essere et molte volte havemo ragionato delle cerimonie de Christiani, de Turchi et Giudei dicendoli io che le cerimonie de Christiani sono molto piu belle dele altre et loro non rispondeno niente.”

to have had intercourse with a Christian prostitute, was sentenced to four years in the galleys.⁷⁶ It could have been much worse; mutilation was often punishment for sexual offences like this.

Meanwhile, Giacomo Francoso is one of the cases where the defendant was sentenced, and his story is interesting because he baptized into Christianity four times. During the questioning in 1548 he said, “My father was Jewish and also my mother and I was hidden Jewish and I was baptized Christian around a year ago now.”⁷⁷ But strangely, he did not just do it once, but four separate times in four separate cities: Venice, Modena, Ravenna, and Badia, receiving religious instruction beforehand in some times. According to his trial report, Francoso received money from his baptism in certain situations as well. When asked why he did this, he said “I knew that it was bad and against the laws of the Christian faith and that it was a sin, but I did it because I didn’t have a way to live” and he did it because “My clothes were out of order and to have some contacts.”⁷⁸ This was a common reason for a Jew to get baptized—there were often financial benefits given to those who converted, and they had better business connections through it as well. Francoso was simply finding a way to survive because he was poor, and his strategy was to baptize repeatedly. He was definitely not the first to convert to Christianity for the sake of financial security.

However, baptizing multiple times is a sin taken seriously by the church, so “we condemn this Giacomo, alias Aaron, to serve in the forced galleys of this illustrious dominion for twenty consecutive years.”⁷⁹ The tribunal also said that if he escaped, he would be hanged. This was one of the harsher sentences that I came across. Francoso knew that what he did was a sin and admitted to it. From the other trials, and from general knowledge about inquisitor trials, I noticed that if the person admitted to the heresy, they evaded a harsh sentence. I assumed that he would have been released after admitting to everything, but twenty years in the galleys was probably accurate for a violation of this level. This could have been a death sentence if the inquisitors wanted. Death sentences happened, usually by drowning, but they were very rare.⁸⁰ Francoso’s story reveals a side of Venetian Jewry that is sometimes disregarded. Because Jews were not forced to convert in Venice, those who did were

⁷⁶ Ioly Zorattini, 54.

⁷⁷ Ioly Zorattini, 71. “Mio padre era hebreo et anche mia madre et io sono nascuto hebreo e mi sono fatto christiano da un anno in circa in qua.”

⁷⁸ Ioly Zorattini, 73. “Io sapevo che facevo mal et contro le constitution della fede christiana et che era peccato ma lo facevo // perche non avevo modo di vivere.” “Ero mal in ordine del vestito e per aver qualche recapito.”

⁷⁹ Ioly Zorattini, 76. “Condenniamo esso Giacomo, alias Aaron, a servir in le gallie sforzate di questo illustrissimo Dominio per anni venti continui.”

⁸⁰ Grendler, find page

usually doing it for some other reason like elevating their status. This proves that the conditions of Jews in Venice, though better than other cities, were still not ideal. Many lived in poverty, in the crowded ghetto, and living as a Christian was easier and brought more opportunities, meaning conversion was a choice many Jews made strategically. Four baptisms was a pretty drastic measure thought.

This collection of documents reveals so much information not only about the inquisitors themselves and their procedures, but also about the methods that the defendants used to attempt to clear their names, their storytelling, and their unique experiences as Jews or Marranos in Venice.

Forced baptism was not usually carried out in Venice, but many Jews were obliged to baptize into Christianity either out of fear or for the social and business contacts in the Christian community. Pullan goes into detail about the various circumstances in which Jews converted, often still practicing Judaism in private or feeling neutral about both religions. An example he provides is Tristao da Costa of Portugal, who always lived privately as a Jew but was probably forcibly baptized to Christianity sometime in his childhood in Portugal. He also married a Jewish woman, but it was a Christian wedding, and they had three children, but they held back on circumcising them because they were afraid of persecution in the very strict Iberia. Once in Venice, they did so, and practiced Judaism at home but still portrayed themselves in public as Christian. When questioned in the inquisition, “He admitted living in Venice for at least eight years as a Jew, disguising himself as a Christian for the purpose of conducting business.”⁸¹ Acting as a Christian helped him expand his business contacts and to trade with other Christians with more protection, and less fear. He had similar reasons to Francoso. Luckily, he was not sentenced, because his private practices of Judaism were mostly dietary; overall, da Costa was not a devout man, so he was not performing any Jewish rituals. There were often occasions where it was simply easier to live if one pretended to be Christian, opening up more opportunities and saving the less economically advantaged Jews from poverty.

Though forced baptism was rare, “Adult Jews in Italy were normally exposed to conversion by persuasion than to conversion by duress.”⁸² And in true Jesuit fashion, a program was set up in Venice to educate either potential or newly baptized converts about the Christian faith before they changed their mind. Many Jews who converted to Christianity often found that reading and studying scripture had brought upon them their conversions, not just sermons. But either way, the catechumen—called the

⁸¹ Pullan, 214.

⁸² Pullan, 275.

Pia Casa dei Catecumeni—organized a structure to “scrutinize the intentions of prospective converts, to see them properly instructed, to eliminate fraud, and to provide the emotional and other support necessary to preventing lapses.”⁸³ The rituals and methods they employed for conversion were often characterized by heavy surveillance of the converts, usually keeping them close in the institution. This effort attempted to keep around those who had converted for purposes of financial survival. Like many conversion campaigns, it was not hugely successful, with only a few actually fully baptizing,⁸⁴ but it was an important sector of the inquisitorial institution that shaped the ways in which the Venetian elite attempted to reckon with the threat of the presence of non-Christian religions.

Though these conversions were not forced, there was a certain persuasive element to them, in which the authorities of the Church in Venice attempted to exercise a power over their converts or potential converts. And this theme of dominance can be found everywhere as we explore the history of the Venetian Inquisition. Shakespeare portrays the power struggles between the two religious groups in Venice, especially in Act IV, with the infamous trial scene that ends with Shylock being converted to Christianity against his own will, a severe and shocking occurrence that I interpret as a form of religious violation, ultimately representing early modern religious intolerance. To the people living in England in Shakespeare’s time, it would likely be interpreted as the proper procedure. I analyze Elizabethan attitudes towards Jews in the following chapter, but it must be addressed that a forced baptism into Christianity was necessary for the villain of the play. To the Elizabethan audience, Christianity was the only way to live, so it is important to keep this in mind as we unravel the complexities of this pivotal scene. Additionally—something that applies to every written drama—the way this scene is performed can vary largely, and with a lot of actions, like the baptism itself, being unwritten, the actors performing it can completely change the interpretation of this scene. For example, in the 2004 production of *Merchant of Venice* by Michael Radford, it is left out. But in a stage reproduction that, like the movie, starred Al Pacino, it was included. The forced baptism scene in that version was powerful and disturbing according to theater reviews.⁸⁵ The scene in the 2004 movie ends with Shylock walking out of the courtroom, and it is dramatic, but showing the baptism has a much heavier impact. It gives the entire play a darker feeling, one that victimizes Shylock and frames the

⁸³ Pullan, 255.

⁸⁴ Pullan, 272.

⁸⁵The Associated Press, “The Merchant of Venice-Theater Review,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, 14 Oct. 2010.

play as much more intentional about the message it is sending about antisemitism. The ambiguities of this play are ultimately what make it such a heavily discussed piece of literature to this day.

The trial scene in which Shylock is ultimately punished displays a moment where the ideals of Christianity triumph over the rational views of the Jewish character. Portia, dressing up as a male judge, manipulates the scene with such grace, knowing all along that she will be able to find a loophole in Christian Venetian law to get Shylock in trouble. Her famous monologue about mercy— “it is enthroned in the hearts of kings, it is an attribute to God himself”⁸⁶—exhibits the Christian attitudes that align more with the merciful God of the New Testament, than the stricter God that is depicted in the Old Testament. Shylock’s rationality and expectations of adherence to the law is more of an Old Testament attitude, while Christians tend to highlight God’s forgiveness over law. Because of the contract between Antonio and Shylock, it is agreed that Shylock must cut off a pound of flesh from Antonio, but not before Portia interrupts with a law of Venice that he must not “shed one drop of Christian blood”⁸⁷ or his possessions will be taken away. And when Shylock goes back on his insistence on cutting Antonio’s flesh, Portia says,

“It is enacted by the laws of Venice, if it be proved against an alien that by direct or indirect attempts he seek the life of any citizen, the party ‘gainst the which he doth contrive shall seize one half his goods; the other half comes to the privy of the state; and the offender’s life lies in the mercy of the Duke.”⁸⁸

According to Venetian law, Shylock was an alien and would never be a true citizen of Venice, while Antonio was a citizen. Portia has found a way to still punish Shylock for wanting to uphold the contract about a loan that Antonio did not pay back. This shows how the Jews of Venice would never truly have the rights and freedoms of a Christian Venetian. The court comes to an agreement that they would spare Shylock’s life, but he is fined and “He presently become a Christian.”⁸⁹ Shylock somberly agrees to this forced christening, leaves, and is never seen again in the play. His absence is symbolic of the fact that he has had his identity stripped away from him in a violating fashion. And though he is not sentenced to death, this moment is a representation of his death, as Shylock has nothing left—not his daughter, not his religion—and the Christian characters prevail, the play ending with their marriages. The baptism is not written in the play, but the impact here is in the lack of information. Publicly forcing

⁸⁶ *Merchant of Venice*, 4.1.189-190.

⁸⁷ *Merchant of Venice*, 4.1.305.

⁸⁸ *Merchant of Venice*, 4.1.344-351.

⁸⁹ *Merchant of Venice*, 4.1.406.

a Jew to convert to Christianity is an act of violence, taking away Shylock's agency that he was usually able to practice in his daily life in Venice. Shakespeare's intentionality with silencing Shylock speaks volumes about the dark implications of Shylock's end, which is forced baptism. Whether that baptism is performed on the stage or not, it is there, hanging over the Christian characters as they celebrate their victories and get married, reminding the audience that this play is apparently a comedy.

Overall, this long and impactful scene reflects some broader societal pressures about early modern Venice, and their institutional practices of ghettoization, inquisition, and attempts at conversion. Though they were usually not coerced like Shylock's was, Shakespeare was making a statement about the overarching themes of religious persecution that plagued Venice at that time, and the discourses amongst religions about biblical and theological interpretations. And this all ties in with the republic's processes of inquisition; how they reckoned with the instructions of the papal states while also attempting to maintain their diverse mercantile population to benefit their economic interests. The inquisition documents which I looked at imply a tug-of-war that the republic struggled with between pleasing God and their religious endeavors and prospering as a peaceful and powerful trading city on the Mediterranean. *Merchant of Venice's* ambiguities and complexities are a reflection for the multi-faceted nature of the Venetian Republic's treatment of Jews and how they addressed religious tolerance.

1.3. Comparative Study: The Jews of Florence and Venice

In order to comprehend the scope of Italian approaches to religious intolerance in the early modern period, it is crucial to view the Venetian Republic comparatively among the various Italian city-states. This year I have had the pleasure of working with the Eugene Grant Jewish History Program of the Medici Archive Project in Florence, and through my traineeship I was able to access many archives depicting and describing the life of the Jews of Florence under Cosimo I. Studying this alongside the Venetian Jews, I have been able to understand what made both Venice and Florence unique in their method of tackling religious differences the creation of the ghetto in their respective cities. This section will serve as a comparative study for the treatment and experiences of religious minorities in Florence and Venice in order to gain insight into the overall attitudes that shaped Italy and Renaissance Humanism in this period. The Venetian and Florentine ghettos represent two distinct approaches to the integration and segregation of Jewish communities. Analyzing their varying motivation and outcomes provides a new perspective on the overall ideas about Jews in Renaissance

Italy as well as how the Counter Reformation and papal suggestions were taken into account by each city state.

Reflecting back on Renaissance Humanism for a moment, which played a major role in shaping the overall Christian sentiment towards Judaism and Islam, it is important to note the superiority complex developed among humanist scholars of the time. This is especially applicable in Florence for its obvious centrality to the Renaissance. The humanists, as the threat of Ottoman westward expansion loomed, not only had an unfavorable view on Turks for religious reasons, but also for political and military reasons, as noted with the Venetians' managing of the War of the League of Cambrai. They viewed themselves to be religiously superior to the Ottomans but became more extreme in assuming *cultural* superiority after the fall of Constantinople and the initiation of the Renaissance. These sentiments fueled by humanists in response to Ottomans shaped the construction of a Western identity in contrast to the East. As mentioned earlier, many humanists encouraged some sort of crusade as a reaction.⁹⁰ They began building a western superiority complex based on this. Jews, being considered as Ottoman subjects, were affected by this fear of the Turkish invasion. Many friars in early Renaissance Italy preached separation of Jews from Christians.

“Friars succeeded in marginalizing the Jews and casting suspicion on them as a group, while simultaneously trying to incite crusade fervor against the Turks. Hence a growing attitude of religious intolerance in Italy applied to both internal and external non-Christian groups.”⁹¹

Scholars and religious figures of Florence and Venice possessed this worldview to some degree, hence the efforts to differentiate Christians and Jews from one another. And in addition, though Jews attempted to censor themselves during the Counter Reformation to avoid attacks from Christians, “When Hebrew became a language of Christian humanist scholarship in the late Renaissance, disparaging views of Christianity once buried in Hebrew literature were exposed to Christian eyes.”⁹² Now that humanists were able to study much more Hebrew writing, they could generally engage more with the religious discourse, leading them to have negative views like Morosini and Foscarini.

⁹⁰ Nancy Bisaha, (2006) *Creating east and west: Renaissance humanists and the Ottoman Turks*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 5.

⁹¹ Bisaha, 142.

⁹² Stefanie Beth Siegmund (2006), *The Medici State and the Ghetto of Florence: The Construction of an Early modern Jewish Community*, Stanford University Press, 78.

However, the motivations for ghettoization in either city were not solely because of this crusade craze of humanists. We have explored in depth the motivations for Venetian ghettoization in 1516, which have a lot to do with a compromise between economic interests and fear of intermingling and the threat of the east. Florentine ghettoization, which occurred fifty-five years after Venice's ghetto, had its own unique motivations that shaped the construction and management of the ghetto. Under Cosimo I de' Medici, Florence's second duke—and eventually, very shortly before the establishment of the ghetto, Grand Duke—the ghetto was built as “both a political asset and a lucrative business.”⁹³ As Cosimo I strove for recognition from Rome as the Grand Duke of Tuscany, he needed ways to gain the favor of the Pope. Since *Cum nimis absurdum* in 1555, Rome had been confining Jews to their ghetto, more as a means of causing suffering in abysmal conditions to punish Jews into conversion. And though Florence did not instantly follow along on Rome's encouragements of ghettoization, by 1570, Cosimo I found it to be a good idea in order to appease the Pope and appeal to the ideals of the Counter Reformation. And it would help him gain the recognition needed to officially be Grand Duke. 1569 also created more pressures of ghettoization, with Pope Pius V writing the papal bull *Hebraeorum gens*. This bull expelled Jewish people from all papal territories, except those confined to the ghettos of Rome and Ancona, claiming:

“Nevertheless, their (the Jews') impiety, equipped with all the worst arts, has progressed to such an extent that it is now expedient for our common safety to stop the force of such a disease by a speedy remedy... They lead many of the unwary and weak by the tricks of Satan, who believe that events will be foretold, that thefts, treasures, hidden things can be revealed, and that many things can be known, the ability of which is not even allowed to be investigated by any mortal.”⁹⁴

Pope Pius V claimed that the Jews of the papal territories had allegedly committed many crimes and improprieties such as theft through usury and other scandalous activities that went against the Church and exposed Christians to heresy. This resulted in many Jews of the papal states to move, and many found themselves in the duchy of Florence.⁹⁵ Of course, there were already Jews in Florence and the Tuscan region before this. In the 15th century there were reported to be a small number of them

⁹³ Lorenzo Vigotti and Piergabriele Mancuso, “‘Reconstructing a Lost Space’: The Ghetto Mapping Project at the MAP,” *Materia Giudaica* XXII (2017), 221-232, 221.

⁹⁴ Pius V. *Hebraeorum gens*. “Verumtamen illorum impietas pessimis omnibus artibus instructa, usque eo processit, ut iam pro communi nostrorum salute expediat tanti morbi vim celeri remedio prohibere... quam plurimos incautos atque infirmos Satanae praestigiis inducunt, qui credant eventura preunciari, furta, thesauros, res abditas revelari, multaue paeterea cognosci posse, quorum ne investigandi quidem facultas ulli omnino mortalium est permissa.”

⁹⁵ Siegmund, 57.

in the region, some invited to lend money in 1430. Most of them were of the elite class. It was said that “this small population enjoyed a period during which Jewish creativity—especially in Kabbalah, literature, and philosophy—flourished.”⁹⁶ The Medici favored the presence of the bankers for their ability to lend money, something Christians could not do according to the Bible. However, tolerance for Jews grew unstable during the notorious period of Girolamo Savonarola, from 1494 to 1498. After the expulsion of the Medici and the establishment of the republic under Savonarola, the monte di pietà began in 1497, a lending institution that put the Jewish moneylenders out of business. They were ordered by Savonarola to leave the city, but the expulsion did not actually happen because the Jews “were forbidden to do any more banking or lending business, and as a condition of their continued residence they had to make large non-interest-bearing loans to the city.”⁹⁷ Because of this, they were allowed to remain in the city, even until the death of Savonarola and until the Medici were reinstated in 1512 and the Jewish bankers were allowed to loan money again.

Like Venice, Florence was mildly accepting of keeping the Jewish community in their city because of the economic benefits that their presence brought about. This seems to be a common thread in the early modern Italian city-states, with the exception of Rome that did rely on them but had a much stronger prejudice against their general existence. Cosimo I, in 1551, even welcomed Jews and other foreigners of varying eastern descent to move to Florence practice mercantile and other business operations in order to “enhance commerce.”⁹⁸ Though, not all of the Jews who came to Florence were bankers. They had other professions too, but:

“Banking charters were sometimes a cover, something tacitly understood and accepted by Christians, for Jewish economic diversification and geographical spread. Some Jews took advantage of the duke’s willingness to charter them as moneylenders and then virtually ignored that charter, pursuing other activities that wove them into the local and regional economies.”⁹⁹

This decision to welcome Jewish merchants reflects the desire that Cosimo had to take after the Venetian Republic and their diverse foreign mercantile community, something that made the republic particularly unique. Florence was the epicenter of culture and economic success, but it could not quite be a trading city like Venice was, simply because it was not a port city. Though, Ferdinando I

⁹⁶ Siegmund, 98.

⁹⁷ F. R. Salter, “The Jews in Fifteenth-Century Florence and Savonarola’s Establishment of a Mons Pietatis,” *Cambridge Historical Journal* 5, no. 2 (1936): 193–211, 210.

⁹⁸ Siegmund, 104.

⁹⁹ Siegmund, 99.

sought to make up for that in 1591 by building the Port of Livorno. Either way, the inspiration for the Medici's management of the Jewish population was certainly drawn from Venice, especially since they were the first to build a ghetto. And, like Venice, the Florentine republic (and then duchy) valued public order, and did what was necessary to maintain it. Confining them to a ghetto was one step, but there was then the additional step of enforcing the *segno*, which distinguished Jews from Christians. It was a further attempt at discouraging religious intermingling and making it simpler to discern who was Jewish in order to keep them separated even outside the ghetto during the day.

It has been established that one of the reasons that Cosimo I built the ghetto was because he felt pressure to appease the Pope and Rome by following suit with separating Jews, in order to legitimize his title of Grand Duke of Tuscany. He wanted to maintain a connection to the Church and their ideals of Counter-Reformation, like their efforts to crack down on heresy. This project of building the ghetto was the perfect way to strengthen Florence's relationship with the Church. When looking at Cosimo's strategy in comparison to Venice, there is clear difference in relationship with Rome and the Pope through the respective states' ghettoization policies. Venice set the precedent, creating the first ghetto in Europe nearly forty years before Rome created theirs. Venice's reasons, as mentioned, were largely for the interests of the republic, separate from the Church's desires. There was also the necessity of keeping religious minorities on the island for the economic advantages they brought to the republic. It was still a Catholic republic with a duty to God and the Church, especially with the war at the time. But Venice was making its own decisions regarding ghettoization separate from the Church's authority, attempting to maintain some autonomy. This certainly applied to the inquisition as well. Venice practiced more restraint than Rome in all aspects of the inquisition. What was different about Florence in general is that, even though it also practiced relative autonomy from papal authority, it sought to gain approval from Rome following Counter Reformation policy, though Rome was not actively overseeing the process. That is what made these two cities differ from each other regarding policy and their relationship with Rome; they both made an independent choice, but Venice created the ghetto before anybody else did on their own wish to compromise between economic interests and religious differences, while Florence created the ghetto to enhance the Medici image for Rome.

The Medici family invested heavily in the construction of the ghetto. To Cosimo I, it was a business initiative, because "Banning the Jews from any productive profession, narrowing their professional scope to a few basic activities...and forcing them to reside in the ghetto, would ensure its

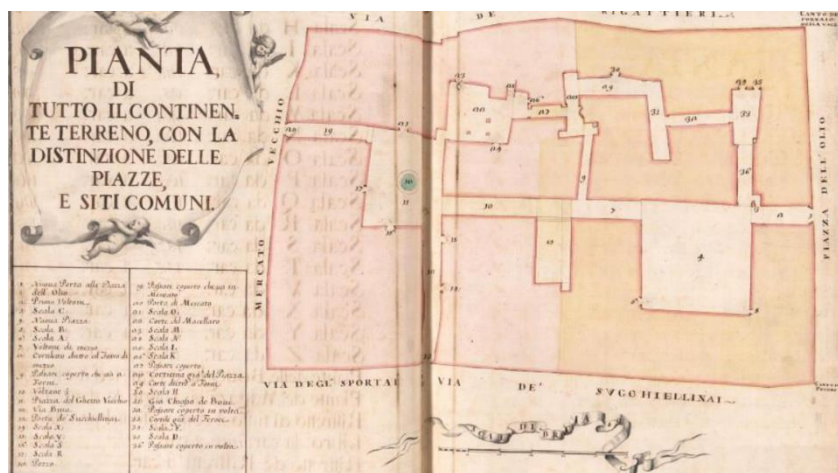
owner (the Medici) a constant number of tenants.”¹⁰⁰ So, it was not only a way of separating the Jewish population from the rest of the Florentines, but it was taking advantage of the wealth that could build as a result of their rental contracts and taxes. The Medici oversaw the entire process of construction, and every step and their expenses have been logged and recorded and are present in the *Archivio di Stato di Firenze*. These records are an example of the careful orchestration employed by the Medici family to put together this neighborhood, one that over time became quite crowded and guarded.

The Ghetto Vecchio was constructed in 1571 directly in the center of Florence, alongside the Mercato Vecchio. Such a central position is an interesting choice, especially because the Venetian ghetto was built on the outskirts of the town, separating their quarter. However, the Florentine ghetto was closed off with doors and guards to disconnect its residents from the rest of the city. In addition, “All the shops rented to Jews were facing the internal alleys and squares, while the ones facing the external streets were owned by or rented to Christians which made the Ghetto invisible at street level.”¹⁰¹ In a sense, though it was directly in the center of the city, it was still tucked away, and the Jewish businesses were not in the open. This further created a sense of isolation for the neighborhood, a deliberate choice of the Medici. The maps and floorplans of the ghetto are present in the *Archivio di Stato di Firenze*, but they were drawn up in 1721, 16 years after the ghetto was expanded to include the Ghetto Nuovo, under Cosimo III. The map, along with hundreds of pages of the floor plans of each residential house and business in the ghetto, gives us an idea of the structure and living conditions in the early eighteenth century, which can even help us reach conclusions about the original layout in the 16th century.¹⁰² The Medici Archive Project has used the maps in the *Piante dello Scrittoio delle Regie Possessioni*, along with the vividly detailed descriptions in the *Scrittoio delle Regie Possessioni* to recreate a model of the ghetto. The archival material and the model allow us to understand the layout, since the ghetto was destroyed in 1888.

¹⁰⁰ Vigotti and Mancuso, 221-222.

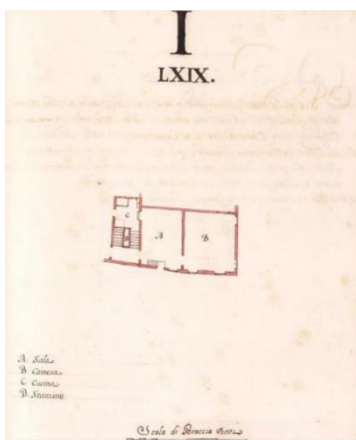
¹⁰¹ Vigotti and Mancuso, 223.

¹⁰² ASF, *Piante dello Scrittoio delle Regie Possessioni*, vol. 26.



Archivio di Stato di Firenze, *Piante dello Scrittoio delle Regie Possessioni*, vol. 26. Page 28.

As we can see in the map, the ghetto, once expanded to include the Ghetto Nuovo, went from the Mercato Vecchio to the Piazza dell’Olio, the southern boundary on Via de’ Succhiellinai. There were three different entrances with gates, and an inner piazza. When it came to the individual houses in the quarter, the size and structure varied. From looking at the various floor plans drawn out in the *Scrittoio*, and from knowing the general financial status of the Jews in Florence, it can be concluded that the housing situations differed from each other.

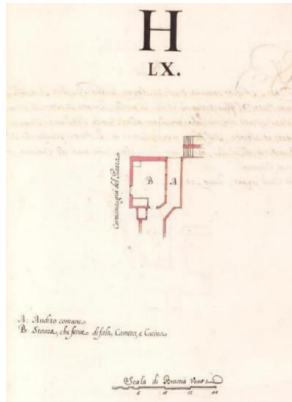


Archivio di Stato di Firenze, *Piante dello Scrittoio delle Regie Possessioni*, vol. 26. I.LXIX.

Some houses were large with many rooms for the more affluent families while others were smaller, having to fit many into a tight space. One of those that I found with smaller living arrangements is shown above. The floor plan is described, saying that the apartment “contains a room, that serves also as a bedroom, a bedroom, and a small kitchen.”¹⁰³ It is safe to conclude that the family

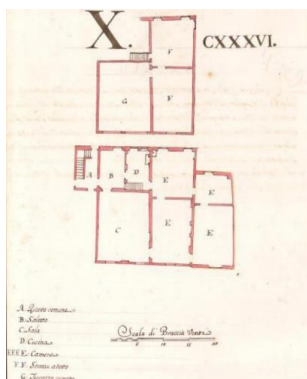
¹⁰³ ASF, *Piante dello Scrittoio delle Regie Possessioni*, vol. 26, I. LXIX. “contiene una sala, che serve anche di camera, una camera, et una cucinetta.”

who lived here did not have enough space for everyone, so the main living room was used also as a bedroom. Another house like this, shown below, has one room that “serves as a main room, bedroom, and kitchen.”¹⁰⁴ These living arrangements, where there is one room for every type of function, where likely a family lives, are not exactly ideal.



Archivio di Stato di Firenze, *Piante dello Scrittoio delle Regie Possessioni*, vol 26. H.LX.

There are other houses in the *Scrittoio* like this as well, where they had to adapt the space to fit all of the inhabitants. At the same time, it is clear that there were many bigger houses as well, which explains the more affluent families living in the ghetto. One in particular, below here, is said to have “a living room, (another) main room, a kitchen, and four bedrooms, and from the living room with a wooden staircase of twenty stairs, one enters in two rooms on the roof in a covered terrace.”¹⁰⁵ This layout is certainly more fit for larger families and much more spacious than the previous houses, with multiple bedrooms and rooms for each function. The variation of house size and quality throughout the quarter is a testament to the diverse sets of occupations and wealth status of its inhabitants.



Archivio di Stato di Firenze, *Piante dello Scrittoio delle Regie Possessioni*, vol 26. X.CXXXVI.

¹⁰⁴ ASF, *Piante dello Scrittoio delle Regie Possessioni*, vol. 26, H. LX. “è una stanza, che serve di sala, camera, e cucina.”

¹⁰⁵ ASF, *Piante dello Scrittoio delle Regie Possessioni*, vol. 26, X. CXXXVI. “un salotto, una sala, una cucina, e quattro camere, e dal salotto con scala di legno di venti scalini, s’entra in due stanze a tetto et in un terrazzo coperto.”

According to a census in 1841, “The average number of people living in one apartment was more than eleven, a clear indicator of the low level of living conditions.”¹⁰⁶ This was obviously three hundred years after the time period we are studying, and more than one hundred years after the *Piante dello Scrittoio delle Regie Possessioni* were drawn up. However, looking at the source material from the early eighteenth century in addition to these records from the nineteenth, we can observe how the conditions developed over time—how they evolved in response to both economic opportunities presented as well as restrictive policies imposed by the ruling authorities, from Cosimo I to his predecessors. The Jewish ghetto of Florence was an organized institution of confinement, and no matter the socioeconomic status of a family, being forced to one area showed to have negative consequences on the general living conditions of the neighborhood.

Like the Florentine ghetto, the Venetian ghetto also had a variety of socioeconomic groups residing there. Especially because of the mercantile and moneylending groups that contributed to the Venice economy, a good number of Venetian Jews were wealthy or at least financially stable. It seems, however, that the economic disparity among the Jews in Florence was much more prominent, as we can see from the stark difference in house structure, size, and quality. Structurally, the ghetto of Venice was less organized than Florence’s. The Jewish community was ghettoized in a much more spontaneous manner in response to defeats in the War of the League of Cambrai, on the edge of the city. The haste of the decision in 1516 and the creation of the quarter made for a more asymmetrical design. And as the quarter became more populated, the inhabitants had to find a way to make do. The problem was that “overcrowding was an endemic problem in the ghetto. Jews were forced to build vertically in Venice, as ghetto tenements ascended up to nine stories.”¹⁰⁷ The verticality of the Venetian ghetto was one of its defining features, as the Jews had no choice but to build up. So even though they were enclosed, their houses reached high into the sky. Cosimo I had a clearer idea in mind when he designed the ghetto in Florence, because it was a financial investment to generate more wealth for the Medici family. As we can see from the *Piante*, the structure was quite organized and directly within the city, with more intentionality as it was a more structured project. The ghetto of Florence was also much more central, providing the inhabitants with a closer proximity to the daily activities of the city, leading to many interreligious reactions. The ghetto of Venice was tucked away on the edge of the city, but there were still many interreligious interactions through mercantile activities during the day. Either way, the

¹⁰⁶ Vigotti and Mancuso, 226.

¹⁰⁷ Katz, 28.

location within the city limits of each ghetto played a role in shaping the experiences of the inhabitants.

But both ghettos were similarly enclosed spaces; the Florentine ghetto was inspired by the Venetian one anyways. They both have a similarity to the cloister that nuns reside in, and Katz makes a good point when she compares the Venice ghetto structure and spatial order to that of a convent, where the outside perimeter is closed off to the rest of the world, and the inner square is where the residents gather. This format conceals the residents from the gaze of the outsiders, leading to a seclusion from society that specifically differentiates and closes off the community from others to see them. Katz says that “Both the sequestration of nuns and the ghettoization of Jews engender a relationship of power and discipline that expresses how a spatially confined subgroup articulates politics and ideology.”¹⁰⁸ The way in which space was organized in the Jewish ghettos of Florence and Venice was a representation of the cities’ systems of religious discrimination and exclusion.

Twenty years following the original construction of the ghetto, Ferdinando I decided to construct a port on the coast of Tuscany in order to enhance the Grand Duchy’s commercial and economic importance. Ferdinando I had a strong idea of transforming Tuscany into a participant in global maritime activity, and constructing the free Port of Livorno was the key to achieving that. His strategy was to invite foreign merchant families to settle in Livorno and grant them certain privileges. The official charter was called the *Livornina*, which stated:

“First we grant to all Turkish, Jewish, and Moorish merchants and other royal merchants...that you may come to stay, trade, pass, and live with your families without leaving, returning and negotiating in our said city and Port of Livorno and also staying to negotiate with others for all of our Ducal dominion without impediment, or any real personal harassment for the time during the next twenty-five years.”¹⁰⁹

This was an historic step towards tolerance for 16th century Italy. The Grand Duke was welcoming foreigners of any religion to stay for an extended period of time, especially including Spanish merchants who were expelled. Though this measure was due to the economic interest of the Grand Duchy, the welcoming nature of the *Livornina* was incomparable to anything else at that time, even Venice. Furthermore, Ferdinando added that “We still want that for this said time no inquisition,

¹⁰⁸ Katz, 60.

¹⁰⁹ Ferdinando I de’ Medici, *Costituzione Livornina*, 1593, Schoenberg Center for Electronic Text and Image-University of Pennsylvania-Philadelphia, PA, 1. “Prima concediamo a’ tutti mercanti hebrei turchi, e’ mori, & altri mercanti reali...che possiate venire a’ stare, traficcare, passare & abitare con le vostre famiglie, o’ senza esse partire, tornare, e’ negoziare nella detta nostra Citta’ e’ Porto di Livorno & anco stare per negoziare altrui per tutto il nostro Ducal dominio senza impedimento, o’ molestia alcuna reale, o’ personale per tempo durante di Anni venticinque prossimi.”

complaint, denunciation or accusation can be carried out against you or your families, even if in the past one has left our dominion as a Christian.”¹¹⁰ So, not only were Jewish merchants welcome, they were also immune to the inquisition and ghettoization, free to practice their religion openly without disturbance. It even includes those who had converted to Christianity for any reason, meaning that the inquisition could not preside over New Christians either, like it did in Venice. And these New Christians could revert back to Judaism because they were free to practice in Livorno. They could even become citizens if they resided long enough, which “provided an incentive to become rooted in Livorno.”¹¹¹ Compared to Venice, where Jews had the ability to live and trade there but were faced with the confines of the ghetto, the occasional inquisition, and had to fight for charters to remain (the ones in 1589, for example), Livorno was much more favorable. Naturally, the Jewish population of Livorno increased over the years, many taking advantage of the privileges granted to them, and by the Napoleonic period, “The port counted a percentage of Jewish inhabitants (between 9-12% of the entire population) perhaps unequalled in any other urban center in Western Europe throughout the early modern period.”¹¹² This meant there was a vibrant and thriving Jewish community in Livorno, as well as a diversity of other religions and ethnicities.

The creation of Livorno ushered in great success, expanding Tuscany’s trade networks past the Mediterranean and into the East, with the Ottoman Empire and through to Asia. The Tuscan state was now a player in the global economy. Trivellato argues that “the Sephardim of Livorno forged with the Levant and North Africa,”¹¹³ meaning that the relationships built between Tuscany and the Ottoman lands was largely thanks to the mercantile connections that the Sephardic Jewish community brought with them. This was Ferdinando I’s goal after all, and it seemed to go according to plan. The legal status of the Jews in Livorno also gave way to success, as they had a good relationship with the Tuscan state.

“The Tuscan authorities legally recognized the *nazione ebrea* as a ‘subject nation’ because of its economic merits, a status that granted it semi-independent jurisdiction. Under this definition, Livornese Jews were

¹¹⁰ *Costituzione Livornina*, 2. “Vogliamo ancora, che per detto tempo non si possa esercitare alcuna inquisitione, vessita, denuntia, o’ accusa contra di uoi, o’ di uostre famiglie, ancora che per il passato sia uscito fuori del dominio nostro come Cristiano”

¹¹¹ Francesca Trivellato, “The Port Jews of Livorno and Their Global Networks of Trade in the Early modern Period,” *Jewish Culture and History* 7 (1–2): 31–48, 33.

¹¹² Francesca Bregoli, “The Port of Livorno and its *Nazione Ebraica* in the Eighteenth Century: Economic Utility and Political Reforms,” in *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History* 2 (2011), pp. 45-68, 50.

¹¹³ Trivellato, 32.

officially recognized as Tuscan subjects, and the community enjoyed the right to organize itself as a political body, autonomous yet dependent on the government of the city.”¹¹⁴

They received such status because of their evident economic utility and prosperity. There was a certain trust between the Livornese Jews and the Tuscan state. This also applied socially, as Jews and gentiles alike interacted not just for business but also daily socialization.¹¹⁵ As previously mentioned, Livorno differed from Venice in that there was no ghetto or inquisition. However, it seems that overall, Venice was an inspiration for Livorno—Ferdinando I probably wanted to mimic the cosmopolitan, diverse mercantile atmosphere and success that Venice had possessed for years. Its “relations with the East had been shaped by long-standing transcultural relations based on Venice’s geographical position and commercial industry.” Venice was known for being the gateway to the East, having long-term relations with the Ottoman Empire. From the information gathered about this port city, it can be concluded that Venice had an influence on Ferdinando I’s vision for Livorno. And the tolerance was taken a step further in Livorno’s case. Ultimately, Livorno’s model of inclusive and strategic openness not only mirrored but also surpassed Venice’s mercantile legacy, marking a shift towards a more modern and globally integrated economy. This progressive approach catalyzed Livorno’s economic success and even redefined the Grand Duchy of Tuscany as a more inclusive environment, at least when it came to Livorno. Florence, on the other hand, still had its ghetto and restrictions on its Jewish population. What I noticed in both Cosimo I’s decision to create a ghetto in Florence and Ferdinando I’s proposal of Livorno is that both (Grand) Dukes acted strategically for the benefit of the Medici and their realm, whether political or economic. This brings us back to the argument that at the end of the day, these decisions about Jewish communities often boiled down to their economic usefulness, their value often determined by the economic success they brought—not exactly because of some progressive desire for inclusion. This also applies to Venice, which served as a model both for Florence because of its ghetto and for Livorno because of its religious coexistence and merchant economy. Therefore, Venice really was the trendsetter when it came to the Jewish population of Italy, a testament to its distinctiveness. However, “by the mid-seventeenth century, Livorno replaced Venice as the main Mediterranean hub of European trade and functioned as the link between the Levant and Northern

¹¹⁴ Francesca Bregoli, *Mediterranean Enlightenment: Livornese Jews, Tuscan Culture, and Eighteenth-Century Reform*, Stanford University Press (2014), 28.

¹¹⁵ Bregoli, 34.

Europe.”¹¹⁶ So, even though Venice may have been the pioneer of this phenomenon, Livorno’s trade infrastructure and connections made it a real success later on.

In comparing the both the ghettos of Florence and Venice, it becomes evident that while both cities sought to control and segregate their Jewish populations, their approaches and underlying motivations differed significantly. The Venetian ghetto, with its densely packed, multi-story buildings and sudden creation of the ghetto in response to losses in the war, reflects Venice’s inclination to create as much order as possible. In contrast, the Florentine ghetto was more centrally located and varied in housing size, showing Cosimo I’s different approach to ghettoization that was influenced by the pressures set on by Rome and papal authorities during the Counter Reformation as well as the Medici’s political and economic ambitions. An important aspect that differentiates Florence’s ghetto is Cosimo’s strategic maneuvering of the Jewish communities to both enforce the values of the Catholic Church but also to boost and maintain the Medici’s economic viability. And in the case of Livorno, welcoming Jewish merchants with no restrictions and plenty of opportunities reflects a shift in policy that centers around the commercial advantages of religious pluralism. The influences of Renaissance humanism had a role on both Florence’s and Venice’s policies towards Jews as well. This is because the fear of Ottoman expansion and the encroaching of foreigners from Ottoman lands became strong and widespread among humanists and the general population of Italy during this period. Both of the ghettos of Florence and Venice were an embodiment of early modern attitudes towards religious differences and how states reckoned with that. Analyzing the two side-by-side provides us a richer understanding of Venice’s ghetto and the overall nature of anti-Jewish processes and the Jewish experience in early modern Italy.

¹¹⁶ Trivellato, 127.

Chapter II: Historical Importance of *Merchant of Venice*

II.1. Jews and Christians in Elizabethan England: The Contemporary Moment of *Merchant of Venice*

In order to understand the ways in which ideas about Jewish-Christian relations reached England and influenced Shakespeare's writing, we must evaluate how the perceptions of Jews came to be for the English. New Historicists claim that the relationship between texts and historical context is a prominent part of the social process, and scholars contend that literature and events engage with each other to form meanings and interpretations. Scholars in the field of Renaissance literature, when applying this New Historicist lens, see literary works as a product of the time in which they are produced. But this is a reciprocal relationship because "The reading and writing of texts, as well as the processes by which they are circulated and categorized, analyzed and taught are being reconstructed as historically determining and determined modes of cultural work."¹ Written discourse is a representation of the cultural, religious, and political moment. But it also contributes to that moment by constructing it. This aspect is vital to Shakespearean studies because, as we know, his writing was heavily shaped by the culture and historical events of his time. That is why I have found studying his plays alongside history to be so fruitful. Even if his plays are fictional and embellished, they are pieces of history and culture that allow us to have a more comprehensive understanding of how events shaped the general beliefs and understandings in early modern England.

This chapter aims to investigate the implications of *Merchant of Venice* within its historical context. I will argue that Shakespeare's portrayal of Shylock is inconsistent, reflecting both antisemitic stereotypes and sympathetic moments, and this duality is mirrored in the Venetian ghetto, which is a place of both confinement and cultural flourishing. The moment of Shylock's forced baptism represents a death of his character and identity, reflecting themes of religious persecution in history, and I analyze him as a Christ-like symbol. Shakespeare also heavily focuses on the social relations between Christians and Jews, and how scripture is employed in daily life. His work does not merely criticize one certain religious sect, but rather raises important questions, at times criticizing biblical absolutism and confessionalism in contrast to broader biblical values. But like all of Shakespeare's work, it can be interpreted and performed in many ways, which can drastically change the meaning, reflecting the

¹ Harold Aram Veesser, *The New Historicism*, New York London: Routledge, 1989, 15.

historical moment in which it is performed. The sense of ambiguity and confusion at the conclusion of *Merchant* makes for a compelling analysis, both historical and literary.

When it came to *Merchant of Venice* and Shakespeare's depiction of Jews, it must be asked how he got his ideas because it "could not possibly derive from first-hand contact with Jews or Jewish life. There had been almost no Jews in England for over three hundred years and no Jewish community life even of the most rudimentary form."² Many scholars had recognized that the idea of Jewry to the English at this time was a concept fashioned by Christians themselves and the stereotypes which had been passed around. The Jewish population of England had been expelled in 1290 under King Edward I. His reasons for expulsion were that after he outlawed moneylending fifteen years prior, the Jews: "maliciously discussing amongst themselves, changed the kind of usury into a worse kind, which they called courtesy, and oppressed the king's people twice as bad as before; as a result the king, for this reason and for the honor of Christ, has caused the Jews to leave his realm as perfidious men..."³

This edict of expulsion followed a time in which "a reign of terror was generated against the Jews which led gradually to their humiliation and impoverishment, and the expropriation of their wealth."⁴ Being then expelled from the kingdom, they were not able to return until 1656, so the only Jews present in Shakespeare's time were those who had converted and practiced openly as Christians⁵, like the doctor to Queen Elizabeth, Roderigo Lopez, whose story will be discussed at length below. So on paper, there were no Jews in England, but a few Marranos did arrive following the expulsions in Iberia; however, they were not openly practicing Judaism.⁶ As a result, one of the main factors that fueled the stereotype that many English Christians had of Jews was from medieval English ballads that had been passed around for centuries, as well as medieval passion plays "where the Jew is an incarnation of the devil himself."⁷ Antisemitism from the Middle Ages definitely had an impact on antisemitic attitudes in the Early Modern Period, but there was more to it than this. Christian-Jewish relations in England were more complicated than simply villainization and hatred, and this nature is also reflected in Shakespeare's depiction of Shylock, who is not the typical villain. Shylock is depicted

² Herbert Bronstein, "Shakespeare, the Jews, and The Merchant of Venice," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 20, no. 1 (1969): 3–10, 5.

³ The National Archives, Jews in England 1290, *Source Four: Letter from King Edward I to the Treasurer and barons of the Exchequer*, 5th November 1290 C54/107, m1.

⁴ Bronstein, 6.

⁵ Bronstein, 5.

⁶ Yates, 109.

⁷ Bronstein, 6.

in a sympathetic manner with a real sense of humanity, and he points out moments of discrimination that he experiences, making him a victim at times.

Following the Protestant Reformation, England was constantly switching its official religion, but with the reign of Elizabeth I, it was Protestant. During these years, various Protestant sects had formed and established their own identities. And London was “a marketplace for different forms of English Protestant practice.”⁸ There was a consistent presence of outward expression of different Protestant ideas; it was one of the most dominant aspects of English culture under Elizabeth. Additionally, Shakespeare’s writing is overflowing with biblical references. Of course he was well versed in the Bible, but these references come naturally in the characters’ speeches. This can be explained by the fact that many biblical proverbs at this time were an integral part of common language.⁹ The Bible was ingrained in almost every form of Elizabethan society, therefore these allusions were of course going to be everywhere in his plays.

The question is often brought up of whether or not Shakespeare challenges Catholicism or Protestantism, and generally what his own religious beliefs were. As we know, Shakespeare’s writing is often ambiguous, not having one concrete and strict ideology. He presents various social, political, and religious issues in a nuanced way, allowing the reader to contemplate and reflect accordingly. Betteridge, in “Shakespeare and the Elizabethan and Jacobean Church” argues that the issue Shakespeare seems to tackle in many of his plays is not simply Protestantism versus Catholicism, but the idea of confessionalism, that is the establishment of a social identity based on hardline doctrinal beliefs. According to Betteridge, “Shakespeare and his drama reflects on the nature of the English Church as a community,”¹⁰ as Protestants in this time were focused on fostering a Christian society. Betteridge uses evidence from *Henry IV Part 2*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and other plays to show how Shakespeare played with the idea of Church community and confessionalism. For example, he cites Bottom’s paraphrasing of I Corinthians 2.9 in Act IV scene i of *Midsummer* as a reversion of absolutist interpretations of scripture. Since Bottom mixes up the Bible verse into nonsense, but still gets the point across, Shakespeare is rejecting strict doctrinal absolutism and exemplifying the simplicity of Protestant culture at this time, which was “a textual Christian community united in and

⁸ Betteridge, 12.

⁹ Hannibal Hamlin, “The Renaissance Bible,” Chapter. In *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Religion*, edited by Hannibal Hamlin, 34–51, Cambridge Companions to Literature. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, 40.

¹⁰ Betteridge, 6.

through the exchange of proverbial wisdom.”¹¹ In other words, since the people of Elizabethan England were always verbally exchanging general phrases from the Bible, these were embedded into their lingo. It was an important part of the culture, and Shakespeare was embodying that in the passage from *Midsommer*. This is a rejection of confessionalism because it is about the general Christian values and beliefs, not adhering to exact strict doctrine.

Betteridge has a point; by examining these nuanced portrayals, we can see that Shakespeare’s engagement with religious themes goes further than simple denominational adherence. Instead, his work suggests an exploration of religious social cohesion in the chaos of a country that just recently changed its official religion. Are these ideas reflected in any way in *Merchant of Venice*? Though it is more focused on the social relations between Catholics and Jews, this play also addresses social religious identities as well as how the characters interpret and use scripture in their day-to-day lives. Religious identity in *Merchant of Venice* is clearly at the focal point of the drama, defining the characters in a seemingly black and white manner. The Christian and Jewish characters make sure to emphatically distinguish themselves from each other, clearly indicating a social hierarchy of Venice. The most obvious example of this is the scene when Shylock refuses to dine with Bassanio and Antonio, responding, “Yes, to smell pork; to eat of the habitation / which your prophet the Nazarite conjured / the devil into.”¹² He then proceeds to emphasize how their relationship is solely business. He is not interested in social interaction with Christians. First, this line indicates the differences in dining habits of Jews and Christians, distinguishing them from each other in religious practices. But Shylock’s invocation of the New Testament is something the contemporary audience would understand, again, due to the general knowledge of scripture at this time. It is interesting because Shylock tends to be educated on Christian values and scripture and uses it to point out the hypocrisies of the Christian characters. The scriptural reference he’s making regards Jesus taking the devil away from men and displacing it into some pigs. In Matthew, it says, “So the devils besought him, saying, if thou cast us out, suffer us to go away into the herd of swine.”¹³ Basically, Shylock is bringing up how even in the New Testament, pigs are seen as demonized and therefore shouldn’t be eaten by Christians either. This is one of many instances where he criticizes the inconsistencies of Christians.

¹¹ Betteridge, 9.

¹² *Merchant of Venice*, 1.3.29-31.

¹³ Mt. 8:32 NRSV.

This brings us back to Betteridge, who argues that the Christians in many of Shakespeare's plays are more focused on living the general biblical values rather than confessionalism, or being exact in their following of scripture. This was also something the Puritans in particular pioneered in the time of varying Protestant sects under Elizabeth. Puritans were dissatisfied with the reforms of the Church of England, advocating for further purification and attempting to live as strictly according to the scripture of the New Testament as they could, as they were "intensely preoccupied with personal salvation."¹⁴ Shakespeare's work generally does not align with Puritan beliefs, and embraces broad religious attitudes instead of biblical absolutism. The concept is seen in *Merchant of Venice*, not only through this interaction between Shylock and Bassanio, but also through the specific values that the characters embrace. Specifically, Portia in the trial scene of Act IV scene I appeals to the idea of mercy, drawing on Christian notions of divine grace and forgiveness. Shylock demands what he is owed, a pound of Antonio's flesh, since he did not pay back the loan, saying "And by our holy Sabbath I have sworn / To have the due and forfeit of my bond."¹⁵ When the Duke and the others implore Shylock to practice mercy, he proceeds to emphasize the hypocrisy of the Christian characters and the laws of Venice.

"You have among you many a purchased slave,
Which, like your asses and your dogs and mules,
You use in abject and in slavish parts,
Because you bought them: shall I say to you,
Let them be free, marry them to your heirs?
... You will answer
'The slaves are ours: ' so do I answer you:
The pound of flesh, which I demand of him,
Is dearly bought; 'tis mine and I will have it."¹⁶

¹⁴ John Coffey and Paul C. H. Lim, "Introduction," Introduction In *The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism*, edited by John Coffey and Paul C. H. Lim, 1–16, Cambridge Companions to Religion, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 2.

¹⁵ *Merchant of Venice*, 4.1.36-37.

¹⁶ *Merchant of Venice*, 4.1.90-100.

Basically, Shylock is calling out how contradictory it is that this society and these characters preach mercy and forgiveness when they own slaves and expect to have full possession of them. And when Shylock has a contractual possession of Antonio's flesh—just like some have of another human being—he expects the same rights in that case. It is a sharp comment that employs Shylock's usual eye-for-an-eye approach. In a sense, it cancels out the intended poignancy of Portia's proceeding monologue, dulling its effect by pointing out the insincerity of the Christians' holier-than-thou qualities as they preach mercy. By comparing this situation to purchasing a slave, Shylock argues for proceeding in a simple and legal way—Antonio agreed to give him a pound of flesh if he didn't pay back the loan, so therefore it is just what they agreed upon. Portia attempts to thwart this rational approach when she cross-dresses as a lawyer named Balthasar and gives her famous monologue about mercy:

“The quality of mercy is not strain'd,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath
...mercy is above this sceptred sway;
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings
It is an attribute to God himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice.”¹⁷

Portia is embodying Protestant ideals about mercy that were prevalent and highly valued in Elizabethan England. It is not only a criticism of Judaism and Shylock's rationality. It could also be seen as upholding the Protestant value system against the Catholics. It is true that the characters of this play are Catholic; they are in Venice, after all. But Shakespeare is nonetheless evoking the ideals he observed around himself in England. Protestants did indeed believe that forgiveness and mercy “is an attribute to God himself” and that one of the key tenets of living a Godly life was to understand the power of divine grace, for God is capable of unconditional mercy.¹⁸ Portia is urging Shylock to practice

¹⁷ *Merchant of Venice*, 4.1.181-192.

¹⁸ Robert Kolb, “Confessional Lutheran Theology,” Chapter In *The Cambridge Companion to Reformation Theology*, edited by David Bagchi and David C. Steinmetz, 68–79, Cambridge Companions to Religion, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 74.

that. This is a contrast to Shylock's eye-for-an-eye attitude that could also be seen in Catholicism, as Catholics were more focused on performing certain rituals in order to repent for their sins; confession, sacraments, etc. And the Church's authority oversaw this. Was Shakespeare using this victory of mercy and salvation over Shylock's strict adherence to law and justice in order to refute Judaism? Or was he possibly using it to refute Catholicism?

It seems more that Shakespeare was embodying general Protestant values by countering biblical absolutism in a broader religious sense. He is also sparking a debate about justice versus mercy rather than refuting Catholicism. Given the context of the chaotic transition from a Catholic to a Protestant country, it is understandable that one could infer that Shakespeare was using antisemitism as a vehicle for anti-Catholicism. However, when looking at the big picture, Shakespeare was never particularly sympathetic to a certain religion. Rather, he was exploring complicated topics to reflect the dynamic of varying religious identities and ideas in his society. Regardless, Shakespeare still displays a skepticism against confessionalism and doctrinal adherence, encompassing a more flexible approach to personal faith and conviction through his characters. Portia's monologue about mercy shows how *The Merchant of Venice* is leaning more towards a negative view of confessionalism and rigidity. This scene could be interpreted in many ways, but I see it as Shakespeare having a more positive bias towards the Christian characters, at least in this moment. He is not consistently presenting them this way, but this scene is intended to be one of the more impactful turning points where Portia is making an eye-opening statement. It is a moment where Protestant ideals of forgiveness and grace triumph over Shylock and his demands for justice, no matter how cruel the outcome; "he shall merely have justice and his bond."¹⁹

Gratiano's comment when Shylock makes his final exit to get baptized is quite shocking. It is only natural that the cruelty of his language would invoke a sympathetic feeling for Shylock in the audience, despite it being a clever joke.

"In christening shalt thou have two godfathers:

Had I been judge, thou shouldst have had ten more,

To bring thee to the gallows, not the font."²⁰

¹⁹ *Merchant of Venice*, 4.1.333.

²⁰ *Merchant of Venice*, 4.1.393-395.

Basically, Gratiano is likening the two godparents at a baptism to twelve judges executing him. This is a total contrast to Portia's "quality of mercy" speech, as if Shylock should have mercy on Antonio for not paying back the loan, but meanwhile they are practicing the utmost cruelty to Shylock by forcing his conversion. Gratiano's harsh words reveal a hypocrisy in the Christians, a characteristic that Shylock points out repeatedly. It suggests that the mercy they are advocating for is uncompromising. This contrast invites the audience to question whether true justice is being served, and again is an example of Shakespeare's versatility of portraying both religions and pointing out flaws in both sides. And with this comment in particular, Gratiano's unwillingness to accept even forced baptism as a just punishment and desiring a death sentence is a reflection in the broader historical context. In Venice, New Christians were often the ones questioned the most in the inquisition because their validity as Christians was not respected by all. Any evidence of Judaizing, no matter how small, was seen as a threat. This line from Gratiano exemplifies the unaccepting nature of the inquisitors, even though the Venetian inquisition rarely had death sentences nor forced baptisms²¹. Also, this commentary could be applied to the Spanish Inquisition as well, especially because of the severity of how Spain went about it—either forcing Jews to convert to Christianity or expelling them, and then the addition of the *limpieza de sangre* laws to exclude New Christians. The resulting diaspora around Europe was known, and even though on paper there were no Jews in England, Shakespeare had enough knowledge to comment on the situation.

On top of that, England and Spain's rivalry and conflicts in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century added fuel to the attitudes in England regarding Spain. The English fought against Spain from 1585 to 1604, supporting the Dutch rebellion against Spanish rule. The heated rivalry had a lot to do with one monarchy being Catholic and one being Protestant. Thus, in England, Protestant propaganda spread against Spain and Catholicism, causing a stark rise in anti-Spanish sentiments. The ongoing Spanish Inquisition added to this, as many New Christians came from Spain to England. Because of this, "In England, views of the Inquisition were influenced not only by the considerable literature available but also by the belief that serious wrongs were perpetrated daily in Spain against English merchants and sailors."²² So, despite the antisemitism prevalent in England, there was a general disapproval of the Inquisition, largely because of its Catholic tendencies and rumors of trying

²¹ As discussed in the previous chapter, the conversions of Jews to Christianity occurred through a catechism program and social pressures, it was rarely an actual forced sentence.

²²Pauline Croft, "Englishmen and the Spanish Inquisition 1558-1625," *The English Historical Review* 87, no. 343 (1972): 249-68, 1.

Englishmen. This perpetrated a hatred towards Spain. And the anti-Spanish bias even infiltrated into history, affecting how English historians portrayed Spain for centuries.

“The phenomenon paradoxically persisted during a period when Spanish imperial power was waning and cultural and political hegemony was shifting from Spain to France and England, showing that the symbolic power of this set of negative images was aligned in historical circumstances in complicated ways.”²³

Not only did the English frown upon Spain’s Catholicism and Inquisition, but also its imperialism and conquering of the Americas, even though England proceeded to do the same. With the rocky relations between the two empires, the propaganda had an effect on how Spain was perceived. This possibly explains why Shakespeare portrays the trial of Shylock this way, because of the negative views towards Spain and its inquisition in his time. Through Gratiano’s joke and the silence of Shylock that persists after his verdict, Shakespeare is criticizing the inquisition and harshness of the forced conversion. This may contradict my earlier statements about his positive portrayal of Christian mercy, but that’s the point that Shakespeare is trying to make. He is complicated, he contradicts himself, and he writes plays that can be interpreted in many ways.

Another prominent writer contemporary to Shakespeare that produced some form of commentary on religious minorities and conversion was the Spanish Miguel de Cervantes, in *Don Quixote*, which was written in (year). Cervantes uses the story of a character Ricote to comment on the expulsion of Moriscos from Spain. Moriscos were Muslims that were forced to convert to Christianity, or their descendants, in Spain. They were expelled in 1609 due to pressures of Ottoman raids and Morisco revolts. The character Ricote is a Morisco that was expelled from Spain, but returns to Spain to find his family. He is depicted as an honorable man who speaks Castilian well and integrates into Spanish culture. Richard Hitchcock argues in “Cervantes, Ricote, and the Expulsion of the Moriscos” that Cervantes was taking a more ambiguous stance about the Morisco situation because he portrays Ricote as well-liked by the Spanish, receiving hospitality.²⁴ Through Ricote, Cervantes critiques Spain’s religious intolerance by having the Morisco retell his experiences in the more tolerant Germany. However, he seems to remain neutral through his story-telling, or at least he is not explicit in his stance. Hitchcock argues that “The underlying assumption throughout the episode would seem to be that some Moriscos have a right to be in Spain, but the multiple facets of irony with which the story is

²³ Catherine Jaffe et al., *The Black Legend of Spain and Its Atlantic Empire in the Eighteenth Century : Constructing National Identities*, Liverpool university press, 2024, 1.

²⁴ Richard Hitchcock (2004), “Cervantes, Ricote and the expulsion of the Moriscos,” *Bulletin of Spanish Studies: Hispanic Studies and Researches on Spain, Portugal and Latin America*, 81:2, 175-185.

recounted, make it certain that Cervantes' own attitude remains obscured."²⁵ Therefore, it can be concluded that like Shakespeare, Cervantes' approach to depicting the current events was nuanced and his characterization complex. This was Cervantes' way of engaging with a sensitive topic, and while Shakespeare's intentions are often unclear he too was writing Shylock with a certain ambiguity in order to provoke his audience to contemplate the topic of religious persecution against Jews and Muslims, without a certain agenda.

There is another aspect of Elizabethan culture that is reflected throughout *Merchant of Venice* and Shakespeare's plays in general that has not been addressed yet in this thesis, and that is the religious syncretism of Judaism and Christianity. Frances Yates, in her book *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*, argues that the dominant culture of Elizabethan England was that of the occult—a spiritual connection to magic and supernatural powers, often related to and mixed with Christianity. And she specifically addresses the Christian Cabala, which is a Christianized version of the Jewish Cabala, which is a mystical tradition that seeks to explain nature, derived from Hebrew teachings. She says that the Cabala teachings began to integrate with Christianity through Renaissance Florentine thought, specifically from philosopher Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. When Pico came across this Cabala tradition, which descended from original Hebrew wisdom, he used it to prove Christianity, particularly that Jesus was the Messiah.²⁶ According to Yates, “through Pico's introduction of Christian Cabala, a contemporary and modern Jewish movement affected the development of the European mind and soul.”²⁷ First of all, this had implications for the Jewish community in Florence because as we know, the city became a center for intellectual and cultural exchanges. And when Florence established the ghetto under Cosimo I, the Jewish residents found themselves in a society where their own mystical traditions were being used in Christian circles, even as they were discriminated against. So, the Jewish community certainly also had an impact on the intellectual development in Florence, and from there the “Cabalist writings had flooded into Venice and other parts of Italy through the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492.”²⁸ These diasporas and the cultural traditions they brought with them spread through the rest of Europe too, even London. This just goes to show how the mobility of religious ideas

²⁵ Hitchcock, 185.

²⁶ Yates, 19.

²⁷ Yates, 22.

²⁸ Yates, 29.

can influence the culture of various communities, combine with other religious traditions, and then make their mark in the literary canon.

Since the expulsions in Iberia led to more contact between Jews and Christians, the ideas of the Cabala began to fuse with Christianity and justify Christian beliefs. Yates argues that *Merchant of Venice* is an allegory for the fusion of the two religious ideas, especially evident in Portia's mercy speech. She says it is a combination of both New and Old Testament laws,²⁹ which is like the Christian Cabala in a sense that it takes practices from both Christianity and Judaism. Furthermore, each character of the play represents a tenet of Cabalist mysticism, and according to Yates, "mercy is not a monopoly of Christians but is enjoined in Jewish law and in Cabalist mysticism."³⁰ This may be true to an extent—mercy is not totally absent from Jewish law—Cabalist mysticism is a more accurate explanation of the various ideologies floating around the *Merchant* characters. Either way, the mercy speech still represents a triumph of Christians over Jews, specifically Shylock, even if it is a fusion of sorts. Even Bottom's "most rare vision" lines³¹ in *Midsummer* exemplify a sort of dream-like mysticism that is present in the Christian Cabala and the occult that dominated Elizabethan England. Shakespeare reflects these ideologies in his plays, especially in *Merchant*, with the tug-of-war between religious ideas.

How did Shakespeare get the idea of writing a play about a Jewish moneylender in Venice? It has been concluded that one of Shakespeare's main literary sources was an Italian novella in a collection called *Il Pecorone* by Ser Giovanni Fiorentino, written in the 14th century. This story even included the city of Belmont, where Portia is choosing her male suitor through caskets in *Merchant*.³² The story of *Il Pecorone* is about Giannetto, who is an equivalent to Bassanio, who is pursuing a woman in Belmont (like Portia) and puts all of his money down on a ship that does not work out, and ends up having to borrow money from a Jewish merchant who makes the same negotiation as Shylock—a pound of flesh. John Hale in "'The Merchant of Venice and 'Il Pecorone,' or, Can Course-Study Resolve the Question of Shylock?" compares the two stories and attempts to understand Shylock's role in the play. One of the biggest differences that Hale points out between Shylock and the

²⁹ Yates, 128.

³⁰ Yates, 129.

³¹ *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 4.1.200.

³² Francis Griffin Stokes, *Who's Who in Shakespeare: Characters, Names, and Plot Sources in the Plays and Poems*, Bracken Books, 1996.

un-named Jewish character in *Il Pecorone* is the motives and characterization.³³ Shakespeare takes a large step further than Fiorentino by creating a personality and character traits for Shylock, and portraying his motives for the pound of flesh in detail, especially with the “Hath not a Jew eyes” speech. Shylock also points out the hypocrisy of the Christian characters, and sticks to his own principles. Hale argues that Shakespeare’s heavy expansion of the Jewish moneylender character is done through Biblical references that “shape Shylock’s character more than others’, and to explain rather than excuse it.”³⁴ So Shylock’s ambiguity is maintained, but his motives and values are explored and used to explain his behaviors and resentment towards the others. It can be concluded that *Il Pecorone* simply provided the baseline story structure for Shakespeare, with its Jewish character having little depth. Shakespeare took from this plot and gave depth to Shylock and other characters, enhancing the complexity of it. This way, *Merchant* was influenced by many of the contemporary attitudes of his time, not just *Il Pecorone*, which was employed as a plotline to allow him to carry over his ideas as he created an early modern drama.

There are a few hypotheses of other influences, Yates’ being that he was responding to his contemporary Christopher Marlowe’s *Jew of Malta*. She says that “Barrabas, in *Jew of Malta*, is an object of hatred and disgust while Shylock was presented as more complex and oftentimes humanized, and the antisemitism which drove his desire for a pound of Antonio’s flesh was demonstrated frequently.”³⁵ Yates claims that this makes *Merchant* a reply to Marlowe and not antisemitic. While she has a point about Shakespeare portraying the Christian characters’ antisemitic behavior in a negative light, this does not make *Merchant* simply a clapback to Marlowe’s antisemitism. In reality, Shakespeare was continuing the tradition of writing a play with a Jewish antagonist but decided to make him more complex and evoke moments of sympathy. But there are also enough moments that demonize Shylock as well. It is not simply a totally antisemitic nor totally philosemitic play.

Alongside Marlowe’s *Jew of Malta*, there were other factors that could have influenced Shakespeare’s writing of *Merchant*.

“Since the Jewish community had been expelled from England at the end of the thirteenth century, few early modern English men and women would have had contact with openly practicing Jews. Yet a small number of

³³ John K. Hale (1973), “The Merchant of Venice and ‘Il Pecorone,’ or, Can Course-Study Resolve the Question of Shylock?”, *Journal of the Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association*, 40:1, 271-283, 275.

³⁴ Hale, 279.

³⁵ Yates, 127.

observant Jews, secretly observing converts from Judaism, and full converts did reside in England during the time Shakespeare wrote. Furthermore, English travelers encountered Jews abroad and a number of texts circulated in the period describing European Jewish communities”³⁶

So even though there were officially no Jews in England since the 13th century, there were some converts who publicly, and maybe even privately, practiced Christianity. This was one of the several ways in which the English were exposed to Judaism. Through this limited view, along with their devout adherence to Protestantism, they constructed their own definition of what the Jewish identity was. It was a self-fashioning, as Greenblatt has coined it,³⁷ to distinguish themselves from what they considered other. Theological discourse often constructed Jewish identity from their point-of-view. The general view of Elizabethan England was that Jews were the antithesis of Christians.³⁸ When it came to Protestant-Catholic debates, both sides would argue that the other was similar to Judaism. So Christians in England did not have a very well-rounded perspective on Judaism, using it as a way to argue the truths of Christianity. This is evident in *Merchant* too, and “ultimately the ideas about Jews serve the interests of the dominant Christian culture that creates them.”³⁹ *Merchant* not only portrays the Elizabethan ideologies of Shakespeare’s time, but also challenges the audience to reflect on these underlying narratives that they have created about Jews.

The last factor that most likely influenced Shakespeare’s perception of Jews and his depiction in *Merchant of Venice* was the trial of Roderigo Lopez, the personal doctor to Elizabeth who also possessed many diplomatic roles. His trial and execution caught the attention of all of England. The article “The Merchant of Padua?” by Dennj Solera breaks down what we know of the journey that Lopez took in order to investigate whether or not Shakespeare used him as inspiration for Shylock, and whether or not Lopez was a student at the University of Padua.⁴⁰ This article was helpful in making sense of how the mobility and diasporas of people can have such an impact. Solera tells the story of how Lopez was born of a prominent Portuguese Jewish family in 1517 who was forced to convert to Christianity due to the inquisition. From examining the timeline of Lopez’ travels and reading the

³⁶ M. Lindsay Kaplan, “*The Merchant of Venice*, Jews, and Christians,” Chapter In *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Religion*, edited by Hannibal Hamlin, 168–83, Cambridge Companions to Literature, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, 168.

³⁷ Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, University of Chicago Press, 1984.

³⁸ Kaplan, 171.

³⁹ Kaplan, 181.

⁴⁰ Dennj Solera, “The Merchant of Padua? The Doctorate of Roderigo Lopez and its Importance for the Shakespearean Shylock,” in “Annali di Storia delle università italiane, Rivista semestrale,” 2/2021, pp. 203-221.

graduation records of the university, Solera inferred that Lopez studied in Padua for his doctorate, according to a Latin name that was awfully similar to his.⁴¹ From this, Solera concluded that Roderigo studied in Padua because it was part of the Venetian Republic and therefore more tolerant of Jews than Portugal. Lopez then went to England from there to be the personal doctor for the queen, making a decent salary for his skills. It caused some paranoia, “and he ended up being accused numerous times of being a Marrano and plotting murder conspiracies, despite his baptism and his loyalty to the Crown.”⁴² This allegation was even passed around in a pamphlet.⁴³ Lopez then gained an international diplomatic role due to his fluency in many languages. Somebody must have been threatened by his success to resort to this measure, but after trial, he was sentenced to death in 1594. It is doubtful that Lopez was actually plotting to poison the queen, as he and Elizabeth had a good relationship and he lived well.

Many, including Solera, say that the Lopez trial prompted Shakespeare to write the *Merchant of Venice*, which was written within four years of his execution. This is a valid explanation because the trial was well-known around London, and if it’s true that Lopez attended the University of Padua, he “had direct dealings with the Serenissima, in the course of which he could well have got to know people, customs, sayings, intellectual stances, culture, scientific work, and much more.”⁴⁴ With Shakespeare’s high interest in Venetian culture and society, five of his plays being set in Italy, and two in Venice itself, it makes sense that he would take interest in Lopez and his trial. Lopez and Shylock have many similarities, being unjustly sentenced to death in one case and subjected to enforced baptism in the other. Both men insisted on their innocence, but the system was against them. I argue that Shylock’s verdict of forced baptism is a metaphorical death of Shylock because the Christian characters take away nearly everything from him—not just his possessions and all that he has achieved, but his religious identity as well. His last words of the play are:

“I pray you, give me leave to go from hence;

I am not well: send the deed after me,

And I will sign it.”⁴⁵

⁴¹ Solera, 205.

⁴² Solera, 208.

⁴³ *Leicester’s Commonwealth: The Copy of a Letter Written by a Master of Art of Cambridge*, London, 1584.

⁴⁴ Solera, 218.

⁴⁵ *Merchant of Venice*, 4.1.390-392.

Compared to Roderigo Lopez' alleged final words before his execution, these are not particularly grand. Lopez said, "I loved the Queen much more than I've ever loved Jesus Christ" as he was escorted to the gallows.⁴⁶ Lopez is stating his utmost devotion to the Queen while maybe revealing that he was not as Christian as he tried to present himself as. This line is striking and impactful. But Shylock's last words are laden with resignation and despair, reflecting defeat. Shakespeare strategically takes Shylock away from the stage, and his silence in the rest of the play is louder than any of the other characters' lines. And before this, he says, "I am content," expressing an acceptance of the fact that his dignity has been stripped away. He was not genuinely content, but soon realized that he was powerless; there was nothing he could do anymore. Lopez was more indignant to the end. Shakespeare's portrayal of Shylock's verdict echoes the unjust nature of the Lopez situation by capturing the drama of the situation and the harsh realities of the way religious minorities are often sentenced. By concluding Shylock's story with such muted resignation, Shakespeare is trying to make a point about the treatment of Jews at this time, and Lopez' story certainly provoked something in him to write about it.

Shakespeare's inspiration and influence in writing *Merchant of Venice* came from a multitude of factors—the religious and cultural ideas that surrounded him, other works of literature, and the trial of the Queen's doctor. And there was the additional factor of the English's fascination with Venice. Leo Salinger argues that Venetian society was a projection of London because the English often "concentrate rather on the idea of Venice as an aristocratic republic and cosmopolitan center of capitalism, with her exceptional freedom for strangers and her exceptional attraction for travelers in search of sophistication."⁴⁷ Like the image that the English had of Jews, they also created an image in their head of the city of Venice. London, like Venice, was a cosmopolitan city participating in international trade, as well as trade with the East. So when they saw a city with similar qualities as well as a diverse population, there was a particular interest and captivation. Shakespeare definitely saw Venice as an anomaly, hence his many plays taking place in the Venetian Republic. Now that we have investigated the cultural context of the time in which *Merchant* was written, it is worthwhile to dive into the character of Shylock and what he represents, and the historical implications for Elizabethan and Venetian society alike.

⁴⁶ Furdell, *The Royal*, cit., pp 80-81, cited in *Merchant of Padua?*, 209.

⁴⁷ Leo Salinger, "The Idea of Venice in Shakespeare and Ben Jonson," in *Shakespeare's Italy: Functions of Italian locations in Renaissance Drama*, Manchester University Press, (1993), 173.

II.2. The Portrayal of Shylock and his Allegorical Importance

Shylock stands as one of the most complex and enigmatic characters in literature, and he is one of the most well-known Jewish characters in early modern drama and most of the literary canon up to today. Far from being a mere antagonist, he embodies an array of themes that reflect and challenge the dynamics of his time. Through his portrayal, Shakespeare brings up discussions of identity, religion, and humanity, presenting Shylock as a figure caught between roles of villain and victim, the interpretation largely up to the audience. We must examine him alongside the history because it uncovers a profound commentary on the concept of the religious tensions in such a pivotal era in history. It significantly enhances our understanding of the social dynamics of early modern Venice. His story, under the guise of a comedy, is a tragedy at the end of the day. And Shylock is an allegory for the complicated nature of Christian-Jewish relations, antisemitism, and inquisition in early modern Europe. Viewing history through this literary lens of character analysis is vital in order to have a well-rounded understanding of the cultural and societal implications of religious persecution.

This section will discuss his portrayal not just as a stereotypical figure of Jewishness, but as a mirror reflecting the fears and prejudices of the Christian majority, as well as pointing out the hypocrisies of them and their antisemitism. It will also scrutinize some of the biblical allusions and symbolism that Shakespeare includes throughout *Merchant of Venice*. Sussanah Heschel, in “From Jesus to Shylock,” says that “Shylock’s Jewishness is signified in the play not through his faith or practice, but as constructed by a Christian theological narrative that is dedicated to its eradication—and he knows it well.”⁴⁸ It is true that in *Merchant*, Shylock is not written openly practicing Judaism, and that it is based on the Christian construction of what Judaism is. This goes back to the phenomenon mentioned in the previous section of how Protestants in Elizabethan England created their own definition of what they thought Jews were in order to distinguish Jews from themselves. Shylock embodies a Christian-constructed narrative of Judaism that sees Judaism as the antithesis to Christianity, even an attribute of the devil—“the very devil incarnal.”⁴⁹

Shylock can be analyzed not only as an allegory for the Jewish experience in Venice but also the New Christian experience in Venice. As we know, most of the inquisition trials we looked at were from New Christians, who usually received a heavier amount of scrutiny due to the uncertainty whether

⁴⁸ Sussanah Heschel, “From Jesus to Shylock: Christian Supersessionism and ‘The Merchant of Venice,’” *The Harvard Theological Review*, pp. 407-431 (2006), 425.

⁴⁹ *Merchant of Venice*, 2.2.23.

they were abiding to Christianity or secretly practicing Judaism. And this phenomenon of New Christians was fairly new due to the inquisition, and Christians of early modern Europe had to reckon with this new identity. And since there were allegedly some New Christians present in Shakespeare's England, like Roderigo Lopez, this fear of a "Jew concealed in the theological appearance of a Christian"⁵⁰ was relevant at his time. Heschel explains that the concern Christians had then was: How was it possible for someone of Jewish blood and ancestry to be a true Christian? They questioned the legitimacy of baptism, which is clear from the inquisition records we reviewed in Chapter 1. Although Shylock is not a New Christian until after he leaves the stage for the last time, his presence among the Christians—a foreign presence—evokes a similar image of what was deemed as a threat. He represents the coexistence of religions, something that went against the perceived order to Christians. And he especially represents an outsider experience of feeling alienated from the rest of society. An example of this is when Shylock criticizes Antonio for asking for a loan after the way he and his Christian comrades have treated him.

"You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog,

And spit upon my Jewish gaberdine,

And all for use of that which is mine own.

Well then, it now appears you need my help."⁵¹

Shylock is pointing out his outsider status and poor treatment that he receives from these people; not only words but physical harassment as well. It shows how in early modern Venice, just because there was a level of semi-tolerance and inclusion of various religious minorities, this did not mean equal treatment and harmony amongst the different religious groups. Here is a literary example of a very real experience of discrimination, someone considered an alien in a society dominated by one religion. What is noteworthy about Shylock is his insistence on standing up for himself, not afraid to call out the hypocrisy of Antonio and Bassanio. He goes further by asking if they really expect him to say:

"Fair sir, you spit on me on Wednesday last;

You spurn'd me such a day; another time

⁵⁰ Heschel, 409.

⁵¹ *Merchant of Venice*, 1.3.106-109.

You call'ed me a dog; and for these courtesies

I'll lend you thus much moneys'?"⁵²

His sarcastic tone embodies his stubborn and bitter personality; he has many reasons to be resentful, so he is. Shylock's so-called villainy and lack of sympathy for the other characters is an expression of the abuses he has suffered as a Jewish man in a Catholic republic. He does not hesitate to criticize the other characters for this. As the outsider of the play—a Jewish man interacting within a Christian circle—he is an allegorical symbol not just of Jews in Christian Venice, but the concept of a New Christian. This is because New Christians often adopted the appearances of Christianity on the outside but still inwardly and privately practiced Judaism. It was like a double life, and Shylock's placement and representation can be equated to this duality.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, Jessica is also a representation of the New Christian experience because of her conversion in order to marry Lorenzo. We examined her conversation with Launcelot and Lorenzo, about how she technically is not a true Christian by blood. She is nonetheless passionate about her newfound religion. This conversion, along with her robbing her father of all his possessions, is the ultimate betrayal of Shylock and of her upbringing under Judaism. Her reasons for conversion seem to be simply because of love, to be able to marry Lorenzo. Referring to her anger towards her father, she says:

“But though I am a daughter to his blood,
I am not to his manners. O Lorenzo,
If thou keep promise, I shall end this strife,
Become a Christian, and thy loving wife.”⁵³

Jessica seems to be acting upon some need for rebellion against her father. She is an example of a Jew who willingly converts to Christianity without duress, except maybe the pressure from her lover. Like Brian Pullan mentions, historically, a lot of the converts from Judaism to Christianity in Venice were not from forced conversion, but were from some circumstances that drew them to conversion for their own advantage.⁵⁴ And many, having been baptized early in life or even from birth but with Jewish

⁵² *Merchant of Venice*, 1.3.120-124.

⁵³ *Merchant of Venice*, 2.3.17-20.

⁵⁴ Pullan, 243.

parents, were truly practicing Christianity. But as we know, they were never truly accepted into Christian society, hence the jokes that Launcelot made. But Lorenzo seems to be generally unbothered by her Jewish ancestry, so long as she converts. And in Act V the couple is happy and harmonious, Lorenzo rejoicing,

“Sit Jessica. Look how the floor of heaven

is thick inlaid with patines of bright gold:

There’s not the smallest orb which thou behold’st

But in his motion like an angel sings.”⁵⁵

All of these heavenly metaphors show Lorenzo’s acceptance and embrace of his marriage with Jessica. At the same time, Lorenzo mentions before this various lovers in history that did not have such good endings, like Troilus and Cressida.⁵⁶ This emits a certain lingering feeling of doom, implying that even though the couple is receiving their happy ending, these other couples are on their mind. This may be because of the religious differences; though Jessica converted to Christianity, she will always have Jewish blood, and would not be considered a true Christian by many. I expand on this concept in Chapter 3. At the end of the play, at the sufferance and expense of Shylock, these characters triumph. Lorenzo even receives much of Shylock’s wealth. Overall, Jessica benefits greatly from converting to Christianity, which can connect back to the many benefits converts received in early modern Venice as well.

Meanwhile, Shylock is suffering great losses in many ways. Heschel takes this a step further though, likening Shylock to Jesus because:

“both Jesus and Shylock are figures that negotiate the presence of Jewishness within the Christian realm. Through Jesus, central elements of Judaism’s theology were brought to the heart of Christian theology, while through Shylock, the alien Jew became resident in Christian Venice.”⁵⁷

This again relates to the existence of Judaism within the Christian world, and how society reckoned with the fairly new concept of religious diversity. Jesus and Shylock are displayed as opposites, one being a martyr and the other being a Shakespearean comedic villain, but there is

⁵⁵ *Merchant of Venice*, 5.1.57-61.

⁵⁶ *Merchant of Venice*, 5.1.3-6.

⁵⁷ Heschel, 408.

something strikingly similar about what they represent and the space they hold. Shylock could be considered a Christ-like figure, but not because he sacrificed himself for the good of humanity. It is much more complicated than that. Ultimately, Shylock is a scapegoat for the errors and struggles of the other characters, and for this, he has his identity, daughter, and property stripped from him, and he is forcibly baptized, which could even be seen as a metaphorical crucifixion. This is because he has everything taken from him against his will, and has to suffer at the expense of others. Something about the public setting of his trial and the spectacle it produces also has a crucifixion-like quality to it. The loss of his identity is like a death of the character, especially as his silence follows in the rest of the play. The fault of the large gamble that Antonio made and the debt that resulted was pitted onto Shylock, and he had to suffer for it. Additionally, he was challenging the views of Venetian Christian society and ultimately being marginalized and forced to sacrifice everything he had for the mistakes of the others. His forced conversion is his sacrifice while the Christian characters, even after the debt they accrued, get to walk away free, then getting married and living happily ever after.

The Christ-like figure is a common archetype in fiction to make a statement about some social issue and display a character that possesses a prominent moral compass, sacrificing something for the greater good. The impact that Christ figures have in drama especially can really be strong. Take John Proctor in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, whose trial and execution are a statement against the injustice and paranoia of the Salem Witch Trials—or in reality, the Red Scare of the post-war United States.⁵⁸ The two characters are nothing like each other. However, when looking at Proctor's demise next to Shylock's, some interesting parallels can be drawn that speak to the significance of the Christ figure in drama, and what it implies for the historical moment. The intense final scene of *The Crucible* shows the court of Salem requesting its prisoners to confess to witchcraft in order to save their (the court's) image, even though those confessions would be false. Proctor, upon being pressured to sign a confession that would be hung on the church door, eventually refuses. For context, he had had an affair with Abigail and admitted his wrongdoings for that, but he was an honest man. He was not willing to lie because he wanted to preserve his integrity and reputation, as well as the reputation of other prisoners that the court was pressuring him to accuse of witchcraft. When Danforth asks him why he won't confess, Proctor responds:

⁵⁸ Arthur Miller (1968), *The Crucible: A Play in Four Acts*, Penguin Books.

“Because it is my name! Because I cannot have another in my life! Because I lie and sign myself to lies! Because I am not worth the dust on the feet of them that hang! How may I live without my name? I have given you my soul; leave me my name!”⁵⁹

These gripping words show how Proctor is insistent on maintaining his integrity until the end, even if it meant he would be hanged. He is also not willing to throw the other prisoners under the bus. And in the Salem Witch Trials, similar to most religious inquisition trials, admitting guilt was one of the only ways to avoid punishment. Since he wouldn't do that, he was hanged, sacrificing his life for not just his own reputation but for his family and community, refusing to continue the lies and hysteria spreading around Salem. When Proctor says, ‘I have given you my soul; leave me my name!’ he is expressing how he has nothing left anymore; they had taken everything away from him. Shylock, though an obviously different situation, is left with the same feeling since his identity and belongings have been stripped from him.

“Nay, take my life and all; pardon not that:

You take my house, when you do take the prop

That doth sustain my house; you take my life,

When you do take the means whereby I live.”⁶⁰

Shylock and Proctor clearly value different things, Shylock's values being perhaps a bit more materialistic. But what is important to point out how both men had nearly everything taken away from them due to their respective trials and persecutions. They end up sacrificing their lives or identities for the sake of others. While Shylock's is more forced upon him, Shylock was also presented with the choice of giving mercy to Antonio, but he was adamant about adhering to the agreement that he and Antonio had made—“'tis mine and I will have it!”⁶¹ Meanwhile, Proctor was adamant about his integrity. So, Proctor's transformation from a flawed man to a figure of moral clarity and strength mirrors the Christ-like narrative of suffering leading to spiritual redemption. Shylock, on the other hand, is more complex, due to his portrayal as the semi-villain. He refused to practice mercy, a godly trait, so he was punished. Shylock's moral compass is definitely subject to interpretation, and while Proctor made mistakes as well, he is very clearly the hero at the end of *The Crucible*.

⁵⁹ Miller, *The Crucible*, 124.

⁶⁰ *Merchant of Venice*, 4.1.369-373.

⁶¹ *Merchant of Venice*, 4.1.100.

Why compare the two? Though vastly different, these two men offer profound reflections on questions of integrity, innocence, and justice through their embodiments of the Christ-like archetype. Shylock, as a Jew in a Christian-dominated Venice, and Proctor, as a dissenting voice against the Puritanical hysteria of Salem, both experience the harsh consequences of being outsiders. Their trials and sentences are metaphorical crucifixions that resulted in unreasonable impositions from religious authorities. Shylock's experiences represent the broader historical moment of early modern inquisition and Proctor's represent the damaging effects of McCarthyism and anti-communist trials in the U.S., though under the guise of witchcraft trials. By giving them Christ-like characteristics, Shakespeare and Miller effectively portray a dramatic image to the audience of one of the most important religious figures, allowing them to contemplate the messages they are trying to convey. Juxtaposing Shylock and John Proctor in this analysis shows how literary works across different time periods reflect universal themes of persecution and marginalization. It also brings up the point that even roughly 350 years after the period we are focusing on, this phenomenon was still relevant. Persecution resulting from paranoia about religious or ideological differences has always been a recurring issue historically. When these historical phenomena are addressed in literary drama, we receive a better understanding of the societal implications of their relative historical moments.

The complexity of Shylock's character is what makes him such a well-known and heavily discussed Jewish character in drama. He is ambiguous, yet the "most sympathetic Jew in Shakespeare and in all of Elizabethan drama."⁶² Shakespeare juxtaposes Shylock's unwavering hatred for the Christian characters with the raw feeling of alienation and suffering that he is experiencing. This way, there is an explanation and origin for his villainous behavior, and there is a nuance to him that allows the audience to feel sympathy for him but at the same time despise him. Shylock is rational and no-nonsense, refusing to stand down when asked to have mercy for Antonio after he did not pay back the loan. Because they agreed to it, Shylock is determined to take a pound of flesh from Antonio. This behavior could be perceived as ruthlessly homicidal. But when we look at some other moments where Shakespeare lets the audience into his personal experiences and explanations, there is more of an understanding of his motivations. This is apparent in his famous monologue in Act 3 Scene 1 when Shylock is wondering why Antonio and Bassanio have treated him so poorly.

"I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes?"

⁶² Maurice Charney, "Shylock as Villain," *The Shakespeare Newsletter*, Winter 2009/2010, 85.

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...If you prick us,
do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not
laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if
you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are
like you in the rest, we will resemble you in
that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his
humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew,
what should his sufferance be by Christian
example? Why, revenge. The villainy you teach
me, I will execute; and it shall go hard but I
will better the instruction.”⁶³

This monologue can evoke a plethora of responses. First, it humanizes Shylock when he emphasizes the many human experiences that happen to both Jews and Christians alike, such as bleeding, laughing, and having the same organs. He addresses that at the end of the day, we are all made of the same flesh and deserve the same treatment. This challenges the dehumanized image that many Elizabethan Protestants had of Jews at this time, especially from their very limited perspectives. And most early modern dramas at this time displayed their Jewish characters simply as villains or laughingstocks without any compassion. So this was a stark contrast to the status quo, having such an emotional speech about the struggles of being discriminated against as a Jew in a Christian-dominated society. Second, it explains his desire for revenge. Shylock’s approach to dealing with interreligious conflict and marginalization is the “eye-for-an-eye” approach. We can see this when he says, “The villainy you teach me, I will execute.” He does not take the high road; he simply wants to behave towards the Christians the way they behave towards him. To a Protestant audience, his lack of

⁶³ *Merchant of Venice*, 3.1.50-63.

forgiveness and mercy could possibly take away their sympathy for him that they may have felt at the beginning of the monologue. But logically, he so eloquently explains his motivations for exacting revenge upon Antonio and not feeling remorse for him and his friends. This speech allows us to see Shylock in a light we had not seen before; it expresses his frustrations, his melancholy, and his justification of his behavior.

This speech, when applied to the historical context of the treatment of Jews in Venice, provides a profound commentary on the shared humanity of any religious group against the backdrop of religious persecution. Under the mechanisms of control carried out by the republic, like inquisition, ghettoization, and censorship, along with the social adversity between religious groups, the Jewish population did not always have a voice and their needs were often neglected. Shakespeare, though not an expert on the state of the Venetian Republic, was able to acknowledge the feelings of marginalization that many groups faced during this time of religious turmoil. Shylock's defiant and vengeful tone embodies the pain of these groups and creates a commentary about the hypocrisy of the Christian institutions and people.

But as we know, Venice was comparatively one of the more tolerating cities in early modern Europe when it came to foreign populations. Shylock is a complex and nuanced character, like Venice. Therefore, Shylock's intricate nature serves as an allegory for the complicated and multifaceted characteristics of early modern Venice. Just as Shylock is both the victim and the villain, Venice too was a city of paradoxes, offering refuge and economic opportunity to Jews while simultaneously confining them within the ghetto and subjecting them to many restrictions and discrimination. The duality of Venice's treatment of the Jewish residents mirrors the conflicting portrayal of Shylock that makes him both sympathetic and evil. Him being a Christ-like (and even Proctor-like) figure adds another layer of complexity by framing him as a different type of martyr that is sacrificed for the faults of the others.

II.3. *The Merchant of Venice* in Cultural Memory

Like many of Shakespeare's works, *Merchant of Venice* is an important piece of the literary canon that contributes to the cultural understanding of not only its contemporary moment, but of future generations. Its relevance never seems to fade, and performances of the play speak to their own moments in history. With different time periods, its meaning and interpretation is adjusted accordingly.

Merchant contributes to the conversation about social conflicts between religious groups and general humanity, but it also adds to the understanding we have about the ghetto of Venice. In *The Venice Ghetto: A Memory Space that Travels*, Amanda Sharick says:

“I consider both the Ghetto and Shakespeare’s play as fundamentally ambivalent documents of Western civilization, having been both instruments of intolerance and catalysts for cross-cultural understanding, vehicles of antisemitism and portals of knowledge of and sympathy for the Jews.”⁶⁴

There is a duality present in both the play and the ghetto. It is certainly true that *Merchant* both perpetuates and criticizes antisemitism through its mix of negative stereotypes and sympathetic moments. This duality can also be seen in the ghetto of Venice, as it was both a place of confinement and marginalization, but also where Jewish families thrived and grew their culture, and they were able to practice Judaism and contribute to the economy of Venice without being expelled. The Venetian ghetto, established in 1516, symbolizes this paradox. On one hand, it was an instrument of control, intending to minimize the perceived threat Jews posed to Christian society. However, the ghetto became a center for Jewish life and culture, and Jews earned a degree of respect because the Venetian economy relied on them for their contacts and trade connections with the East as well as their moneylending and other skills. Basically, they were restricted but left alone for the most part, making Venice one of the more popular destinations for the Jewish diaspora in Europe. Additionally, *Merchant* has been interpreted and reinterpreted over the centuries, and its various productions over time are a testament to that. The play’s continued adaptations show its enduring relevance. Overall, the paradoxes present in the play compel us to confront uncomfortable truths and challenge our perceptions, while keeping the memory alive of the Venetian ghetto.

Merchant of Venice is one of those plays where the situation is vague and by the end the audience is left unsatisfied. Though there is not too much scholarship analyzing *Merchant* as a “problem play,” it is usually mentioned in passing as loosely fitting the category. A problem play deals with social issues in an ambiguous manner that does not end with a resolution, nor does it fit in the typical genres like comedy or tragedy. When looking at the various definitions and how the categorization has evolved over time, the play does in fact fit the category “problem play.” There is a general consensus that *All’s Well that Ends Well*, *Measure for Measure*, and *Troilus and Cressida* are definitely problem plays, something that was established by Frederick Boas in *Shakespeare and his*

⁶⁴ Chiara Camarda et al., *The Venice Ghetto: A Memory Space That Travels*, Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2022, 84.

Predecessors. He says, “Thus throughout these plays we move along dim untrodden paths, and at the close our feelings is neither of simple joy nor pain.”⁶⁵ These are problem plays because after the curtains close, “we are left to interpret their enigmas at best we may.”⁶⁶ It also is a different category because though they are technically comedies, they contain elements of tragedy or psychological drama, with dark and uncomfortable situations. That being said, *Merchant of Venice* fits this definition, especially because it presents two sides of an issue with no exact display of a better side. Neil Rhodes argues that as Shakespeare studies have developed, the definition of a problem play has expanded too much, at the fault of new historicists and postmodern critics. This is because they have apparently categorized any Shakespeare work as a problem play simply because it’s problematic, when really a lot of it boils down to “the controversiality programmed by Renaissance rhetoric.”⁶⁷ Renaissance literature has a contradictory quality, often derived from Greek drama, and many of them dramatize a moral or political topic. Rhodes focuses on similar plays as Boas but develops the idea further to relate it back to Greek drama, and though he only briefly mentions *Merchant*, his categorization could be applied to it as well because “the central issue is the dramatic construction of moral ambiguity.”⁶⁸

Given these various definitions from Shakespearean scholars, it can be concluded that *Merchant* would fit under the term “problem play” because of its ambiguity, unresolved moral questions, uncomfortable themes, and the fact that it cannot properly fit into a genre. This is important to address because in the case of problem plays, their performance can profoundly affect the message it sends. Looking at how various productions of *Merchant* have developed over the centuries is central to understanding the relevance of the play to historical studies and its contemporary moment. It brings with it the memory of the ghetto of Venice.

Its hard to say exactly how *Merchant of Venice* was performed in Elizabethan England, but we know that most plays at that time with a Jewish character usually played them as a laughingstock with a fake nose and wig. This was common up until the end of the nineteenth century, when a director and actor of the name Henry Irving desired to portray Shylock in a more honorable and sympathetic light at the Lyceum Theater of London. This production began in 1879 and ran for 250 performances, Irving’s

⁶⁵ Frederick Boas, *Shakespeare and his Predecessors*, New York: C. Scribner’s sons, 1904, 345.

⁶⁶ Boas, 354.

⁶⁷ Neil Rhodes, “The Controversial Plot” *Declamation and the Concept of the ‘Problem Play,’*” *The Modern Language Review*, vol. 95 (Jul. 2000), pp. 609-622, 610.

⁶⁸ Rhodes, 609.

Shylock even going on tour in North America.⁶⁹ According to reviews and observations about Irving's performance as Shylock, he made him have a more "pleasant business manner"⁷⁰ when conducting the business exchange with Bassanio, rather than a villainous demeanor. This way, "despite his evidently evil intentions, Shylock's dignity in the face of the Christians' arrogance quickly won the sympathy of the audience. His rebuke to Antonio for past insults was restrained, and could earn applause."⁷¹ Irving played Shylock in a way that allowed the audience to understand him, sympathize with him, and feel somewhat of a disdain towards the Christian characters. This production of *Merchant* spanned years and made an impact on the way audiences perceived Shylock. In this way, the play was less antisemitic than previous productions. It shows the malleability of the play, confirming that it could be portrayed in different types of light. Additionally, it confirms its problem play qualities because at the end, the Christian characters "rejoice in the last, apparently comic act of the play, the bell of Shakespeare's irony tolls for them. It is their tragedy too, but they do not know it."⁷² This feeling at the end is an echo of its inability to fit into a genre, the vague and uncomfortable sensations being experienced by the audience.

One of the most infamous productions of *Merchant of Venice* came during the height of antisemitism in the Second World War, a stark contrast from Irving's production. Under Nazi Germany, every form of media was controlled by Joseph Goebbels's ministry of propaganda, including the theatrical arts. And at the onset of the Third Reich, productions of *Merchant* waned a bit, probably because there was a worry of displaying Shylock in a positive light.⁷³ But eventually, the *Reichsdramaturgie*, which oversaw stage production in the Reich, figured out a way to perform *Merchant* according to their agenda. The production took place in Vienna's Burgtheater in 1943, and through it, "This *Merchant* has become iconic in a negative sense as the most glaring example of how a Shakespeare play can be 'hijacked' or, as it were, 'cannibalized' for insidious propaganda purposes."⁷⁴ They turned Shakespeare's nuanced play into an antisemitic production in order to advance and affirm the Nazi agenda, even far into the regime. The reviews reported that Werner Krauss, who played

⁶⁹ Alan Hughes, "Henry Irving's Tragedy of Shylock," *Educational Theatre Journal* 24, no. 3 (1972): 249–64, 249.

⁷⁰ Hughes, 254.

⁷¹ Hughes, 254.

⁷² Hughes, 264.

⁷³ Ludwig Schnauder, "The Most Infamous Shakespeare Production in History? The Merchant of Venice at Vienna's Burgtheater in 1943." *Shakespeare en devenir [En ligne]*, Shakespeare en devenir, N°9 - 2015, mis à jour le : 28/12/2019.

⁷⁴ Schnauder.

Shylock, dressed so “he looked like one of the vicious caricatures of orthodox Eastern European Jews that could be found in Nazi newspapers or propaganda movies at that time.”⁷⁵ Additionally, this production cut out Shylock’s baptism because his conversion to Christianity would not make sense given that Nazis had a problem with the ethnicity of Jews, something that could not be changed. And naturally, since reviewers did not have much of a choice but to approve of the production, none were critical of the offensive nature of the play.

Overall, the 1943 Burgtheater production of *Merchant* stands as a reminder that art can be distorted to serve oppressive ideologies. By reducing Shylock to a stereotype, they were using Shakespeare to reinforce antisemitic propaganda. This is just an example of how the interpretations of this play have evolved so drastically depending on the historical moment in which it’s brought to life. We cannot overlook the dark aspects of this play that can be used to emphasize certain antisemitic messages. This potential that *Merchant of Venice* has for this sort of production shows how complicated this play really is, especially when it’s contrasted with more modern adaptations that show it in a more philosemitic light. This duality connects back to our perception of the ghetto and the Jewish experience in Venice. These contradictions are present throughout the history of Jews in Venice as well as the evolution of the play.

Michael Radford’s movie adaptation of *Merchant of Venice* from 2004 also embodies the complexities and evolution of the play as well as shows how much the portrayal of Shylock can be determined by the actor, namely, Al Pacino.⁷⁶ His intense performance gives just the right amount of complexity to Shylock. After watching his “Hath not a Jew eyes” speech, one can see that Pacino channels Shylock’s anger in such a raw way, causing the audience to empathize with him and understand why he is so determined to seek revenge. And in the trial scene, Pacino so effectively evokes the shock and devastation that Shylock felt when he was told by Antonio that he “presently become a Christian.” He is already on the floor, told to do so in order to ask mercy from the Duke. But here, once he realizes he will have to convert, he grabs his necklace and bends his head to the ground, releasing these crying grunts. It is clear that he feels his life is being stripped away from him in such a humiliating way as he musters, “I am content.” This scene, along with his speech in Act 3, is so powerful and painful, and one can truly feel the impact of his emotions and experience through

⁷⁵ Schauder.

⁷⁶ *The Merchant of Venice*, directed by Michael Radford (Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer, 2004).

Pacino's performance. Here, there is no other choice but to feel thoroughly upset for Shylock, as most audiences from the 21st century would.

Lastly, the 2016 production of *Merchant of Venice* in the Venetian Ghetto itself is a crucial interpretation that warrants analysis. The project, pioneered by Shakespearean and Jewish Studies scholar Shaul Bassi from The University of Ca' Foscari, is titled *The Merchant 'in' Venice* and was performed on the 500 year anniversary of the construction of the ghetto. It was performed outside, directly in the Campo del Ghetto Nuovo, and they had five different actors playing Shylock, one for each of his five scenes.⁷⁷ Bassi writes that his intentions of this production were about “owning Shakespeare, coping with his disturbing legacy” and “recognizing the public civic function of the Ghetto as a paradigmatic site.”⁷⁸ The goal was to respect the original material while also reclaiming and owning the play, and not just creating a fully sympathetic version of Shylock. The setting spoke for itself, being directly in the campo. The ensemble director said that “Instead of building a stage, we placed the audience on stadium seating at one side of the campo to gaze at the historical facades of the Ghetto, including two of its six synagogues.”⁷⁹ One can only imagine how impactful that setting could be, the cast standing directly within the location in which much history had occurred, and that carries a lot of weight and symbolism regarding antisemitism. This is not only because of the history of ghettoization in early modern Venice, but also because of one of the most visible objects in the Campo del Ghetto Nuovo, which is the Holocaust memorial, dedicated to the residents who were taken by the Nazis. With this more recent history next to them, it adds another dark and more recent memory to the atmosphere.

The image below depicts the final scene, where, instead of the problematic happy marriage scene, the production brings back out all five Shylocks who recite some earlier lines. Then, Jessica bursts into the scene, running away and through the audience, which was “an attempt to escape the smothering confines of the society and laws of property and propriety that have twisted through the play. A look of horror was on her face. Any remaining illusions were shattered.”⁸⁰ This interpretation is particularly impactful because it reframes the comedical ending to bring it back to reality, rather than

⁷⁷ Shaul Bassi and Carol Chillington Rutter, ‘The Merchant in Venice: Shakespeare in the Ghetto,’ *Studi e Ricerche* (10 June 2021), 35.

⁷⁸ Bassi, 35.

⁷⁹ Karen Coonrod and Davina Moss, “Gathering Strangers: Davina Moss in Conversation with Karin Coonrod,” Chapter in “The Merchant in Venice: Shakespeare in the Ghetto,” *Studi e Ricerche* (10 June 2021), 48.

⁸⁰ Frank London, Stefano Nicolao, Peter Ksander, “Collaborative Spectacle: Designing The Merchant in the Ghetto,” Chapter in “The Merchant in Venice: Shakespeare in the Ghetto,” *Studi e Ricerche* (10 June 2021), 95.

discredit the Jewish characters by celebrating the triumph of the Christians, who just exacted cruelty onto Shylock while preaching for mercy. As shown in the image, the word “mercy” was projected onto the walls, allowing the audience to really wonder whether the mercy Portia propagates is appropriately executed. It also brings the history to life within the present, one of the play’s main intentions. It must also be mentioned that the actual forced baptism is not depicted in this production either, but a dramatic exit of Shylock through the audience and ensemble.⁸¹ This production, compared to the others, has a particular significance that ushers *Merchant* and the history surrounding it into the present, allowing the audience to reckon directly with the reality of the Venice Ghetto. It seems like a culmination of all directions, literary and historical, which is quite powerful. As we have discovered, the evolution of the play’s dramatic depiction over the centuries tells us a lot about how the historical moment and attitudes can affect the execution and performance.



“‘Mercy’ projected onto ghetto walls,” Andrea Messana

It remains crucial to emphasize the value of studying *Merchant of Venice* alongside the historical context of the Jewish ghetto and experience in Venice. The play provides us as readers a compelling lens through which to examine the characteristics of religious persecution in early modern Italy as well as the lived experiences of Jews in Venice. By comparing both the dualities in the play, where Shylock is at once villain and victim, with the historical realities of the ghetto and inquisition, we achieve a deeper understanding of the complicated and varied nature of the treatment of Jews at this

⁸¹ Coonrod, 57.

time. The setting of the play is also significant due to the historical establishment of the ghetto and the Venetian policies towards their Jewish population, resulting in an interesting mix of tolerance and control. The representation of Shylock becomes a reflection of the inconsistent approaches of tolerance towards Jews, from exploitation to acceptance. And since *Merchant* can be considered a problem play, its ambiguity makes for a spectrum of interpretations to develop, relevant to the current moment depending on the historical events and contemporary attitudes, like in Nazi Germany versus the 21st century. And when we look back at the context of Elizabethan England and how the overall sentiments were towards Judaism, we can see as well how history shapes literature, as well as how and where Shakespeare got his ideas and inspiration to write *Merchant*. The development over time of how *Merchant* was portrayed in modern theater and film is also telling of how we interpret the history and the play in different periods. This interaction between text and context helps us have a more well-rounded view as we explore this historical moment of religious interaction and persecution in the distinct and complicated Venetian Republic.

Chapter 3: Religious Conversion in Venice and Shakespeare

3.1. Muslim Merchants in Venice

This chapter will go a step further by considering another group that was equally vital to the economic activity of Venice, but were also alienated from the rest of Venetian society, the Muslim merchants. Because Venice was known for its religious diversity, it is necessary to evaluate how the other groups played a role and how they were treated compared to the Jewish inhabitants. This way, we can have a true scope of the characteristics of tolerance and persecution in early modern Venice. The chapter will also analyze Shakespeare's other play set in Venice with a religious minority, *Othello*. *Othello* is a problematic and violent tragedy in which the protagonist, a Moor-converted-Christian and Venetian military leader, is manipulated by Iago, a junior officer, into thinking his wife is having an affair. This leads to dire consequences, and the tragedy deals with a broad set of themes regarding race, religion, and the dynamic between men and women in marriage. *Merchant of Venice* and *Othello* both feature a religious minority of Venice experiencing discrimination and mistreatment while also being extremely flawed individuals themselves, both creating a fascinating commentary on early modern religious persecution.

In order to properly analyze the concept of conversion in both *Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*, it is necessary to discuss the historical context of the Venice in which *Othello* took place, because it is also related to Shylock's Venice, and provides a better understanding of the relationships between various religious groups in Venice. Since the beginning of the Crusades as early as the eleventh century, there had been a negative feeling towards Muslim Turks in Europe, and with the rising power of the Ottoman Empire in the fifteenth century, "the demonization and denigration of Muslim Turks must have resulted from the relative weakness Europeans felt when they compared their society and army to those of Turks."¹ While this demonization was true, Ottoman Turks still populated Venice as it was known for its openness. Venice was a hub of cultural exchange and trade in the sixteenth century, so many Ottoman subjects lived and worked there along with the Jewish diaspora. And "despite these insurmountable differences, both Christian Italians and Muslim Arabs and Turks saw trade as being in their mutual best interest and placed a high priority on maintaining it."² Therefore, despite these

¹ Filiz Barin, "Othello: Turks as 'the Other' in the Early Modern Period," *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 43, no. 2 (2010): 37–58, 43.

² Robert P. Collins, (2004) "Crossing the Gulf: Christian-Muslim Interactions During the Renaissance Era," *Vulcan Historical Review*: Vol. 8, Article 4, 31.

constant fears of Ottomans from the West, the Venetian Republic and Ottoman Empire recognized the benefit of trading in the Mediterranean and did not let their rivalry interfere. According to Robert Collins, the Ottomans and Venetians were always mutually benefitting from each other's ideas and innovations regarding trade and business methods. Additionally, this trade network was highly profitable. For example, "during the second quarter of the fifteenth century, Venice succeeded in imposing a virtual monopoly on the pepper trade and could dictate prices in order to ensure a high profit."³ As we know, Venice's command over maritime trade in the Mediterranean, including all of its territories in the Greek islands, gave it a strong hold in the global economy, which explains why it "pursued a foreign policy that placed trade and economic considerations above all else."⁴ It also explains why domestically, Venice was focused on keeping their foreign merchants and not expelling them for religious differences. Foreign merchants living in Venice were simply too crucial to its success to give up because they were Muslim or Jewish. But the question of integration or separation remained on the radar of the Venetian state well into the sixteenth century.

Following the war of Cyprus, there was an influx of Ottomans who came to Venice. So because of these groups continuing to move to the city to trade, Venice had to figure out what to do with the Ottoman merchants, many of them arriving after the war had ended.⁵ There was a question of where to locate the Turkish merchants, as they also had with the Jewish merchants about sixty years prior. So Francesco Lettino, a Greek trader, proposed to establish some sort of separate neighborhood for the Turks of Venice, saying that they were "staying in different locations, were having sex with Christian women, and, more generally, were ruining Venice's reputation as a good Christian state."⁶ These sentiments are similar to those towards Jews—the fear of religious intermingling was one of the main concerns of the Venetian Christians. There was also clearly that specific bias against Muslim men having sexual relations with Christian women, which is seen as a major threat to the religious stability, and to the woman herself, like the Muslims having power over Christians. It connects to the notions expressed against Othello's marriage with Desdemona, which will be investigated in the next section. Ultimately, Othello did end up having power over Desdemona, expressed through violent domination

³ Collins, 33.

⁴ Collins, 35.

⁵ Stephen Ortega, "Across Religious and Ethnic Boundaries: Ottoman Networks and Spaces in Early Modern Venice," *Mediterranean Studies* 18 (2009): 66–89, 67.

⁶ Ortega, 66.

and murder. In a literary sense, this validates the cultural assumptions and anxieties of the Christian west, in both Venice and England.

The proposal to create a segregated quarter for the Ottoman merchants was accepted in 1574, and the official *Fondaco dei Turchi* was not established until 1621 because it was a process of negotiation. Though it was partially an institutional form of Venetian control over their Muslim population, “these residences were adapted from place to place as a means to help integrate a foreign population.”⁷ Venice still valued their contribution to the economic mercantile industry and strove to prioritize cross-cultural contact, an important aspect of the republic. This meant building residences that would accommodate that population, not necessarily restrict them, especially because these Ottoman merchants had power and influence over their affairs. They were able to negotiate accordingly with the Venetian government. There was also a heavy presence of Venetian merchants in Constantinople, so in order to protect them, they had to protect their Ottoman merchants in Venice.⁸ This meant that there was a clear agreement between the two powers, and there were indeed protection treaties in made in the fifteenth century. With this in mind, both states had to maintain diplomatic relations and protect one another’s populations. It is what made the conditions for Muslim merchants a bit different than those for Jewish merchants. Jewish merchants were valued and encouraged to trade in Venice, but they often came from the Spanish diaspora, not all being Levantine. There was no formal relation with another power, so there was less of an incentive to protect the Jews, therefore confining them to the Ghetto where the conditions were not always ideal.

Another indicator of the more careful approach that the Republic had towards its Muslim population was how they handled cases of insults against Turkish merchants. Venice used a heavy hand when it came to censorship and language. Two factors went into this: First, because of the Counter Reformation policies and presence of Protestants. Second, because of the heavy foreign population. Venice was monitoring and punishing any form of blasphemy against Jesus Christ, the saints, and the relics, more so than other cities because of their desire for control and stability in a very cosmopolitan and open city. This method of regulating speech was “a means by which the Venetian State sought to define itself and its residents in a moment of intense demographic change.”⁹ Basically, it was an anxiety about outsiders tainting what many nobles thought to be civility. Despite this intense response

⁷ Ortega, 70.

⁸ Ortega, 72.

⁹ Elizabeth Horodowich, “Civic Identity and the Control of Blasphemy in Sixteenth-Century Venice,” *Past & Present*, Nov. 2003, No. 181, pp. 3-33, 28.

to blasphemy, they still protected their Turkish inhabitants. There is a case in Horodowich's article where two Turks reported to the Doge that some Venetians were heavily insulting them. Because of the aforementioned commercial relationship between the Republic and the Ottoman Empire being prioritized, Venice had no problem announcing that any further insults against Turks would result in galley service or public torture.¹⁰ So, even though Venice seemed to target outsiders in particular when punishing blasphemy, Ottoman subjects were handled differently because of the respect Turks and Venetians were required to maintain because they could not afford otherwise.

For economic purposes, intermingling was accepted, but not for social purposes, as we have seen with the Jews as well. It must be noted that "Muslims stayed in locations where a significant amount of contact took place between Muslims and Christians."¹¹ There were even cases of Muslim merchants having Christians as servants, which violates the social order of not wanting Muslims and Christians to dine together and socialize beyond business. This was also because, like Jews, Muslims had certain dietary restrictions that could not be broken. The *Fondaco* ended up being a fixed location for trade that was negotiated by both the Ottoman Turks and the Venetian state, making it, as previously mentioned, a less restrictive environment than the Jewish Ghetto. At a certain point, the Fondaco became an established location for trade and connections among Ottoman merchants, as well as for their connections with other religious groups. It was then a place of cross-cultural contact and networks. There was always religious tension between Muslims and Christians in Venice, and Venetians remained threatened by their Muslim inhabitants, but "Even in the context of open war (like the war over Cyprus), both Venetians and Turks were committed to maintaining the flow of commerce,"¹² as it was more important than religious and cultural differences. This did not mean that Muslims faced equal treatment to Christians, especially in daily social settings where they were often "shunned, spied upon, and harassed."¹³ Additionally, the crusade sentiment that wrought Europe as the Ottomans expanded did not go anywhere.

A concept that will be important to this chapter and could in some ways be applied to the Jewish experience and *Merchant of Venice* as well, is Orientalism and the discourse surrounding it. Edward Said coined the term to describe the way in which the West created their own view of Eastern culture, distinguishing themselves as separate and categorizing non-Western cultures as "other" in

¹⁰ Horodowich, 29.

¹¹ Ortega, 75.

¹² Collins, 37.

¹³ Collins, 41.

order to self-define.¹⁴ It can be used in many periods and academic fields, but can also be defined as “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.” So this was definitely applicable as European powers began conquering and colonizing indigenous civilizations. But it was also applicable to Venice and rest of Europe in the sixteenth century in regards to people of non-Western and non-Christian backgrounds. There was a level of ignorance in their portrayals in literature, art, and other instances.

“This negative portrayal, embedded throughout European culture, not surprisingly informs most literary depictions of Turks, Moors, and Arabs, who were usually lumped together as followers of the same religion. In fact, literary depictions became the primary vehicle for carrying these negative images.”¹⁵

This way, many of the ways in which Ottoman subjects were portrayed were in a stereotypical and ignorant light, a manifestation of the Orientalism that Said was writing about. It is a mode of differentiating another culture by representing them in a negative fashion, establishing their own (Western) culture as superior. As Said says, “The Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West.”¹⁶ Basically, it is an idea that is created by societal assumptions, not based off of reality. This phenomenon certainly played a role in the treatment of Muslim merchants in Venice and also in Shakespeare’s portrayal of Othello, especially how all of the other characters treat him. These themes will definitely come up again in the subsequent section.

So overall, was the nature of the conditions of Muslim traders in early modern Venice was characterized by a certain level of autonomy due to the importance of maintaining good commercial relations with the Ottoman Empire. Nonetheless, they were treated as Other, as heretics to the Catholic Church, and were discouraged from socializing with Christians due to these negative stereotypes. In a sense, this mirrors the way in which Othello is regarded by the Venetian characters of the play. He is a convert to Christianity, but still a man of color and Muslim background. While he is respected as a military leader, there is a lack of full acceptance for racial and religious reasons, which explains Iago’s deep desire to destroy Othello’s life.

¹⁴ Said, *Orientalism*.

¹⁵ Barin, 44.

¹⁶ Said, *Orientalism*, 5.

3.2. *Othello* and Conversion

Though we have previously touched on the topic of conversion, it is important to expand on the historical implications of conversion in early modern Venice as well as England, and how it is depicted in Shakespeare's works. And now that we have the historical context of the Muslim inhabitants of Venice, we can explore how that connects to *Othello*, and juxtapose it with the themes of conversion found in *Merchant*. The overarching theme I have noticed when it comes to converts is that the validity of the conversion was never fully accepted, and Marranos were often questioned for the legitimacy of their baptism into Christianity. This concept can also be seen in *Merchant* and especially in *Othello*. Looking back at the inquisition trials examined in Chapter 1, it is apparent that Marranos were under a strange amount of scrutiny. Odoardo Gomez's case is an example of this. He was Christian since birth, however he was of Jewish origin and his parents baptized into Christianity. Therefore, he was subject to the questioning and accusations that the tribunal often directed towards Marranos.¹⁷ Through his interrogation, the tribunal asked Gomez about his interactions with other Jewish merchants, his eating habits, mass attendance, and even whether he was circumcised or not. After multiple witness testimonies about these small and random daily habits and characteristics about Gomez, he was dismissed. His dismissal shows the generally relaxed nature of the inquisitors in Venice, however, the length and detail of his trial indicates that there was a certain level of paranoia and suspicion. Being a Marrano in Venice, and in other Christian countries, meant being under heavier scrutiny and having to prove their loyalty to the Christian faith, because of the fear of crypto-Judaism and the lack of recognition of one's conversion because their blood and background were of another faith.

Another case of religious conversion and identity in Venice is that of Mariana di Fiori because "Her conversion did not result in a clear, new religious identity, but in ambivalence and tension."¹⁸ This is just one example of how religious tensions and persecution throughout Europe led to many instances of mixed religious identities, something also present in *Othello* and even *Merchant*. Mariana had quite an eventful life story, starting her life in Danzig and then travelling to Tripoli, which, under Ottoman Islamic law, accepted openly practicing Jews. When she and her husband, who she met in Tripoli, attempted to travel to Venice, their ship was captured and they were sold into slavery in Malta

¹⁷ Pier Cesare Ioly Zorattini, *Processi del S. Uffizio di Venezia contro ebrei e giudaizzanti*. Firenze: L. S. Olschki, n.d, 225-246.

¹⁸ Kim Siebenhüner, "Conversion, Mobility and the Roman Inquisition in Italy Around 1600," *Past & Present*, Volume 200, Issue 1, August 2008, Pages 5–35, 7.

where Mariana was baptized into Christianity. Siebenhuner, in “Conversion, Mobility, and Roman Inquisition in Italy Around 1600,” evaluates whether or not her conversion was forced, which is something that is difficult to discern. She seemingly did not understand what was happening because of the language barrier, but when questioned by the Roman Inquisition, she “emphasized that it had not occurred against her will” despite having “burst into tears when told that she was now a Christian and could not continue to live with her husband.”¹⁹ She ended up released in Naples with a son from her master and eventually met a new husband, Giovanni Domenico Morcante. He was Christian and opposed to Mariana’s idea for her to openly practice Judaism while he practiced Christianity, in Danzig. They broke up before arriving in Danzig and this is when Mariana found herself in Venice, going to live in the ghetto with her son. Her husband Giovanni denounced her to the Sant’Ufficio in Rome for Judaizing.²⁰ She reported to the Sant’Ufficio in both Rome and Venice, and “In Rome she tried to convince the inquisitors of the integrity of her Christian faith. In Venice, on the other hand, she argued that she had never abandoned her Jewish faith.”²¹ This affirms the fact that often the ones who were punished the most were those who somehow mixed both religions; sticking to one was always the least heretical according to the inquisition. At the end, Mariana said to Rome that she desired baptizing into the Christian faith, which she did. And she was most likely released without punishment.

Her trial records reveal a fascinating case study about the mobility of converts, how marriage between a Christian and Jew was severely forbidden, and how Mariana altered her identity and story towards a certain religion in order to protect herself depending on who was questioning her in the inquisition. It also shows how for many converts facing inquisition in the early modern period, identity was often on a spectrum, and they usually practiced a mix of rituals, beliefs, and customs, altering their perceived religious identity in order to avoid questioning or punishment. In Mariana’s case, Siebenhuner concludes that she was genuinely at a loss for which religion she identified with more, being in constant tug-of-war between Judaism and Christianity most of her life. This crisis and the ambiguity of faith during a period of forced conversion and high alert for apostasy demonstrates how the inquisition affected individuals, especially as interactions among different religions increased overtime. This is also the reason why so many inquisitors were worried about whether one’s conversion was legitimate or not, prompting concern for crypto-Judaism.

¹⁹ Siebenhüner, 16.

²⁰ Siebenhüner, 18.

²¹ Siebenhüner, 20.

The concern about legitimacy of conversion and the desire to ingrain Christianity into converts is also demonstrated in the republic's system of proselytizing and conversion, the *Casa dei Catecumeni*. The *Casa dei catecumeni* would house and give catechism lessons to prospective converts, with monetary and social benefits for them as well. What is interesting is how it affected inquisitor trials because:

“They would punish neophytes who showed signs of returning to Judaism and hence of overturning the religious hierarchy, the order whereby the super-seded faith of the Jews was inferior to that of the Christians, and movement should therefore be made only in one direction: through promotion from Judaism to Christianity.”²²

This explains how the conversion campaigns were particularly concerned about the converts reverting back to Judaism, still practicing it, or socializing with Jews. They were threatened by the idea of a newly baptized Christian disrupting the order and mixing in Judaism, which they deemed as the antithesis of their values. Therefore, the *case* focused on drilling the ideas of Christianity into potential converts heads and educating them on the teachings of their faith, while the inquisition focused on monitoring converts who displayed signs of crypto-Judaism. A lot of this fear was based on the fact that the *case* awarded their converts with financial help²³, so the inquisition then assumed that Jews only baptized out of desperation to get out of poverty. This connects back to the inquisition trial we looked at in Chapter 1 where Giacomo Francoso was reported to have been baptized four times in various Italian cities in order to benefit financially to survive.²⁴ This was taken as a serious offense as it was a violation of Christian rituals, and he was sentenced to serve twenty years in the galleys. Francoso's case is an example of the inquisition's suspicions probably being correct. These two institutions—the *Casa dei catecumeni* and the inquisition—created somewhat of a system, though they did not directly work together, where Jews had the opportunity to convert, and from there were under scrutiny of the Holy Office to make sure they were adhering to their conversion to Christianity.

The suspicion others had of a Jew converting to Christianity but still practicing Judaism in secret was also apparent with Roderigo Lopez, the doctor of Queen Elizabeth. There were often conspiracies circulating through London about his Jewish origins, discrediting his professional abilities and reasons for his higher position in the Queen's circle, even though, “we have not evidence of his crypto-Judaism.”²⁵ Many accused that “his rise and importance were due to a restless activities and

²² Pullan, 243.

²³ Pullan, 252.

²⁴ Ioly Zorattini, 73.

²⁵ Solera, 212.

plausible address rather than to medical ability.”²⁶ Lopez still remained in his job as the Queen’s physician and advanced to other endeavors, becoming a representative for Portuguese exiles²⁷ and communicating with Portugal and Spain.²⁸ However the suspicions against him “included anti-Semitic charges such as falsity, immorality, immoderate avarice, and above all, the atavistic desire to kill Christians using witchcraft and various poisons.”²⁹ These reasons embody the Elizabethan attitudes towards Jews, attitudes that are brought out in *Merchant of Venice*. Despite Lopez being a seemingly good Christian and having this high position working for Elizabeth, his Jewish roots caused him to be a target, ultimately leading to his execution in 1594. Lopez’s story is another instance that connects back to Venice and *Merchant*, and that exemplifies the scrutiny and suspicion that Marranos and converts faced. The narrative of suspicion and prejudice is mirrored in the character of Shylock, who Solera concludes was likely loosely inspired by the trial of Roderigo Lopez. The Christian characters’ disdain for him reflect the underlying anxieties possessed by the English who accused him of all sorts of things.

Jessica’s conversion to Christianity adds another layer to this discussion. Her conversion is portrayed as a betrayal of her father and her Jewish heritage, at least to Shylock. At the same time, it is celebrated as her joining the right side and turning away from what is described as a bad situation. Her hatred for her father is not fully explained, but she says, “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.”³⁰ What we know is that Shylock is controlling, obviously not approving of her choice to marry Lorenzo, a Christian man. So, not only does she convert to Christianity in order to be with Lorenzo, but she also disguises herself as a male, robs Shylock of his valuables, and escapes in the middle of the night, with the helps of the Christian gang. This is the ultimate betrayal, but given her successful ending, it provides the reader with the assumption that she is a character that we are supposed to root for, going against her father’s cruel impositions. What do we make of this? It adds to the complexity of Shylock’s betrayal because she is embraced by the Christian characters. As mentioned in the previous chapters, she still receives some negative comments about her Jewish ancestry, which shows that she is not fully accepted as a true Christian. But overall, her escape from Judaism is written as a positive

²⁶ Cecyll Ro and Arthur Dimock, “The Conspiracy of Dr. Lopez,” *The English Historical Review* 9, no. 35 (1894): 440-72, 441.

²⁷ Solera, 208.

²⁸ Ro and Dimock, 444.

²⁹ Solera, 216.

³⁰ *Merchant of Venice*, 2.3.16-18.

transformation, implying that her change over to the Christian identity is a pathway to a better life where she is accepted by the characters and the rest of Venetian society. Jessica being female also adds another facet to her conversion, as she did baptize for a male, and Lorenzo could be interpreted as a dominating man changing a Jewish woman for the better in order to properly possess her. Jessica's positive ending stands in stark contrast to Shylock's tragic downfall. One voluntarily converted to Christianity, experiencing for the most part a spiritual victory—though the other characters still occasionally questioned her legitimacy as a Christian—while the other was forced to convert, losing his identity and dignity in the process. These two outcomes of the two Jewish characters of *Merchant* suggest the prevailing ideas about conversion of Shakespeare's time, also in Venice, that New Christians were usually not fully taken seriously, but choosing to convert to Christianity was seen as an honorable choice at the same time. This explains the *catecumeni*, who worked hard to convert and keep the New Christians converted, providing incentives. And it also explains the inquisitors' suspicions regarding crypto-Judaism and the analysis of their behaviors.

The concept of conversion being depicted in drama was not new—actually, it was quite common in medieval plays, where “the conversions of saints were used as inspiration for audiences, who were invited to cast off their sins, intensify their faith, and follow the footsteps of exemplary characters.”³¹ In the Middle Ages, it was simply this one-sided message that was displayed in many dramas. However, Stelling argues that with the onset of religious and confessional diversity provoked by the reformation and interaction between other religious groups, a new form of conversion had emerged in early modern drama. Conversion was then portrayed in a more complicated manner that was not explicitly stating a bias towards a certain religion. The plays usually “presented conversions and converts that suggested that true Christian identity could not simply be shed or assumed.”³² This is certainly prominent in *Merchant of Venice*, as both Jessica's and Shylock's religious identities are under scrutiny, like the Marranos questioned in the Venetian inquisition. And ultimately Shylock is clearly not going to be accepted as a Christian, and Jessica was only partially accepted due to her open condemnation of Judaism and willingness to convert to marry Lorenzo. There is a general aura of skepticism around conversion in Shakespeare's plays, not just in *Merchant* but also in *Othello*. Conversion in *Othello* is analyzed at length by various scholars, including Stelling, and it contributes to

³¹ Lieke Stelling, *Religious Conversion in Early Modern English Drama*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, n.d., 1.

³² Stelling, 7.

the conversation here as well regarding early modern attitudes and anxieties towards conversion, religious and racial differences, and how that is portrayed in Venice.

This shift in the attitudes towards conversion, and therefore how they were performed in drama and on stage, can be explained by a few factors. The first factor was England's shift towards a Protestant theology and the confusion that followed from Elizabeth to James. This period was wrought with a "lack of closure" and the creation of multiple denominations. According to Betteridge, "The Church established in 1559 was Protestant and Constantinian in the sense of being ultimately under secular control but little else was decided and confirmed."³³ Among this uncertainty, the strength of Calvinist doctrine prevailed, with the idea of predestination. Even though Puritans were not the leading religion of the Church of England, they helped create the Calvinist identity among the English, including confessionalization and doctrinal absolutism.³⁴ Thanks to them, predestination was a mainstream belief of England, making the idea of conversion from one faith to another seem a bit weaker because there was no human control in where one will go after they die. And with the presence of different denominations, plays "responded to the diversification of religion that was part of the confessionalization of Western Christianity."³⁵ Therefore, this transitional and identity-seeking period caused the rise of this new ambiguous sort of conversion drama that Stelling discusses.

The second factor that explains this shift of conversion drama during the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods is the increase in interactions with the rest of the world when it came to trade, exploration, and migration. This exposed England to religions they were unfamiliar with, such as Judaism and Islam. In Chapter 2 we already explored the small presence of Judaism in England and the stereotypes and assumptions the English possessed, largely based on the diaspora from the Spanish Inquisition. But the interactions between East and West also made way for Christianity and Islam to collide, hence the central theme of conversion in *Othello*—starring a former Muslim turned Christian leader of Venice and his failure to assimilate. This narrative, which was present not just in English drama but in Renaissance humanist circles in Italy, was brought out by Western reactions to the expansion of the Ottoman Empire further into Europe. As previously mentioned, the response to Ottoman expansion was a stereotyped attitude towards Muslims and Turks, characterized by fear of a rising and expanding power. This power was populated by people who practiced a different religion

³³ Betteridge, 3.

³⁴ Betteridge, 4.

³⁵ Stelling, 4.

and who looked different from Western Christians, and “By Shakespeare’s day ‘the Turk’ represented all that was barbaric and demonic, in contrast to the Christian’s civil and moral rightness.”³⁶ This Western superiority complex infiltrated early modern scholarship as well as Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, as a means of reckoning with this perception and concept of conversion. The distrust of converts, especially those from the inquisition, added another layer of complexity to conversion drama, as there was a delegitimization of the conversion. So, “with religion serving more and more as an instrument to fashion national selves and barbarous other, interfaith conversion started to play a crucial but paradoxical role in it.”³⁷ We can see it in *Merchant of Venice* and *Othello* alike, both dramatic and problematic representations of somebody of another inferior religion failing to be included in Venetian society, with the theme of conversion appearing in both, albeit in different ways.

The Merchant of Venice focuses on the events leading up to Shylock’s conversion while *Othello* focuses on the events following the title character’s conversion. Othello is a general of the Venetian army in a time where Venice is at war with the Ottoman Turks over the island of Cyprus. He is a “Moor,” meaning probably of Middle Eastern or African descent, though it is never quite specified. And though it is not explicitly mentioned, he most likely converted from Islam to Christianity sometime before the play begins. He is stuck between being a respected military leader but also an outsider who is not fully accepted in Venice due to the color of his skin, experiencing constant racist remarks, especially from Iago, the ultimate villain of the play. An example of these remarks even in Act 1 Scene 1 shows how blatant Iago and the others could be. Othello’s wife is a white woman named Desdemona, and in this scene Iago is talking to her father, Brabantio, saying that, “Even now, very now, an old black ram / Is tuppung your white ewe.”³⁸ This vulgar comment exemplifies the sort of attitudes the characters have towards the relationship between Othello and Desdemona, something Brabantio is just finding out about in this scene. Moreover, he is a recently-converted Christian marrying a Christian woman.

This conversion of his has been analyzed by many scholars, one in particular being Daniel Vitkus in “Turning Turk in Othello,” who discusses Othello’s conversion and ultimate downfall within its historical context, as there were many fears about the Turks ingrained in English society. One phenomenon that set off this fear was that “Faced with the growing problem of Christian captives who

³⁶ Virginia Mason Vaughan, *Othello: A Contextual History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 13.

³⁷ Stelling, 5.

³⁸ *Othello*, 1.1.90-91.

‘turned turk’ in order to gain their freedom, the English authorities adopted a strategy to prevent such conversions, using sermons to condemn the practice of conversion to Islam.”³⁹ This gave an additional reason for the English to possess an anxiety regarding the Turks, as well as a generally skewed perception of Islam and the concept of conversion. Vitkus argues that “‘turning Turk has a sexual connotation,”⁴⁰ and in early modern Europe, Islam was often seen as a religion of lust and promiscuity in a violent way. This connects to Othello because of his love for Desdemona shortly turning to murderous hate when Iago convinces him that she is having an affair. There is a sexual—and racially charged—connotation to this part of the play, when Othello is in danger of reverting back to his old ways, being a Moor. And once Iago’s tormenting gets to his head enough, Othello resorts to suffocating his wife to death in bed, a violent and extreme measure. This scene takes place in bed, and he seems to have a mixed feeling of love and rage. He kisses her and then says,

“O balmy breath, that dost almost persuade

Justice to break her sword. One more, one more!

Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee,

And love thee after. One more, and that’s the last!

So sweet was ne’er so fatal. This sorrow’s heavenly;

It strikes where it doth love.”⁴¹

That he expresses both love and hatred, and how necessary it is to kill her makes this scene strangely and disturbingly erotic, especially because they are in bed together. There is also this racist power dynamic often portrayed by Western society, of a “barbaric” Black man violently dominating an innocent white woman, and when Emilia finds out she says, “O, the more angel she, and you the blacker devil!”⁴² This brutal scene is characterized by the early modern England’s racial and religious stereotypes and attitudes. Even the cover of my copy of *Othello*, the Signet Classic edition, exemplifies this. Its disturbing imagery fuels these attitudes and evokes such a visceral reaction from somebody who sees it. The cover, pictured below, shows a man with a regal robe to represent his position in Christian Venice, but with very dark skin as a contrast. Othello is choking Desdemona, who’s white

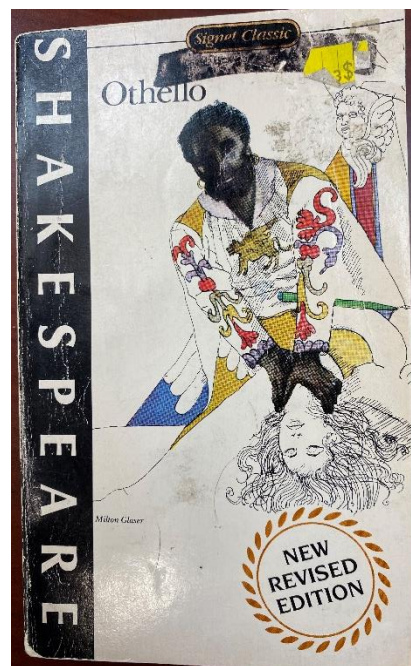
³⁹ Daniel J. Vitkus, “Turning Turk in Othello: The Conversion and Damnation of the Moor,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 48, no. 2 (1997): 145–76, 152.

⁴⁰ Vitkus, 157.

⁴¹ *Othello*, 5.2.16-22.

⁴² *Othello*, 5.2.129-130.

skin heavily contrasts Othello's as her hair is spread out angelically. This shocking image certainly exemplifies the uncomfortable nature of the play, and even shows Othello's duality, how he is stuck between his new Christian life as a revered military general and his previous life as a Moor, which is characterized by violence. It also is an example of the stereotypical imagery used in literature and art in the early modern period and proceeding periods that exudes the Orientalism that Said discusses. Stelling discusses how "When, after Othello has killed Desdemona, he realizes that she is innocent, Othello begins to conceive himself through a Christian Venetian lens as an ignoble and savage other."⁴³ Even Othello is instilled with this view towards himself, a self-hatred. And he cannot continue with the identity of both a convert to Christianity but also an enemy.



Cover of *Othello*, Signet Classic edition, 1963.

Both Vitkus and Stelling argue that Othello's suicide is a symbol of his "turning," as in reverting back to Islam from Christianity. This is a compelling point because he is having a crisis of self and can no longer continue, as he failed to properly integrate into Venetian society. It represents the anxiety many Christians had about converts from other monotheistic religions, that they were always on the verge of turning back to their original religion, not to be trusted. Othello's words before his suicide reveal a lot about this:

⁴³ Stelling, 153.

“And say besides that in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
I took by the throat the circumcised dog
And smote him—thus.

*[He stabs himself.]*⁴⁴

Othello is basically comparing his suicide to a time where he killed a Turkish man who betrayed Venice because he feels that he himself has done the same. He thinks that he is basically just like this “turbaned Turk” at the end of the day and deserves to die. Vitkus compares his self-stabbing to circumcision, a ritual cutting that Muslims do, also an important step in conversion. He says that this action is “signifying his return to the ‘malignant’ sect of the Turks and his reunion with the misbelieving devils.”⁴⁵ He is additionally damning himself to hell by taking his own life, something that takes someone out of the running for salvation. This final scene is the culmination of what was always to come—from Iago’s mental torture to Othello’s severe jealousy that turned into murderous rage, Othello was never fully able to assimilate into Venetian society, showing that:

“the very notion of Christianization is impossible as a radical, genuine and lasting transformation. It is this twisted logic that Othello assumes and that causes his life to end in a tragic lapse—and, from a biased Venetian point of view relapse—into otherness.”⁴⁶

Ultimately, Shakespeare is embodying both Venetian and English views on conversion by depicting a character who is at odds with himself and is manipulated into murdering his wife, leading him to hate and kill himself. As Vitkus and Stelling have highlighted, Othello’s struggle is representative of the tensions between identity and assimilation in a society that views him as an outsider despite his conversion to Christianity. His internal conflict is not just personal but reflects the larger picture—what we discussed about English views on Islam and Ottoman Turks. *Othello* is complex and, similarly to *Merchant of Venice*, has different layers and interpretations of Shakespeare’s personal views on race and religion—like whether this whole situation is Iago’s fault, and how much blame to place on Othello himself. But overall it is a problematic play that reflects and contemplates

⁴⁴ *Othello*, 5.5.348-352.

⁴⁵ Vitkus, 175.

⁴⁶ Stelling, 145.

early modern attitudes on conversion, as is *Merchant*. Both plays engage with contemporary anxieties about conversion—whether cultural, racial, or religious.

Shylock, like Othello, is heavily alienated by the other characters in *Merchant of Venice*. His forced conversion at the end signifies his demise, a metaphorical death of his character, as his identity and belongings are all stripped from him. It is simultaneously both a parallel and sort of reverse of what happens to Othello at the end. While Shylock converts to Christianity, Othello is, in a metaphorical sense, converted *from* Christianity back to his previous religion, Islam. And his death is literal. Both men experience a severe reversal of themselves, as a result of the ostracization from the Venetian characters and, in Othello's case, an internal battle with himself. Iago's manipulation about Desdemona's alleged affair infiltrates so deep into Othello's conscience that is stuck at odds between love and hate for his wife. While talking to Iago, he says:

“Ay, let her rot, and perish, and be damned
Tonight; for she shall not live. No, my heart is turned
To stone; I strike it, and it hurts my hand. O, the
World hath not a sweeter creature! She might lie by
An emperor's side and command him tasks.”⁴⁷

Othello is clearly viewing Desdemona as a betrayer who deserves to die, but at the same time the woman who he loves. He sees her in both lights, struggling to grasp the concept of her adultery. His “heart is turned to stone” and he feels himself turning into a different person. And, when in Desdemona's chambers to end her life, she asks for mercy twice. Both times, he responds with “Amen,” showing that it is too late for him to change his mind and show mercy—he is determined to murder her because “she must die, else she'll betray more men.”⁴⁸ He was not capable of showing forgiveness, similarly to Shylock. As we know, Shylock was unwilling to forgive Antonio, citing the hypocrisy of the Christian characters for begging for him to show mercy with his comparison to their enslaving. One can see his determination when in the courtroom he says, “by my soul I swear there is no power in the tongue of man to alter me: I stay here on my bond.”⁴⁹ Clearly, both Othello and Shylock demonstrate a lack of mercy, and seek some sort of revenge on those who wronged them. This

⁴⁷ *Othello*, 4.1.183-187.

⁴⁸ *Othello*, 5.2.6.

⁴⁹ *Merchant of Venice*, 4.1.235-237.

is interesting that both of the non-Christian characters of Shakespeare, or in Othello's case, a convert, exude such characteristics, like they are the antithesis of what the Christian characters stand for. It emphasizes the two men as a stark moral contrast, which seems like a commentary on religious differences in early modern society. Shakespeare is pointing out some of the debates that occur between various monotheistic religions and emphasizing the skewed way in which Christians often views Jews and Muslims, as people who had practiced no mercy or forgiveness.

The fact that Shakespeare portrays both Othello and Shylock's experiences as religious minorities and converts in such a nuanced light says a lot about Elizabethan English views on conversion in general. Since both are never fully accepted into their Venetian society, it shows how the attitudes about conversion were not conditional and fully open, but rather fraught with tension and suspicion. It reflects Elizabethan anxiety about the integrity of conversion, something also very clearly displayed in the trial records of the Venetian inquisition. Shakespeare's portrayals suggest that conversion, in the eyes of many, was not a seamless transition and did not erase their prejudice. We of course do not see Shylock after his conversion, but rather his story leading up to it. But it can certainly be concluded that he would not be treated well nor trusted as a New Christian; he already had most of his assets taken from him anyways. They both experience a religious transition at the end of the play, a real death for Othello and a metaphorical death for Shylock.

Who we *do* see after conversion in *Merchant* is Jessica. Jessica, like Othello, converting to Christianity and married a Christian. Her intentions for converting were clearly in order to marry Lorenzo, while in *Othello* it is unclear why or when Othello converted. The views expressed towards Jessica by the other characters is a mixed bag—she seemed to be mildly accepted and happy that she was converting. But various comments from those like Launcelot, and even Lorenzo himself, show that there was a concern for her true Christianity, especially having Jewish blood and background. To Lorenzo, her conversion is good enough, but it is clear that he would not have accepted her if she remained Jewish, saying once she baptized, “And true she is, as she hath proved herself; and therefore, like herself, wise, fair, and true, shall she be placed in my constant soul.”⁵⁰ Jessica unfortunately had to prove herself in order to be wed to Lorenzo, which shows the conditionality of their relationship. And though Lorenzo is willing to marry her once she is baptized, that does not stop him from referring to various doomed lovers in history before their wedding in Act 5. It shows that he possibly has a sense of

⁵⁰ *Merchant of Venice*, 2.6.55-57.

dread and confusion when it comes to their marriage. Meanwhile, Othello faces constant scrutiny and racist remarks regarding his relationship with Desdemona, as he is still a Moor to the Christian characters, who constantly refer to him as that.

Both of Shakespeare's Venetian plays tackle religious minorities in Venice experiencing alienation, identity crises, and conversion. This brings out the themes of religious identity and conversion that were relevant to early modern Europe during a period where Christianity was changing so much, and global interactions and diaspora were increasing, causing more tension between different religion. His exploration of these themes invites the audience to contemplate the limits of tolerance and conversion, engaging with contemporary attitudes towards the topic.

Conclusion

This study has managed to reveal the interconnectedness of historical phenomena and literature in the context of early modern religious persecution, both ideas and practices. The goal of this thesis was to analyze ghettoization, inquisition, and religious attitudes in Venice in the sixteenth century, connecting it to William Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, which in turn uncovered the inextricable relationship between the two. I trace the beginnings of Renaissance humanist ideas relating to Judaism and Jewish-Christian relations, looking at how the Christian Cabala became integrated into humanist thought through Pico della Mirandola. In turn, this form of religious syncretism found its way to Elizabethan England and dispersed into their culture as it was compatible with the type of Protestantism that was prevalent at that time, which Chapter 2 expands on. Chapter 1 also does not forget the presence of patrician humanism in Venice, and how there was much more antisemitism in this intellectual sphere. Following the analysis of various attitudes towards Jews in Italy, it is then explained how and why the Jewish Ghetto was created, and the conditions that are a mix of confinement and agency for the Jewish inhabitants. I then examine the presence of paranoia towards Jews and New Christians through the *Processi*. The *Processi* reveal the restrained but invasive approach of the inquisitors, especially towards New Christians accused of crypto-Judaism. A comparative study of Venice with the Florentine Ghetto and its background and floor plans, adding the Medici-encouraged Port of Livorno, demonstrates the approaches that various Italian cities took to manage their Jewish population. The largely historical Chapter 1 analyzes Venice within its context of Renaissance sentiments about religious differences and Judaism. It finds that the city of Venice in the sixteenth century is a paradox; it welcomed Jewish merchants because of their large contributions to the commercial endeavors of the republic while simultaneously viewing them as heretics, forcing them to the margins of the island, and monitoring the lives of the converts. Not only do these ideas and sentiments travel to England to be reflected in Shakespeare's writing, but *Merchant of Venice* is a representation of the multi-faceted nature of the Venice Ghetto.

Continuing with the theme of connecting the history to literature, Chapter 2 dives deeper into the historical context of *Merchant of Venice* in Elizabethan England, especially pertaining the establishment of a social identity of the Protestant sects. I point out how certain characteristics of Protestant are both reflected and challenged in Shakespeare's work, including the Christian Cabala. After considering possibilities for Shakespeare's inspiration for the character of Shylock, I then emphasize the allegorical importance of his character, especially given his ambiguous portrayal. This

ambiguity relates back to the experience of Jews in Venice and how we can use this piece of literature as a means to better understand its complicated nature. Additionally, Shylock fits into the category of a Christ-like figure, adding this sacrificial dimension that further complicates his role in the play and out of it. Lastly, Chapter 2 discusses how *Merchant of Venice* has evolved overtime and how its performances have varied greatly depending on its location and historical context. It also argues that *Merchant* is a problem play due to its uncomfortable themes and vague conclusion that is not completely solved. This makes it malleable when it comes to its productions on stage. The 2016 production of *Merchant*, performed directly in the Ghetto on its 500-year anniversary, displays the power that this play can hold. There is a potential for a dangerous and hateful production, like those in Nazi-occupied territories in the Second World War, but there is also potential for a strong statement against discrimination and hate. Overall, Chapter 2 argues that *Merchant* is an extremely complex, problematic, and thought-provoking play with various interpretations and layers that show how Shakespeare is providing a rich commentary on his contemporary moment without claiming certain opinions or religious allegiances. I emphasize how Shylock's duality is a symbol of the duality of the Venice Ghetto, and how his character carries on the memory of the ghetto.

Finally, Chapter 3 adds another layer to the discussion of religious minorities in Venice by investigating the experience of the Muslim merchants who resided there. And since *Othello* also takes place in Venice and is about a Muslim convert to Venice, it was the perfect juxtaposition to *Merchant*, especially regarding the recurring theme of conversion. I first briefly summarized how Muslim merchants were treated in Venice in the sixteenth century. Because of their provenance from the Ottoman Empire, their trade connections were highly valued. The *Fondaco dei Turchi* as, similarly to the Ghetto, a location of separation but also flourishing for the Muslim population. They had more negotiation rights, however, giving them a leg up. I then analyze the concept of conversion in *Othello*, and how Othello failed to integrate into Christian Venetian society by turning to violent jealousy and murdering his white wife. Because of this, he has "turned Turk," and his suicide symbolizes a reversion back to Islam and the so-called barbaric ways. This problematic play has many parallels with *Merchant* and how it displays conversion with both Jessica and Shylock. We now have the full scope of Venice plays that show a character that is a religious minority, demonstrating important ideas of conversion that were present in both Renaissance Italy and England.

This research could be expanded in the future in many ways. First, there could be more comparative analysis when it comes to inquisitorial records from different early modern cities. For

example, Florence even had a branch of the Holy Office, and while there is a small amount of information about their trials, it would be interesting to see a comparison of how Jews were tried in Florence versus Venice, juxtaposed with a comparison of their respective ghettos. Another fruitful addition would be a more comprehensive analysis of the Jewish diaspora from Iberia and how they settled in Tuscany versus the Venetian Republic. This could also apply to England, historians have reported that some New Christians went to England following the Spanish Inquisition. Though there may not be record of it because they were Christian on paper, it would connect a lot more missing pieces about how much Shakespeare and other English knew about Jews and Judaism. When it comes to Shakespearean studies, there is potential for a more overarching full analysis of how performances of *Merchant* have evolved from the very beginnings and into modern times, as well as how they were received. There are many individual analyses of certain productions, but a full overview would present a bigger picture of the development of the play. Overall, there are many avenues for further research on this topic, both historical and literary, that could contribute to both fields and broaden the scope of analysis.

By bridging the gap between historical analysis and literary interpretation through the New Historicist approach, this study provides a more thorough exploration of themes of religious tolerance, identity, cultural exchange in the sixteenth century. The works of Shakespeare are like a looking-glass—they have always contained multitudes of information that reveal so much about the historical and social context of his time. *Merchant of Venice* stands out as one of the most complicated and impactful of his plays because of its unsettling ambiguity and complex characters. Scholars have never been able to fully understand or arrive at an agreement about what Shakespeare’s opinions and intentions were, giving this play potential for plenty of discourse. The tragic character of Shylock causes both discomfort and sympathy for his audience, making him one of Shakespeare’s most fascinating characters, as his “Hath not a Jew eyes” monologue is incredibly powerful and applicable to many situations of discrimination and alienation. The choice to connect *Merchant* to the history of Jews in early modern Venice came easily not only because of its obvious historical parallels, but also because of how complex the dynamics between Christians and Jews were and still are. It was not just in Renaissance Italy but since Antiquity all over Europe and the Middle East. Shylock calling this an “ancient grudge”⁵¹ highlights this long-existing antagonism. Studying religious conflict, persecution, and conversion from an historical perspective emphasizes the fact that religion has always been one of

⁵¹ *Merchant of Venice*, 1.3.47.

the largest factors in historical processes and social interactions between humans. It is truly fascinating to study just how much religion has affected the evolution of events in humanity. Using Shakespeare for a lens through which to examine the nuances of it all has brought out an abundant investigation in this study. *Merchant of Venice* is timeless and always evolving. It serves as a reminder that the complexities of religious tensions have shaped, and continue to shape, the human experience across centuries.

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