

# **Stony Brook University**



OFFICIAL COPY

**The official electronic file of this thesis or dissertation is maintained by the University Libraries on behalf of The Graduate School at Stony Brook University.**

**© All Rights Reserved by Author.**

*The Merchant of Venice:*

**Portia as the Embodiment of Queen Elizabeth I**

A Thesis Presented

by

**Weijian Wang**

to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements

for the Degree of

**Master of Arts**

in

**Theatre Arts**

Stony Brook University

**May 2015**

**Stony Brook University**

The Graduate School

**Weijian Wang**

We, the thesis committee for the above candidate for the  
Master of Arts degree, hereby recommend  
acceptance of this thesis.

**Michael Zelenak – Thesis Advisor**  
**Associate Professor in Theatre Arts**

**Steve Marsh – Second Reader**  
**Lecture, Director of Graduate Program in Theatre Arts**

This thesis is accepted by the Graduate School

Charles Taber  
Dean of the Graduate School

Abstract of the Thesis

*The Merchant of Venice:*

**Portia as the embodiment of Queen Elizabeth I**

by

**Weijian Wang**

**Master of Arts**

in

**Theatre Arts**

Stony Brook University

**2015**

With the large amount of research of William Shakespeare, scholars tend to look at Shakespeare as a noble literary figure who wrote the best English poems and plays ever. They, however, may lose a comprehensive understanding of the motivation for some of his best works by not considering his other social roles, such as businessman, shareholder, etc. So when we talk about *The Merchant of Venice*, there are always elusive questions about the main characters in the play. One question is about how Shakespeare made the audience, especially after the twentieth century, feel pity for Shylock who might have been treated exclusively in Elizabethan times as a villain. And the latter attitude would make it hard to understand Portia's function since she has always been described as a smart and virtuous character. In this thesis I want to put more attention on Shakespeare's own life and the time when *The Merchant of Venice* was written. I try to use both traditional materials and new discoveries to look at this play through a more social and economic perspective. Through my careful analysis I will show my theory that Portia

is William Shakespeare's embodiment of Queen Elizabeth I, and that much of the plot arrangement and character development is Shakespeare's ways of expressing his complex feelings to Queen Elizabeth I and others in a time of great political and religious conflict. I hope that through my theory, we can get a better understanding of his own motivation for writing *The Merchant of Venice*.

## **Dedication Page**

I would like to dedicate my thesis to my dear parents.

## Frontispiece



## Table of Contents

Preface.....	viii
Chapter 1: Introduction to The Merchant of Venice.....	1
1.1 The Merchant of Venice .....	1
1.2 Four major contrasts in the play.....	2
Chapter 2: Queen Elizabeth I and her time .....	10
2.1 The life of Queen Elizabeth and her governing of England.....	10
2.2 Marriage, Religion, and the Spanish Armada.....	11
Chapter 3: The other side of William Shakespeare.....	15
3.1 Short review of William Shakespeare's writing life.....	15
3.2 Religion and its influence.....	16
3.3 A hardheaded businessman.....	19
Chapter 4 Final Conclusion .....	22
Works Cited.....	31



## Preface

Why should we still do research on *The Merchant of Venice*? Or more specifically, how can further research enlighten us on William Shakespeare's ideas about his own plays? But just as Joan Ozark Holmer notes: "there will probably never be a final interpretation or any single reading or approach that gives justice to the orchestrated whole of *The Merchant of Venice*" (John 54). One of the difficulties is the lack of records of Shakespeare's life that make it hard to trace the author's motivation for writing this play. Another difficulty is the change of people's attitudes today toward the Elizabethan Era because of new social values in a different era.

Readers tend to get a strong feeling of contrast when they watch or read *The Merchant of Venice*. There is a strong contrast between Portia's compliance to her father's will and Jessica's elopement from her father Shylock. And we also see a strong difference between Shylock's greed for money and Antonio's generosity to his friends. But the most obvious contrast we find is still the conflict between Shylock and Portia. Two different characters that represent two totally incompatible value systems. Should we trust in mercy or should we demand justice? And is there any universal standard of justice?

These questions weren't central until the late nineteenth century when people began to reshape their attitudes towards Shylock and Portia. There was growing pity for the "villain" character Shylock while some began to question the righteousness and legitimacy of Portia's view toward Shylock. Since these two characters are so different, when we support one, then it seems we must criticize the other. So scholars began to guess the true intention of Shakespeare when he wrote this play. Did he purposely create the mercy toward Shylock, or is it just the

changes in society and history that activates our pity today? If Shakespeare did it intentionally then why did he do it?

Through this paper, I want to examine social and economic factors to illustrate Shakespeare's true intention in the play. I hope that with the help of our available resources, I can make a logical explanation of those conflicts and contrasts and put forward my theory that Portia is not just an idealized character created to flatter Queen Elizabeth I and fit into the people's notion about their queen, but that Portia may be an expression of Shakespeare's complex, and sometimes dissatisfied feelings to his Queen and her policy. I think if we look at this play from this perspective, we will find a harmonious unification in the play's plot and character development.

I will start my analysis by reviewing the original play and teasing out some important analysis. Next I want to go back to the Elizabethan Era and try to create an overview of its social and economic conditions. Then I'd like to review Shakespeare's life and especially his business and religious affairs. Finally, I will summarize and analyze the evidence that could support my theory.

## **Acknowledgments**

Thanks to all my teachers in Theatre Arts during the past two years, especially for Steven Marsh and Michael X. Zelenak who gave me lots of help and courage. I won't forget these great days in Stony Brook. Hope to see you again and send my best wishes for you and your family.

## Chapter 1: Introduction to *The Merchant of Venice*

### 1.1 *The Merchant of Venice*

After writing **some** popular historical plays like *Henry IV*, *Richard III* and *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare began to write comedies in the 1590s, and *The Merchant of Venice* was first played in 1596. His sources were two old books from Italian Renaissance literature. The first book is *Pecorone II*, a collection of stories written by Giovanni Fiorentino in 1378. We have no idea who had translated it publicly into an English version so it could be possible that Shakespeare had read it by himself. The story he chose from *Pecorone II* tells us of a wealthy female character Portia at Belmont marrying an upstanding young gentleman. She helps to save her husband's best friend's life in a court suit since he has violated a contract with a Jewish moneylender. Shakespeare added the usury issue to the Jewish moneylender, which is not in the original story. The original story also doesn't include the casket sub-plot that he took from *Gesta Romanorum*, a medieval collection of stories published in 1577 in England.

Shakespeare combined these two stories in a way that created a new image of Portia as well as the voracious Jewish character Shylock. People enjoy the casket part not only because of the beautiful words but also the implication of each casket. The courtroom scene also creates concerns for Antonia's life since Shylock has the right to take one pound of flesh from him. But the arrival of the Portia takes the story in a totally different direction, and we are impressed by her famous courtroom speech. In the end there is a relief and joy since Antonia wins his suit (and gets his ships back) while Portia and Bassanio share a happy marriage. The greedy and ruthless Shylock gets his punishment and loses all his properties.

The play is definitely a comedy when seen in the light of anti-Semitic tradition in The Elizabethan Era. Audiences naturally watched this play as a victory of Christian values over Jewish values and they saw Shylock as an evil character with nothing but a greedy drive for more money. They celebrate the intelligent and eloquent female character Portia in helping Antonio to escape from the bond made with Shylock. She was an idealized character, full of mercy and wisdom as a pious Christian, and her husband Bassanio and his best friend Antonio were all seen as kind-hearted people.

But coming to the early twentieth century and especially in recent decades, with the spread of capitalism and racial equality movements, people began to rethink this play from a more critical standpoint and now tend to give sympathy to Shylock who had lost everything after the suit. Scholars also started to question the fairness of Portia's judgment and the value Christians hold as a universal standard. They began to care about those inessential but ambiguous parts in the play, like Shylock's lost ring and the "re-discovered" ships of Antonio, bringing to bear different methods and perspective.

Great focus has centered on four elements of the play: the casket part, the courtroom speech, the missing rings, and Antonio's missing ships. These key factors drive the story, and they depict different images of the protagonists and show the complex relationships among them. So it is necessary to examine these four parts.

## **1.2 Four major contrasts in the play**

Portia's dead father left a will for any suitors who want to marry his daughter: they must choose the correct casket box with a portrait of Portia inside of it, and if they fail they cannot have marriage again. There are three suitors in the play, the prince of Morocco, the prince of

Arragon, and the gentleman Bassanio from Venice. Each of their choices is important because of the meaning shown in the reasons three people have when they were make the choice. The first suitor Morocco chose the golden one since he thinks gold is the most precious thing in the world. But when he opened the casket, all he got was a horrible skull with a scroll next to it. And the scroll says, “All that glitters is not gold/You’ve often heard that said” (Mowat 79). Next the prince of Arragon chooses the silver casket since he thought that his supreme social status as the prince of Arragon deserves winning a girl like Portia. His choice, however, about the silver one dragged him away from Portia since the script in the silver box wrote, “... Take whatever wife you want to bed with you/You’ll have a fool’s head forever” (89). Arragon is, in Portia’s view, too arrogant to make a guess. Finally it was the gentleman Bassanio who wins the game. But his reason in choosing the lead casket and the meaning of that lead one are full of inconsistent reasons.

In Act III, Scene ii when Bassanio makes his analysis, he says to himself that, “So may the outward shows be least themselves/The world is still deceived with ornament” (107). He abandoned the gold casket since it makes people lose their judgment from its beautiful appearance. Then he also gave up the silver one since he thought that money was made of silver. Finally he chose the lead casket but didn’t give any direct reason why he likes it. When he opened it, he got the painting of Portia and read the word on the script, “You that choose not by the view/Chance as fair and choose as true” (111). Bassanio’s reason and this script became our first puzzle about the play.

Remember that the first time Bassanio told Antonio that he needed the money he said one of his main reasons is to use it as a nuptial gift and if he did marry Portia, then he would inherit

the property from Portia's dead father. Bassanio says: "...and her sunny locks/Hang on her temples like a golden fleece" (15). Does this show the hypocrisy of Bassanio? He hid his main intention from Portia and claimed that his reason for choosing the lead casket was because he thought Portia had an inner virtue just as the lead casket.

But saying that Bassanio is hypocritical is not enough to solve this question because Portia is a very intelligent female character who seems to know everything. Even though she is attracted to Bassanio, as she tells Nerissa, we still have reasons to ask: Does she know Bassanio's true intention? And if she knows it, how should we interpret the arrangement in the final act when Portia asked Bassanio to give the ring that is the same one that she had gave to him earlier? Could it be possible that she just wanted to use Bassanio as a way to break the bond she made with her father and set herself free from that marriage? If it was her true intention, why did Shakespeare make this play in a comedy? Did he only want to add a funny element to make a happy ending or did he want to express more complex ideas? I think we should not ignore this small detail. In fact there are many other "suspicious arrangements" and coincidences in the play. We must examine them in order to fully understand this play. The courtroom scene is a good example.

There is a strong link between the courtroom scene and the court part with the casket choice because there is a huge change on Portia's behavior when she left the Belmont and appeared on the court. We all know that the essential competition in the courtroom is a conflict between "mercy" and "justice". More specifically, there is a contest between *Old Testament* and *New Testament* values, as Roger Stritmatter says: "Portia's eloquent speech on mercy ... paradoxically draws its sources of inspiration from the 'Old Law'" (Roger 42). Portia has asked

Shylock three times to give mercy to Antonio and to give up the right to get one pound of flesh. When Shylock denied all her proposals, Portia read the contract again and gave Shylock the right to take one pound of flesh from Antonio but mentioned that he could not make Antonio bleed and has to make sure the one pound of flesh is exactly one pound--even a difference of a hair's weight is not acceptable. Portia said to Shylock, "Tarry a little. There is something else/This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood/The words expressly are "a pound of flesh" (Mowat 161).

So according to this logic we could see that Portia has enough confidence to win the suit at the beginning of the trial. (She is quite familiar with Venetian laws) She knows that if Shylock refuses all her suggestions about mercy, she could win the trial, but instead of mentioning the potential threat to Shylock about what will happen if he denied the offer, Portia seems to seduce Shylock into a trap that she has set for him and from which there was no chance of escape. When Shylock realized he couldn't get his pound of flesh, he asked the court to give his money back. Bassanio is preparing to give the 9,000 ducats, but Portia stops him and denies all Shylock's requests and confiscates all his properties under the edict that Shylock had threatened the safety of a Venice citizen as a foreigner. Audiences in the Elizabethan Era got an instant pleasure when they saw the bad guy gets his punishment from the smart Portia. But from the late nineteenth century, audiences started to find sympathy toward Shylock and doubt Portia's true intention. She didn't seem to be a person who held "mercy" as the most important thing. On the contrary she was the one who insisted on the justice. But this justice was not fair since it denied the right of a minority to defend itself.



How does this change of Portia link with the casket part? Can we say that she had a brutal heart beneath into her friendly face just like the gold casket's script? We know that anti-Semitic may become a reason for Shakespeare to create Portia like this since England had evicted all Jews ever since eleventh century. It could have been natural for him to separate "Jews" from "other people". (i.e. Christians) But we have to remember that Shakespeare had an intensive understanding to human nature and society, so it is unlikely that he would create a simple, one-dimensional, and stereotyped Jewish merchant. He must have had a specific reason to make Portia such a person who could be so brutal to Shylock and leave no road for him. This creates an irony beneath the play's happy atmosphere--Portia can be viewed as a tricky political leader who manipulates the people's opinion by eloquent speech and gets her will by sacrificing other people's rights. The question is: why did Shakespeare want to write this?

The reason why I insist on the belief that Portia is not just an idealized, intelligent female character Shakespeare created in order to flatter Queen Elizabeth I and fit into the people's notion of queen at that period is because there are many suspicious elements in the play that make it full of irony. Because Shakespeare had already create an irreconcilable conflict between Shylock (the Jews) and Christians, if the author simply wanted to flatter Queen Elizabeth I, then there was no need for him to make Shylock a pitied character. This attitude of pity breaks the image of Portia as a smart and gracious heroine.

Shakespeare wrote that Shylock lost the ring his wife gave to him when he was a bachelor: "It was my turquoise/I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor" (101). When you compare this to Bassanio, who also gave his ring to the "doctor", we find a strong contrast and irony about Bassanio's promise. In Act III He gave Portia his word that the ring will never leave

his finger: “But when this ring parts from this finger/Then parts life from hence/O, then be bold to say Bassanio’s dead” (109). But after the trial he violates his word and gives the ring to that “doctor”. It is natural for us to speculate that Portia won’t give Bassanio a real punishment for his betrayal since it is a comedy that this will be a happy ending. But Shylock’s great depression about losing his ring makes us see Bassanio’s dishonesty and Portia’s treatments of Shylock and Bassanio differently, since the ring could represent the bond Portia made with Bassanio, then taking off the ring from his finger means the termination of that bond. Portia, in theory, is free from the marriage since she had the right to decide whether or not Bassaino still will be her lawful husband. There is a clear implication that the ring represents the sex men could have with women. Why dose Bassanio give it to another person? Shylock seems to be the only one who didn’t violate his word or any of his promises. Antonio, Bassanio, and Jessica have all broken their promises but none of them gets the punishment for their behavior. It is Shylock alone who keeps his word and also gets the punishment. This is the greatest irony in the play, and this ring theme is the most powerful evidence that Shakespeare has more on his mind than the play’s apparent pure “comedic” surface.

At the end of the play, Antonio and his suddenly “re-discovered” trade ships also gave us a perspective to speculate Shakespeare’s true motivation about his play. At first glance, Antonio is an honorable merchant in Venice who sacrificed his life to help his friend Bassanio. Compared to Shylock, he has a kindness to lend his money without interest to the people who were in trouble. His image gradually shifts as we find out that he always insults Shylock with brutal words simply because Shylock was a Jew. This character become visible as audiences began to

feel sympathy for Shylock—Antonio, a merchant with “humors”, emerges as a gloomy, thoughtless, and pessimistic merchant who turns all his frustrations to innocent Jews.

Antonio has risked all of his fortune on overseas trading, but he still insists on borrowing 3,000 ducats from Shylock using his life as a pledge. When he got the news that all his ships were lost, he didn't make any effort to prepare the suit with Shylock but just to ask people to tell Bassanio to see him in a last time. But when Portia comes and makes Shylock a scapegoat, all his negative characters disappear, and he begins to treat Shylock differently as he forces him to change his religion.

Earlier audiences didn't think Antonio did anything wrong in making Shylock change his religion because they thought that Antonio was just helping heretics to correct themselves and have a new life. But this doesn't explain why Shakespeare didn't write the “Merchant of Venice” Antonio as a positive, enterprising, and steady man. We know that the success of Venice as a commercial center relies on its enterprising merchants and fair commercial justice. However, Antonio's behaviors lack the basic requirements for being a successful merchant. Portia's unexpected intrusion into the courtroom can also be seen as violating the principle of independent justice. In this reading, Antonio's words about what makes Venice a great commercial city loses its meaning if it was not a place where impartial justice gave its brave merchants a good environment to pursue their financial dreams.

Another important part occurs at the end of the play when Portia tells Antonio that his three trade ships have miraculously returned to the port with full commercial loads: “Unseal this letter soon. /There you shall find three of your argosies /Are richly come to harbor suddenly. /You shall not know by what strange accident /I chanced on this letter” (199). Isn't it amazing

how Portia knows and succeeds at everything? What is the meaning of these “re-discovered” ships?

Let us draw a conclusion from the four parts we have just examined. Shakespeare often uses contrast to shape his characters. Most of the time, this also makes his characters more real and complex. However, in *The Merchant of Venice*, he was not just showing the defects of those good Christian merchants in order to make them more realistic. Instead, he undercuts our previous understandings of these characters. By contrast and irony Shakespeare makes Portia lose the battle about the legitimacy and fairness of her justice and “mercy”. Shylock is the only person who never breaks his word and does everything according to his principles. Is this a play about a person who uses unfair methods to bully the weak, the scapegoat Shylock? We have to ask ourselves if Shakespeare intended this or that critics like to read according to their own background and beliefs? If the Bard did it purposely then why would he do it?

In the next two chapters I will analyze these questions by examining Shakespeare’s own life and the period when *The Merchant of Venice* was written. I will try to make a reasonable inference to explain his motivation in writing this play, and to propose a new way for readers to view this play.

## Chapter 2: Queen Elizabeth I and her time

### 2.1 The life of Queen Elizabeth and her governing of England

Many see the Elizabethan Era as one of the most fascinating periods in English history. It was a time of stability when the population continued to grow and productivity expanded, especially in the development of the wool industry and overseas trade. England's navy defeated the Spanish Armada in 1588, and they began to establish and expand its colonies in North America. All these developments contributed a lot in shaping the idea of national consciousness. Shakespeare was born in this period and witnessed the whole process of this social change.

But there was also a dark side to this era, especially if we look at the life of normal people. In the Elizabethan Era there was no free media or free speech, and the Elizabethan government openly used political propaganda and censorship to shape people's attitudes. It wasn't easy for the average person to learn the truth, and no social or economic issue could be discussed publicly. The religious conflict between Catholics and Protestants finally exploded in the war with Spain. High inflation and food shortages decreased many people's living standard and caused the ranks of "the poor" to swell.

In this chapter, I will select three main aspects of the Elizabethan Era and discuss how they could have influenced Shakespeare's life and his writing. I hope by this analysis and the combination of Shakespeare's own life, we could decide whether or not Shakespeare had hidden his true intentions in *The Merchant of Venice*. If he did then what was his true motivation?

## **2.2 Marriage, Religion, and the Spanish Armada**

Elizabeth (7 September 1533 – 24 March 1603) was the daughter of King Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn. She took the throne on 17 November 1558 and held the position until her death. She had no child and never married so people sometimes call her “The Virgin Queen”. She was the fifth but also last monarch of the Tudor dynasty. When her mother Anne’s marriage to Henry VIII was terminated, young Elizabeth was pronounced illegitimate, deprived the title “Princess Elizabeth” and became the “Lady Elizabeth”. Her half-brother, Edward VI, became the king before he died in 1553, and after a short period of turmoil, her half-sisters, the Roman Catholic Mary, inherited the throne. Queen Mary wanted to murder Lady Elizabeth; she was arrested and held in London Tower for one year due to her Protestant religion.

Her marital status became an important issue when she took the throne since people worried about the future of England if she didn’t leave any descendants. But she never married even though there were several prominent suitors. She worried that marrying foreign nobility or a king would influence the independence of England’s foreign policy. She made it clear to Parliament that she would not marry: “I have already joined myself in marriage to a husband, namely the kingdom of England” (Alison 55). There, however, has long existed a rumor about her affair with Thomas Seymour, Lord Protector of the young King Edward VI, Elizabeth’s brother. That rumor made Thomas Seymour guilty of High Treason, and he was executed in 1549. The scandal terrified the young Elizabeth and taught her a valuable lesson to protect her reputation. From the time the scandal erupted Elizabeth started to dress in a gloomy style and behaved in a prim and virtuous fashion like a traditional Protestant young lady.

When she controlled power, the first thing she did was to establish the English Protestant Church that made Queen Elizabeth I the supreme governor in both political and religious matters. But she pursued a tolerant religious policy to both religions as she once told in Parliament: “I have no desire to make windows into men's souls” (Terrance 22). But this tolerance disappeared as extremist Catholics were rumored to be planning to assassinate Elizabeth and replace her with a Catholic ruler. Queen Elizabeth changed her tolerant religious policy and began to persecute England’s Catholics. She forced all Catholics to change their religion and became a Protestant. She militarily supported the Protestants in Netherlands in their war with their Catholic government. Her religious policies made both the Pope and the Spanish King intent on her destruction. By the mid-1580s, England could no longer avoid a war with Spain that lasted for nearly 20 years.

England’s Navy defeated the Spanish Armada in 1588 and brought the whole of England a strong sense of national pride. But England still faced serious problems that stretched its limits. The cost of the war with Spain was enormous. Scholars estimated that the total cost of the war with Spain exceeded over £5 million, but in 1588 the crown’s total annual revenue was only around £392,000. Elizabeth’s government couldn’t sustain such spending on the military. The crown sought to increase taxation and to turn to temporary methods, such as selling the royal land or borrowing money, to sustain the its military operation. But England did not have a good credit rating abroad. Elizabeth began to seek to expand its domestic markets and invested in foreign adventures. But, the war with Spain and England’s fast commercial development also created a huge inflation in many areas and the bad harvests and growing unemployment in 1590s made things even worse.

These developments had different results on different classes. The booming business development and the war with Spain created huge demands for military supplies, such as ships, weapons, supplies and outfitting. War also stimulated the development of sea trade and the money lending business. The new class of entrepreneurs and merchants earned great wealth during this period. England's own industry and foreign trade also continued to grow. But for the vast majority of people, especially the lowest class, there was no benefit from the war except high inflation and food shortage. Wages did not keep with inflation and there were few "legal" wages to earn extra income. Many people died of hunger and plague in the 1590s, which were England's most difficult period of Elizabeth's reign. Faced with these severe social difficulties Queen Elizabeth and her government tried their best to mitigate the sufferings. In 1601, for example, the government instituted a Poor Law to try to help the most desperate people. But England couldn't sustain its huge military expenditures, and when Elizabeth I died in 1603, her successor James I signed the peace treaty with Spain in 1604.

Perhaps most importantly, throughout the Elizabethan Era, there was a large social transform from medieval traditional feudalism to the booming new mercantilism of early capitalism. Conflicts between different social classes emerged and Queen Elizabeth tried her best to keep a balance among them. Even though she was a representative of the monarchy which had emerged from feudalism, she couldn't ignore the emerging mercantilism since market forces fueled productivity and could increase not only the total wealth of the whole nation, but also bring more fiscal revenues to the government. She tried to create a market atmosphere for businessmen and revise some policies that could help the development of England commercial activity. Queen Elizabeth had supported overseas trade by investing her own money and even became a shareholder in a trade company. But her protection was not unlimited and since the



rising mercantilism threatened other interests of the old feudal order, Elizabeth at times found herself confining the development of mercantilism. Elizabeth opened the lending market in England but she limited its maximum legal rate to 10%. By increasing taxation during the war she had put a huge financial obligation on the shoulders of English merchants.

Shakespeare must have deeply felt these social changes, and his life was influenced by it. How did the “Bard” feel about the war with Spain? What was his opinion toward Queen Elizabeth and her policies? Most importantly, did any of these social changes and policies influence his creation of *The Merchant of Venice*? In next chapter I will make a deeper analysis of Shakespeare’s life and times.

### **Chapter 3: The other side of William Shakespeare**

Exact historical resources for William Shakespeare are limited. As Marjorie Garber said: "Every age creates its own Shakespeare" (Marjorie 113). We even don't know his exact birth date let alone his "Lost years" in the 1580s. But it is also fun for critics to draw their own images of this most talented playwright based on their research. Just like his most influential character Hamlet, there is never a consistent perspective to Shakespeare.

In this chapter I don't want to try to summarize the different opinions about Shakespeare since they can't really help us to answer our questions. I will now examine Shakespeare's religion and business activity as two main fields in my analysis. (I will also give a short review about his writing career) Since they have the most direct connections with our previous analysis about the Elizabethan Era. I hope by combining different resources we could make a logical inference about the true facts of Shakespeare's religion and business activities.

#### **3.1 Short review of William Shakespeare's writing life**

After the birth of his first son Hamnet, William Shakespeare left Stratford-Avon and moved to London to pursue his theatre career. In a few years he achieved fame as a popular playwright in London. But his talent wasn't confined in theatre alone. In 1594 he had enough money to become the shareholder of Lord Chamberlain's Men, one of the top theatre companies in London. This investment brought him long-term revenue, and five years later in 1599 he re-invested his money with his friends in Lord Chamberlain's Men to build the famous Swan Theatre and most of his famous plays were performed there. As a shareholder, Shakespeare didn't lead a luxurious lifestyle. Official records show that during this time he bought the second largest house in Stratford, called New House.

Shakespeare reveled in his ability to choose the right words to express feelings and to understand human beings' deepest emotions with a combination of metaphor and mythology. He was also a master in story--telling. Many of his plots were not original, and he was skilled at finding old stories from different sources and combined them in a different way. In *The Merchant of Venice* he combined two totally different stories in a natural way. Finally Shakespeare was a genius in creating different characters in a play with more than two plot lines. Audiences could get a deep emotional connection to a character not only from that character's own words or actions but also from the words of other characters. Those contrasts among different characters make it hard to forget those protagonists even when we watch the play again and again.

William Shakespeare excellent at writing almost every kind of play from comedy to tragedy. Many scholars believed that William Shakespeare wrote many plays, especially history plays, to justify the legitimacy of the Tudor Dynasty and Queen Elizabeth I, as a way to get the support of the Queen Elizabeth I. In *King Richard II*, we could see that the play shows the destructive results of weak and corrupt king who have been replaced by the good people, always as a relative of the original rulers. People think this was Shakespeare's way to flatter Queen Elizabeth.

### **3.2 Religion and its influence**

Many believe that there is little sense in our discussion whether was Shakespeare Catholic or Protestant. After all he is a playwright not a clergy. We respond to his ideas not his religious beliefs. As Paul Murray: "It would not, I think, be helpful to characterize Shakespeare formally as a religious dramatist" (Cools 56). I think Murray is right that Shakespeare isn't a

religious playwright. But his opinion that Shakespeare had no opinion on religious issues is not necessary true. In Shakespearean's age religion constituted a very important role in people's daily life. It was not a small thing to forbid people to believe their original religion or to force them to believe another one. Queen Elizabeth's religion policies must have had a significant role in influencing his writing—possibly, he was even a devout Catholic.

The theory that William Shakespeare was a Catholic rests on two types of evidence: the documented history, and parts of his own plays. But the historical materials from the Elizabethan period are far from comprehensive and themselves may contain many personal opinions. So in this part I have decided to leave out the uncertain historical evidence, like the Catholicism of Shakespeare's family, friends, or even his teachers. I will concentrate on his plays and try to show that he would not have written so many Catholic-related plots if he hadn't been influenced by Catholicism. But my focus is not only about what he believes but how his beliefs influence his life and plays. How did these beliefs, along with other influences, shape his attitudes toward Queen Elizabeth I and his society?

In the Elizabethan Era, strict laws required that books or theatre productions must be censored through a specific department and prohibited any religious and current political topics. But this does not mean that Shakespeare didn't write about religion; on the contrary, he wrote perhaps more than any other playwright about religion. Nowadays some get a strong sense that many of his plots are linked with a strong Catholic tradition. But his inner convictions were also very private, and readers are uncertain about any religious issues at first glance. Fr. Peter Milward, a playwright, says in a public website that: "The probability that Shakespeare was a hidden Catholic helps explain the generally recognized enigma behind his work" (Jonathan 1).

Those “hidden” parts may be far beyond the limits of a pure human emotional feeling’s discussion. But it contains a deep meditation on the principle of Catholicism. We can get a clear idea by using *Hamlet* as an example.

Shakespeare expresses his deep belief about Catholic redemption in *Hamlet*. In Act I Scene v, during the discussion between Hamlet and the Ghost, Hamlet’s dead father, the Ghost pours out his horrors in his present state, which is very much like of the purgatory in Catholic religion: “Harrow up thy soul; freeze thy young blood /Make thy two eyes like stars start from their spheres” (Werstine 35). The Ghost then talks about the most painful side of his murder. He was killed before he had a chance to confess his sins! He was unable to receive the forgiveness from the God that will make his sufferings be endless, “Thus was I, sleeping, by a brothers hand /Of life, of crown, of queen, at once dispatchd /Cut off even in the blossoms of my sin /Unhousled, disappointed, unaneld /No reckning made, but sent to my account /With all my imperfections on my head /O, horrible! O, horrible! Most horrible!” (39) King Hamlet is not merely upset by the fact that his brother murdered him when he was sleeping. Because he was asleep, he couldn’t confess his sins. Confession is a Catholic sacrament, not accepted by Protestants.

This could explain why Hamlet didn’t kill his uncle the first time when he had a chance. Because he didn’t want him to be killed when he was making a confession, since that could guarantee his entrance into Heaven after the death. Before this, all the portrayals of Claudius were just negative ones, so why does Shakespeare suddenly want Claudius to be confessing his sin? Obviously Shakespeare has an intense interest about the idea of Catholic purgatory and the Catholic sacrament of confession.

We can't prove Shakespeare's true religion by only use one play. But many of his other plays, such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Much ado about Nothing*, also have clear Catholic overtones. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Friar Laurence is a Catholic clergy who plays a crucial role in promoting the development of the story. He gave spiritual comfort and a faithful friendship to Romeo and Juliet, and he holds a small wedding ceremony for the young lovers. As to Shakespeare's own religious life, there is historical evidence connecting him to many Catholic affairs. Even if we can't find certain proof to say that he was a Catholic, we can at least say that Catholic religion made a great contribution in helping him to develop his attitudes and thinking toward human life in his plays.

### **3.3 A hardheaded businessman**

One thing to keep in mind about Shakespeare is his role as one of the few shareholders in King's Men theatre company. Some years later when the Swan Theatre was built he was also a shareholder who owned 12.5% of the total stock. Remember it was only in 1594 when he just got fame in London so we could make sure that he can't earn such a big amount of money from either writing or acting to allow him to become a shareholder of King's Men theatre. Because back to that time a playwright could only get 10 to 20 pounds (10 pounds equal around 2000 pounds today) of income from each play, and if the play was quite popular he may get an extra revenue from the total tickets but that is still far away from becoming a shareholder of a theatre company. How did Shakespeare get so much amount of money if it was not from theatre? This question leads me to find more resources about Shakespeare's social status, such as a businessman. With the help of new discovery, I think I could answer this question right now.

Another thing about his business life is that I always have a strong instinct that his business life may influence his motivation in theatre writing because he was lived in a time when

the new emerging mercantilism and capitalism got a fast development in England and people began to spend more time caring about business activities instead of the pure traditional issues. The war with Spain and Queen Elizabeth's financial policies had made a big impact on people's life, especially for those merchants and entrepreneurs like Shakespeare. Their current business could be determined by the results of a current battle.

With the help of new discoveries, our understanding of Shakespeare's business life was not only limited on the general idea that he was a very successful merchant who bought the second largest house in Stratford. We even don't what kind of business he was doing. But new evidence has shown that William Shakespeare was actually a trade dealer in food. But his way of making huge profits was not glorious. Evidence shows that Shakespeare bought the grains at the low price and sold them at a high price during the period of famine and war. Detailed information even shows that he was also a moneylender in Stratford and London, and he had been accused for avoiding the taxation during the famine.

As Jayne Archer says: "Over a 15-year period he purchased and stored grain, malt and barley for resale at inflated prices to his neighbors and tradesmen, ...Shakespeare also pursued those who could not (or would not) pay him in full for these staples and used the profits to further his own money-lending activities." Archer admitted that it is hard for people to accept the idea that a creative genius could also be a self-interested trader, and even a heartless businessman (Jayne 78). But she insisted that we couldn't get a comprehensive understanding of Shakespeare if we don't want to accept his other side. He was a normal person first who was more concerned about his family's life before writing his plays and poems.

Scholars speculate that the food shortage and his trading and lending business life could constitute his motivation for some of his plays. *Coriolanus*, for instance, is play written in 1607 that tells a story about people in Ancient Rome experiencing a hard life and food shortages. But for some politicians and businessmen, food shortages could be used as way to satisfy self-interest. Scholars speculate that the social riot in the play could be viewed as a reflection to the 1607's famine uprising of peasants in the English Midlands. It is natural for a playwright to write something that could reflect his time, and Shakespeare just did that.

The purpose of this part is neither to show the "dark side" of William Shakespeare nor to belittle his business activity. I just want people have an idea that the Bard also had his own interest besides theatre. We can't fully understand his works if we overlook his other social activities since it could determine, in some sense, what kind of things will grab his interest. How would he look at an event from his standpoint? So his work must contain the idea he had for that time and the people around him.



## Chapter 4 Final Conclusion

Now, let's combine all our previous analysis and try to link them with the play and see how we could solve those questions we have discussed at the beginning of this thesis. William Shakespeare got his fame in both popular and critical culture. His plays will always reflect the concerns people had in his time. When I found so many ambiguous plots and ironic contrasts in *The Merchant of Venice*, especially when I found the strong contrast on ring part, I knew that I needed to study the period when the play was written and make some investigations about William Shakespeare's own life. I think there could be a logical explanation if we did this work, so I have written the first three chapters. Now let's just see what I have learned from this research.

We have no disagreement that the Elizabethan Era was an important time because England, for the first time in its history, started to become a powerful state in Europe during her reign. And the emerging power of mercantilism and capitalism brought new ideas and institutions that promoted the social productivity significantly. Elizabeth's support of overseas trade also paved the way for England's colonialism. Arts and literature saw a big development in the Elizabethan era and English drama became the most shining star in the sky.

These social and economic changes and achievements, however, had been accomplished with a cost--the decline of the traditional feudalism, and these changes brought lots of pains for England, and especially for normal people. The spread of "Enclosure" brought huge profits to land owners, but small farmers were forced to leave their land and went to London for a job. The booming industry and overseas trade also brought a serious inflation problem. The religious conflict between Catholic and Protestant led to war with Spain. The burden of fiscal expenditure

left Queen Elizabeth no choice but to increase the taxation and to sell the royal lands to private owners.

William Shakespeare as both a witness and an experiencer couldn't ignore those changes in his time. Theatre was a small world where many different views were discussed by people from different places. His commercial activity and religious belief also brought him other dimensions to look at different issues. As a playwright who had an intense and deep understanding of human nature, there is a possibility that he was moved by the hard life of the poor and his own life experience could also intensify his feeling and became the motivation for his plays. That is also the reason why we have made a brief investigation of both his religious and business activities, and we found they gave us a logical answer to some of those questions we raised at the beginning.

Shakespeare wouldn't write unnecessary or contradictory parts several times by negligence and mistake. There was no need for him to mention the ring Shylock lost from his daughter Jessica, if Shakespeare didn't want to use Shylock's ring to make a strong contrast with Bassanio and Gratiano who also *lost* the rings. Or he won't either add a sentence from Portia about why she doesn't want to tell the reason that she knew Antonio's ships had been found safely. Our questions about why Bassanio chose the lead casket that looks like the least desirable could also function as an expression of Shakespeare's true ideas.

Shakespeare left us so many strong contradictions among his main characters and some ambiguous plots. The purpose of his arrangement doesn't just mean that good people may also have a bad side and there is no totally bad person. Shakespeare won't write it because throughout the play he had already created an irreconcilable conflict between the two groups who were

competing about justice. His true intention was not to use these contrasts to show the multiple dimensions of human beings but to satirize those hypocritical people who looked like a good person. I made this conclusion by thinking about his life experiences as a Catholic and a businessman.

People used to look at *The Merchant of Venice* as a comedy in which a greedy, cruel, and violent character, Shylock, got his punishment from a smart and gracious character, Portia. But in the past one hundred and fifty years, with the domination of capitalism and the development of racial equality, people no longer look at this play as a pure comedy but a problem play full of ironies. They started to treat Shylock as a pitiful character who had suffered the unfair treatments from Christians. For Portia people don't any longer treat her as just a merciful female heroine. Instead she is the one full of tricky words and cunning method, and she doesn't have any mercy toward minorities. Her enormous change once when she has been "released" from the marriage bond by Bassanio makes Portia even more elusive. When she was *trapped* into the will from her father, she looks so weak and dependent, but once when she found her future husband she became a totally different person who overshadows all other male characters in wisdom, knowledge, and bravery. When people have this new attitude in their mind, they can guess why Shakespeare created such a large irony and contrast.

There are two kinds of opinions. One opinion insists that Shakespeare did it purposely since his works are always full of humanistic care that lead him to care about people like Shylock who had suffered unfair treatment. They believe that Shakespeare had few prejudices to Jews or minorities, compared to his time and he even supported the validity of usury. So he just used this way to express his discontent of prejudices held by people in his time. Others think that

we totally misunderstand him by using our current values about the society to assume that Shakespeare may hold the same opinions as we do. They believe that we shouldn't ignore the limitation any playwrights will have in their own time. Shakespeare couldn't hold an idea to criticize the unjust Anti-Semitism or support the validity of usury since he was an Elizabethan playwright when most people haven't seen any Jews in their whole life and most of the Elizabethan people's idea about Jews only existed in the fairy tales. There could be no reason for Shakespeare to hold those ideas since it couldn't be a problem in their daily life. These people think we are wasting our time justifying some arrangements that Shakespeare may never had considered.

I think these two opinions have the same limitation. To one who believes that Shakespeare could move out of his time and ignore the prejudice of many unjust things, I think their fault lies in the fact that they have idealized the Bard so much and neglected his multiple social roles. We can't just think that because Shakespeare had a deep insight into human nature then he could move beyond his time and became a person who held the absolute standards for all justice. For the other group, they are just the opposite of the first group and easily give up the research about Shakespeare's motivation once they believe that Shakespeare can't "exceed" his time. It is true that Shakespeare can't exceed it too much but that doesn't mean he won't have some specific reasons to make him think about these issues from his own experiences.

My answer to this difficulty relies on the fact that Shakespeare's Catholic belief and his business activity could influence his attitudes towards some social affairs, such as the war with Spain and Queen Elizabeth's policies, and those attitudes became the motivation for him to write *The Merchant of Venice*. But because there was a strict censorship in that era so Shakespeare

couldn't express his ideas so directly without causing problems. He chose a comedy as way to fulfill the needs of people who want to enjoy an easy while funny story in hard times and created a positive image of Portia to flatter Queen Elizabeth. Under this safe protection he could express his true ideas.

We know that Shakespeare borrowed from two different Italian books to write *The Merchant of Venice*. But he changed Shylock's business activity from normal moneylending to a shameful usury business. This adaption made Shylock guilty of being both a Jew and a usurer. If we think that Shakespeare only wanted to create a pitiful character being humiliated because of his objection to anti-Semitism, then why did he have to add the usury as another "defect" for Shylock? The explanation is that he wanted to criticize anti-Semitism and prove the legitimacy of usury simultaneously. But as we have already discussed, anti-Semitism is not the kind of a possible question an Elizabethan person would think about, let alone relating it to usury and criticizing these two separated traditional values at the same time. Jews were always related with moneylending, so people may think about these two things together. But to ask an Elizabethan to criticize them at the same time just because he objected to anti-Semitism is an impossible thing. So how should we look at this ambiguous arrangement?

I think this small change supports my assumption that Shakespeare just wanted to use Shylock as a scapegoat to express his criticism about Queen Elizabeth's economic and social policies. Because he can't write about Catholicism and Protestantism directly, he used Shylock's racial problem to imply his Catholic and business identity. And by satirizing Portia's brutal treatment of Shylock in the name of justice, Shakespeare expressed his dissatisfaction with Queen Elizabeth's policies. There is a high probability that he had to pretend to be a Protestant in

order to survive in that era just as Antonio asked Shylock to become a Christian in order to save his life. Since we assume that Shakespeare was also a successful businessman whose activity also included trading and lending money, then it was natural for him to add usury to Shylock's lending business. We know that Shylock made a great contribution to the prosperity of Venetian commerce. If there were no moneylenders in Venice, people would lose their chance of making money and Bassanio could not have a trip to Belmont. But even if Shylock had made so many contributions, people like Antonio still hate him.

The reason why we don't have enough information about Shakespeare's business life could also be inferred from Shylock's experience. If he was really a grain trader who sold his food at a high price at the famine time and lent money to people who needed it desperately at a high interest rate, this would have been illegal. People were easy to ignore his contribution as providing the necessary food at the hardest time and lend money to people to make their own business. They judged people by *morality* not by their practical contributions. Shakespeare could have a sense that as an emerging commercial class he had to undertake these unfair treatments from the old social values. He knew he couldn't change too much about social prejudice, so he would first protect himself by living a low-key life and then he may express his dissatisfaction to this unjust treatment.

Now we could look at Portia. We know that Queen Elizabeth I had changed her tolerant policy to Catholics after assassination threatened her life and finally led to a war with Spain. If we say Shakespeare wanted to use Portia as an embodiment of the Queen herself then we could find many similarities between these two females. At first glance Portia was a tender, plaintive female character who wanted to meet the right person. When her future husband Bassanio saved

her from her father's "will" she appeared to become dependent on him. But when she decided to save Antonio and disguised as a man, she became a totally different person full of wisdom, eloquence, and courage. She expressed a totally different male characteristic that overwhelmed all the other characters. Isn't this the same as Queen Elizabeth? Her childhood life was full of political conspiracies that made her very careful about her future actions. She studied hard to become a well-educated lady who treated people polite and friendly. Once when she broke the bond and took the throne, she began to show a totally different face that was full of energy, diplomacy, and courage.

Portia's treatment of Shylock in the courtroom scene was also like Queen Elizabeth's treatment of Catholics. She had no sympathy for Shylock when she gave Shylock the right to fulfill his contract: she set a trap for him. She acted like a brutal ruler who had left no road open for her enemy. She, instead of showing the mercy, which she demanded of Shylock, uses a very subjective "justice" to rationalize her plunder of all Shylock's properties. She abandons the "mercy" which is the core element in the *New Testament* (Christian) and accepts the "justice" that is in the *Old Testament* (Jewish). Remember that Elizabeth also treated English Catholics very brutally. She abandoned her tolerant views of religion and forced Catholics to change their religion and persecuted those who disobeyed the rules. Her policy and propaganda also made most of her citizens think that these Catholics deserved what they had received. Under this comparison Portia was just another version of Queen Elizabeth in that play.

Shakespeare's ironic writing could also be viewed as a way to defend the contribution merchants have made for England back to that time. Remember that it was not Shylock but Bassanio who first made a request to borrow money to become an eligible suitor of Portia. And

the reason why he needed so much money was that he spent a prodigious life that made him use up all the money he bought from Antonio. It was Shylock and his 3,000 ducats that made it possible for this young man to become the husband of Portia. Bassanio made an adventurous investment with that money and he won the game at last. But in the end Shylock not only loses his principles but also loses all his property.

I think this was Shakespeare's idea to use the role of Portia as a way to mock Queen Elizabeth I and her government because they did the same things to English merchants that Antonio did to Shylock. The war with Spain exceeded the government's fiscal limitation and made Queen Elizabeth have no choice but to raise taxes, sell more royal land, and borrow more money. It was those merchants and businessmen, Shakespeare was one of them, who made the most contributions in terms of money lending and taxation support that helped the English government survive during the hardest years without creating big social turmoil. But Shakespeare's own experiences, such as the suit against him for tax evasion and accusations against him of usury, justify his dissatisfaction with Queen Elizabeth. If Elizabeth's government didn't make a war with Spain, then there would not have been high taxation and food shortages, and Shakespeare may not have resorted to questionable practices. It was Queen Elizabeth's policies that made what they called "shameful business" necessary. Those merchants made a great contribution to the prosperity and safety of England, but they didn't get the proper encouragement, and most of the time they were treated as heartless people.

Shakespeare may even feel that the war is just a good excuse for political leaders to maximize their interests under the name of patriotism. He may have suffered or witnessed the unfair treatment from the government to merchant class during the war. Therefore his motivation



for *The Merchant of Venice* could be viewed as his way to object and criticize these unfair treatments.

Combing all those things we might find that Shakespeare's Catholic religion and business status gave a reasonable explanation about why he created a complex villain who actually did nothing wrong but just fulfilled his social duties. If we treat Portia as Queen Elizabeth I, Shylock as the innocent British merchants and businessmen, (Shakespeare may think he was one of them) then we could also say that Bassanio represents the weak Parliament and indebted government, while Antonio is the representative of arrogant Protestant merchants. Then we could find that it became much easier for us to look at those intense contrasts and ironic plot arrangements.

Shakespeare's theatrical success in *The Merchant of Venice* proved that the audience had great enjoyment watching how a greedy Jew gets his punishment from a smart female heroine. It also fulfills the government's desire to show the embodiment of Queen Elizabeth's wisdom and strength through the role of Portia. But deep in Shakespeare's heart, his feelings toward Queen Elizabeth were paradoxical; it was a choice between individual interest and national benefit. As we know, Shakespeare could have many complaints about Elizabeth, from religion to financial policies, at the same time he must have had some aversion to the Spanish army since they were invading his country and Elizabeth did her best to protect England. Although he may have been a devout Catholic, he was also a citizen of England. It was a tough decision for him to keep his religion private while supporting his government publicly. With all these multiple considerations, William Shakespeare wrote this mysterious play full of irony and contrast. He was talented enough to accept a middle ground politically, while achieving the high ground dramatically in *The Merchant of Venice*.

## Works Cited

- Archer, Jayne Elisabeth, Richard Marggraf Turley, and Howard Thomas. Food and the Literary Imagination. London: Palgrave Macmillan P, 2014.
- Barnet, Sylvan, ed. Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Merchant of Venice. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1997.
- Cools, Arthur, The Locus of Tragedy. New York: Brill Press, 2008.
- Garber, Marjorie. Shakespeare After All. Norwell: Anchor P, 2005.
- Garrett, Lauren. "True Interest and the Affections: the Dangers of Lawful Lending in *The Merchant of Venice*." *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 14.11 (2014): 32-62. Print.
- Klein, Terrance W. "Windows into Men's Souls." *America Magazine* 29 Nov. 2013: 22-23.
- Luxmoore, Jonathan. "Experts, Historians Explore Shakespeare's Catholic Sympathies." *Catholic News Service*. 31 Oct. 2014. 20 March 2015  
<<http://www.catholicnews.com/data/briefs/cns/20141028.htm>>
- Mabillard, Amanda. "Shakespeare's Sources for *The Merchant of Venice*." *Shakespeare Online*. 20 Aug. 2000. 14 April 2015 <<http://www.shakespeare-online.com/sources/merchantsources.html>>
- Mahon, John W., and Ellen Macleod Mahon. The Merchant of Venice: Critical Essays. New York: Routledge, 2013.
- Mowat, Barbara A., ed. The Merchant of Venice. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004.
- n.p. "Elizabeth I and Finances." *HistoryLearningSite.co.uk*. 2014. Web. 14 April 2015  
<[http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/elizabeth\\_finance.htm](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/elizabeth_finance.htm)>
- n.p. "Shakespeare's Last Will and Testament." *Shakespeare's Biography Website*. n.d. 23 March 2015 <<http://www.bardweb.net/man.html#links>>
- Smith, Emma, ed. Shakespeare's Comedies. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004.
- Sommerville, J.P. "Elizabeth I, Parliament, Church and Economy." *Faculty History Website*. 12 May. 2006. 12 April 2015 <<http://faculty.history.wisc.edu/sommerville/361/361-16.htm>>
- Stritmatter, Roger. "'Old' and 'New' Law in *The Merchant of Venice*: a Note on the Source of Shylock's Morality in Deuteronomy 15." *Notes and Queries* 47.1 (2000): 70-72. Print.
- Weir, Alison. The Life of Elizabeth I. New York: Ballantine Books, 1999.
- Werstine, Paul, ed. Hamlet. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003.