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# **Human Rights and Duplicity in Measures in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*(\*)**

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Human Rights and Shakespeare**

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## **Abstract**

Although William Shakespeare lived and wrote his works during the Renaissance period, his works are never time or age-specific. His themes are relatable in all ages. His characters can be easily identified with by various peoples. That fact is what makes for their universality. As a result, his works are adapted, re-interpreted, and re-appropriated all over the world up till now. This paper aims at offering a re-reading of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* in the light of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948. Hence, it shows *The Merchant of Venice* from a different perspective. It also aims at pinpointing the duplicity in measures used by the characters when dealing with other people's rights, a duplicity that is presented by Shakespeare as part of human nature.

## **Keywords:**

Human Rights – Duplicity in measures – Shakespeare – *The Merchant of Venice* - Racial discrimination – feminism – Christianity and Judaism

## حقوق الإنسان والازدواجية في تدابير شكسبير ، تاجر البندقية

### مستخلص البحث:

على الرغم من ان وليم شكسبير قد عاش و كتب أعماله في عصر النهضة الا ان أعماله تجاوزت اي زمان ومكان فان تيمات اعماله تتطبق على كل العصور وايضا شخصياته يمكن للشعوب المختلفة التوحد معها وهذا ما يجعلها تنسم بالعالمية.

نتج عن ذلك ان اعمال شكسبير يتم تكييفها واعاده تفسيرها وتعديلها في جميع انحاء العالم حتى عصرنا هذا ولهذا فان هذه الورقة البحثية تهدف الى تقديم قراءة جديدة لمسرحية شكسبير "تاجر البندقية" في ضوء المذكره العالميه لحقوق الانسان الصادره عن الامم المتحده عام ١٩٤٨ ومن ثم سيتم تقديم المسرحيه من منظور اخر.

كما يهدف البحث الى إظهار الإزدواجية في المعايير من قبل أشخاص المسرحية عند التعامل مع حقوق الآخرين وهي ازدواجية قدمها شكسبير على انها جزء من طبيعه الانسانيه

### الكلمات الداله:

حقوق الانسان - ازدواجيه المعايير - شكسبير - تاجر البندقية - التفرقه العنصريه - النسوية - المسيحية واليهودية

### Introduction

The aim of this study is to uncover the multitude of human rights highlighted by William Shakespeare in his play *The Merchant of Venice*, written in 1598, and to pinpoint the duplicity in the measures used by the characters when dealing with the issue of human rights. This aim will be achieved through examining *The Merchant of Venice* in the light of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948. This declaration is a means of re-appropriating *The Merchant of Venice*.

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) is a renowned English dramatist of the Renaissance. His works are apt to interpretation and re-interpretation throughout the ages, for the content is not age or time-specific. His works are known for their universality. As

confirmed by Alan Sinfield, “Shakespeare’s drama is considered as “an influential medium through which certain ways of thinking about the world may be promoted and others impeded” (1994, p. 156). He is “one of the places where ideology is made” (Sinfield, 1994, p. 156). Sinfield adds that [Shakespeare’s] “plays do not have to signify in the ways they have customarily been made to... he has been appropriated for certain practices and attitudes, and can be re-appropriated for others” (1994, p. 161). That is why people still study Shakespeare up till now. For example, Seema S.R. offered an eco-critical reading of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's dream* in 2016. Julian Fellowes adapted *Romeo and Juliet* in his film “Downton Abbey” in 2013. Also, V. Luong studied the translation of Shakespeare's works in Vietnam in 2016. His plays are even adapted for children in a series entitled *Shakespeare Retold* that is presented on BBC offering ten stories based on Shakespeare’s plays. Thanky confirms that Shakespeare is a man of all times by affirming, “actually Shakespeare was never especially relevant, and that’s probably the secret of his longevity” (2017, p. 359). She adds:

The Bard has not become obsolete because he wrote about human issues that have remained unchanged over the years.

There are few, if any, other authors who can claim to be truly of universal significance... universal in the sense that different cultures and successive generations have found inspiration in their works and have decided to re-interpret them again and again. Even without the magic of his language, his tales have traveled well through space and time: across cultures, across generations, across mediums .... (Thanky, 2017, p. 359-60)

Egan too asserts that, “the greatest strength of presentism is its recognition that the present is the place from which critics must start any encounter with Shakespeare’s work” (2006, p. 173). Therefore, any work by Shakespeare “is not a final product of its age, but a productive practice of both its moment and our own” (Ryan,

2002, p. 15). It is a work that can be interpreted and re-interpreted for ever and ever. Ryan adds, “Shakespeare could be read and taught in ways that bring the dimensions of past constraint and modern viewpoint -- the moment of production and the moment of reception -- into dynamic reciprocity” (Ryan, 2002, p. 15). That fact about Shakespeare is the reason why this interdisciplinary research paper is written; it offers a new perspective of Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* in the light of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948.

As for the UNUDHR<sup>1</sup> 1948, it is a landmark document in the history of humanity, for it is among the crucial steps towards spreading peace all over the world. This Declaration was issued by the UN after WWII. Many states, which were members in that organization, decided to write a document that includes the essential human rights that all nations should abide by. This document was written and agreed upon by fifty states under the supervision of Eleanor Roosevelt, the first lady of the United States. It was an attempt by the whole world to live in peace and security, that is why “it has been translated into over five hundred languages” (www.humanrights.gov.au, 2019). This declaration is “an international document that states basic rights and fundamental freedoms to which all human beings are entitled” (www.un.org, 2019). It includes thirty articles dealing with the basic rights of all people, no matter what their race, colour, sex, religion, social class, or origin is. It also includes the right to live, to be free, to be respected, to be treated justly, to own, to have privacy, to enjoy a secure living ...etc. In order to spread the content of this document, it has been taught at various educational institutions.

### **Human Rights and Duplicity in Measures in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*:**

As stated in Article 1 in the UNUDHR 1948, “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with

reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.” This article underscores love that should be the only boundary between human beings. Since all the people enjoy the same blessings like “reason” and “conscience” and are “equal in dignity”, so they should respect each other and love should tie them together. There is no need for jealousy, hatred, greed, revenge war ... etc. Instead, freedom, equity, and love, as mentioned in this article, are the only means for a peaceful enjoyable living. This human right is evident in *The Merchant of Venice* mainly in the relationship between Antonio and Bassanio. Antonio believes that the world is a stage, “where every man must play a part ...” (I.i.78), so all the people are equal. Thus, this equity makes it easy for people to show love toward each other. Bassanio reveals his love to Antonio in: “To you Antonio / I owe the most in money and in love” (I.i.129-30). Antonia replies, “... be assured / my purse, my person, my extremist means / lie all unlocked to your occasions” (I.i.136-38).

Despite the fact that Antonio has no money to lend Bassanio, he agrees to borrow money with interest from Shylock for Bassanio’s sake. He assures Bassanio, “Thou know’est that all my fortunes are at sea, / neither have I money nor commodity / to raise a present sum; therefore go forth; / try what my credit can in Venice do” (I.i.176-9). Later, when Bassanio was heading to Portia’s house, Antonio advises him to enjoy his time and forget about the bond. He even cries when parting from him. Solanio comments on the scene saying, “I think he [Antonio] only loves the world for him [Bassanio]” (II.viii.50). Bassanio, later on, describes Antonio as “the dearest friend to me, the kindest man, / the best-conditioned and unwearied spirit / in doing courtesies...” (III.ii.290-92). When Antonio was to lose his life at the hands of Shylock, Bassanio assures Antonio, “But life itself, my wife, and all the world, / are not with me esteemed above thy life./ I would lose all, ay, sacrifice them all / here to this devil, to deliver you” (IV.i.280-84), and he offers Shylock three times the amount of money

needed, yet Shylock refuses. In fact, as Olson declares, “both Antonio and Bassanio stand ready to lay down their life for the other” (2003, p. 324). Ironically, Antonio, who shows love to Bassanio and to everybody in his country, refuses to show love to Shylock. He informs Bassanio that “the devil can cite Scripture for his purpose; / an evil soul producing holy witness / is like a villain with a smiling cheek, / a goodly apple rotten at the heart” (I.iii.91-4). This hatred for Shylock is due to his being Jewish, a point that will be explained in details later.

Love to humanity is also exemplified in the character of Portia. Although she does not know Antonio in person, she knows how Bassanio loves him. That makes her willing to do anything to save Antonio as she highly values mutual love among humankind. Portia assures Lorenzo:

I never did repent for doing good, / nor shall not now; for in  
companions / that do converse and waste the time together, /  
whose souls do bear an egall yoke of love, / there must be  
needs a like proportion / of lineaments, of manners, and of  
spirit. (III.iv.10-15)

Thus, she disguises herself as a lawyer and saves Antonio at the end of the play.

Another human right shed light upon in *The Merchant of Venice* is the right of servants. This right is so obvious in the character of Launcelot, Shylock’s servant. As Burnett states,

The ways in which servants are represented in English  
Renaissance drama and culture ... point to attempts to  
understand and control the changes that were challenging the  
contemporary order and disclose fears of political instability,  
disorder and social frustration and unrest. (1997, p. 5)

Burnett adds that “the apprentice’s striving for independence, reluctance to remain within the bond of the household and identification with political causes anticipate a later historical moment, another social formation, the irregular enforcement of

apprenticeships and the decline of the guilds” (1997, p. 46). Launcelot, Shylock’s servant, is seen complaining to his father of how badly treated by Shylock he is:

I am famished in his service. You may tell every finger I have with my ribs. Father, I am glad you are come; give me your present to one Master Bassanio, who indeed gives rare new liveries; if I serve not him, I will run as far as God has any ground. (III.ii.94-99)

In fact, Launcelot claims his human rights.

According to Article 4 of the UNUDHR 1948, “No one shall be held in slavery or servitude”. Thus, Launcelot should be treated by his master, Shylock, as an equal. Also Articles 5 and 25 emphasize Launcelot’s right for a good living and adequate living conditions. Article 5 states that, “No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment”. Therefore, it is inhuman to keep Launcelot “famished” without enough food. At least he should have his basic needs of food and shelter. Moreover, Article 25 emphasizes the same human right in: “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.” Thus, by depriving Launcelot of his basic right, his right to have enough food, Shylock subverts the dictates of the UNUDHR 1948. Shylock should provide Launcelot with all his needs. However, when Shylock does not do that, Launcelot asks to move to Bassanio’s service. He complains to Bassanio about Shylock: “the old proverb is very well parted between my master Shylock and you, Sir; you have the ‘grace of God’, Sir, and he has ‘enough’” (II.ii.133-5). In brief, Shylock is a miser who deprives Launcelot of most of his rights, unlike Bassanio, a man known for his generosity.



Another right highlighted by Shakespeare in *The Merchant of Venice* is the right of women to have a say just like men. By presenting this right, Shakespeare was actually ahead of his times. He promoted equality in areas that the rest of his society disapproved of. As stated by Lynda E. Boose, “marriage, sex, and family have emerged as a topic of special interest not just in literature but in all Renaissance disciplines...” (1987, p. 709). She adds that “the ideology of the father-headed, father-named nuclear family had emerged in the 1500s as the discourse defining the family unit...” (Boose, 1987, p. 711). Women “were excluded from the projected ideals of self-fulfillment and self-fashioning, of personal achievement and mobility” (Loomba, 2004, p. 799). It was only through men that women were defined. They were to adhere to their stereotypical image of being obedient and subordinate to men. First as a daughter and then as a wife, a female was just a property of a man, whether a father or a husband. She should follow the orders and commands of the patriarchal figure. Steen states: “The research reveals Renaissance stereotypes of a good woman to have been remarkably consistent and sanctioned by the patriarchy” (1988, p. 136). She further mentions that “English law, religion, and ... literature supported the image of the ideal woman as humble, submissive, quiet, nurturing, sexually chaste, pious, and obedient to appropriate male authority” (1988, p. 136).

This patriarchal obedience on behalf of women has even taken a religious dimension. In fact, a female’s compliance to the society’s code of ethics and conduct was her only way to heaven. One of the treatises taught in the Elizabethan period read as such:

Children haue always to remember, that whatsoever they do to their fathers and mothers (be it good or evill) they do it to God ... when their parents are iustly angrie with the, [sic] God is angrie with them: neither can it bee that they may come to haue the favor of God againe .... (Clever, 1598, p. 352)

Therefore, children must “preserve the good name vpon their parents, get them honest and ... [be] a Crowne of glory to them, euen after death” (Bernard, 1629, p. 31). So if a female disobeys her father or husband, she is flouting the laws of God, as was promoted in the Renaissance. However, Shakespeare’s Portia, the main female character in *The Merchant of Venice*, is presented differently by Shakespeare.

It is true that Portia obeys her father and follows his order concerning the way to choose a husband, yet she is always seen complaining and criticizing that way. In his will, Portia’s father dictated that the suitor that chooses the right casket, from among the gold, silver and lead caskets, that contains Portia’s portrait will marry her. Portia, like other females of her age tries to comply with her father's will. She “humbles herself before the law of her father,” as Olson declares (2003-4, p. 304). She assures Nerissa, “I will die as chaste as Diana, / unless I be obtained by the manner of my father's will” (I.ii.91-2). As mentioned by Plowden,

In a society based on the family unit ruled by the benevolent despotism of husband and father, filial obedience was an essential ingredient of peace and stability. It was, therefore, a virtue highly prized by parents, who were generally considered within their right to enforce it, where necessary, however brutally. (1998, p. 81)

Portia also informs Bassanio, “I could teach you / how to choose right, but then I am forsworn; / so will I never be” (II.ii.10-12). Portia decides to follow her father's order although it is against her will. Indeed, “the operations of patriarchy seek to extend the control and authority of man as father over women ...” (Loomba, 2004, p. 800).

However, Portia has the seeds of rebellion within her. As Dusinberre reveals, “submission is a garment she [Portia] wears as gracefully as her disguise” (1996, p. 85). That is to say, Portia acts as

a submissive daughter, while in reality she questions the plausibility of her father's will together with the Elizabethan society's stereotypical idea about women. As Kaplan asserts,

She does not passively and obediently accept her father's will dictating the terms of her marriage, but she complains about them, expresses strong opinions about her suitors, and may even manipulate the test to favor the suitor she prefers. She assumes male garb and authority in masquerading as a young doctor of the law. (2007, p. 28)

Through his portrayal of Portia as a rebellious female, Shakespeare shows a tendency to resist the norms of his contemporaries.

According to the UNUDHR 1948, Article 1, “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights”. Moreover, Article 2 states that “everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set force in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status”. If we examine Portia in terms of what is stated in the above articles, we will find that she should have all rights as a human being, no matter what her “sex” is. In fact, Shakespeare was keen in *The Merchant of Venice* to present Portia as a woman who questions the socio-cultural ideas about women and shows awareness of her right, as a human being, to choose her husband. Portia reveals to Nerissa how difficult it is to follow what her father decreed:

If to do was as easy as to know what were good to do, chapels had been churches, and poor men's cottages princes' palaces  
... I can easier teach twenty what were good to be done than  
be one of the twenty to follow my own teaching. (I.ii.11-5)

Her disagreement with the society's regimented role for daughters is obvious in her words to Nerissa:

O me, the word 'choose'! I may neither choose who I would,

nor refuse who I dislike, so is the will of a living daughter  
curbed by the will of a dead father. Is it not hard, Nerissa, that  
I cannot choose one, nor refuse none? (I.ii.19-24)

These words are an implicit call by Portia for her right to choose her future partner. Ryan comments that “the freedom of thought, speech and behaviour she displays when alone with her maid Nerissa, or when disguised in male apparel as the lawyer Balthazar, only accentuates the constrictions of her normal identity as obedient daughter and, subsequently, submissive wife” (2002, p. 21-2).

Moreover, as stated in Article Sixteen in UNUDHR 1948, “men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family .... Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses.” Portia seeks that right as she wishes she had the right of choosing Bassanio as a husband. She assures him: “so may you miss me; / but if you do, you’ll make me wish a sin, / that I had been forsworn” (III.ii.12-4). She laments the fact that she does not have that right, but, implicitly, she calls for it. Her disapproval of her father’s way of choosing a husband is also obvious in: “O, these naughty times / put bars between the owners and their rights! And so though yours, not yours” (III.ii.18-20). “Times” here can be understood as a reference to the Elizabethan age in which the socio-cultural stereotypical idea about females, as submissive, obedient and subordinate, is like a bar between her and the one she loves, namely Bassanio.

Not only does Portia ask for her right to choose her future husband, but she also defends Antonio's right to live. She disguises herself as a lawyer and does her best to convince Shylock to show mercy to Antonio and accept taking the money instead of taking a pound of Antonio's flesh. As stated in article three in UNUDHR 1948, “everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.” Thus, Portia believes that Shylock should not deprive Antonio of his right to

live through claiming his forfeit. Portia pleads for Antonio by asking Shylock more than once to show mercy to Antonio. She pleads to Shylock, “Then must the Jew be merciful.” (IV.i.178). She gives a long speech about mercy so as to convince Shylock to forgive Antonio. She declares, “The quality of mercy is not strained; / it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven / upon the place beneath; it is twice blest. / It blesseth him that gives, and him that takes ... / we do pray for mercy ...” (IV.i.180-196). However, Shylock refuses to listen and insists on having his right by the law. Thus, Portia again pleads for the same cause in: “Be merciful, / take thrice thy money; bid me tear the bond” (IV.i.229-30). Nevertheless, her pleas are useless. As a result, she resorts to a trick to preserve Antonio’s right to live. She informs Shylock that he can take a pound of Antonio’s flesh but without shedding a drop of blood, as blood is not mentioned in the bond. Moreover, he should not take more or less than just a pound of flesh, or he will be punished. Thus, she is able to save Antonio and preserve his right to live.

However, despite the fact that Portia knows and calls for human rights, whether her right to choose her partner in marriage or Antonio’s right to live, she ironically denies other people their rights. This duplicity in measures manifests itself more than once in *The Merchant of Venice*. First, Portia denies the Prince of Morocco of being judged according to his personality and not his skin colour. Some background information is necessary here. Since the classical time, black or dark skin always carried negative connotations among European peoples, in Europe, for the white race considered them inferior. As Kaplan mentions, “Roman images frequently represent dark-skinned people as servants, while Christian theology increasingly associates black skin with sin and the devil; ultimately, it becomes the sign of an evil, unredeemable nature” (2007, p. 4). Black skin was viewed “as a mark of God's disfavour” (Hunter, 2000, p. 39). The Elizabethans even impersonated the devil “in the body of a Moor”

(Hunter, 2000, p. 57). They frequently wondered whether the Moor is a human being or a monster” (Hunter, 2000, p. 56). Thus, white skin was associated with Christians while black skin indicated “inferiority, sinfulness, religious alterity and evil” (Kaplan, 2007, p. 4). That is why “the cult of Elizabeth is a cult of whiteness,” as Erickson mentions (1993, p. 517).

For Elizabethans, the Moor was an other. As declared by Harris, “the appearance and conduct of the Moors was a spectacle and an outrage, emphasizing the nature of the deep difference between themselves and their visitors ...” (2000, p. 35). Despite the fact that non-white people had their own character-traits, “a uniformity is conferred upon them by their common differentiation from white civilization” (Loomba, p. 803). By examining Portia’s way of dealing with the Prince of Morocco, the Moor, it is obvious that she deals with him while mindful of the stereotypical idea about black Moors in the Elizabethan society. Before Portia meets the Prince of Morocco, she assures the serving-man: “if he have the condition of a saint and the complexion of a / devil, I had rather he should shrive me than wive me” (I.ii.111-2). That is to say, his complexion is criticized by Portia even before meeting him. Then, when the Prince chooses the wrong casket, she comments saying, “Draw the curtains; go; / – let all of his complexion choose me so” (II.viii.78-9). Despite the fact that Portia claims that the Prince of Morocco has full right to marry her if he makes the right choice, she, inertly, despises him for his skin colour.

Ironically, Article 3, that gives Portia her right as a woman, is the same article that gives the Moor his right to be treated as well as any other human being, no matter what his “race” or “colour” is. Therefore, the Prince of Morocco should not be judged or dehumanized because of his skin colour. As Ridley states, “there are more colours than one in Africa, and that a man is black in colour is no reason why he should, even to European eyes, look sub-human” (1958, p. i). That is why the Prince of Morocco is seen defending his

right to be judged for his personality. He starts his speech with Portia saying:

Mislike me not for my complexion,  
 the shadowed livery of the burnished sun,  
 to whom I am a neighbour and near bred.  
 Bring me the fairest creature northward born,  
 where Phoebus fire scarce thaws the icicles,  
 and let us make incision for your love,  
 to prove whose blood is reddest, his or mine. (II.i.1-6)

He emphasizes that his face is black because of the sun, but that shows nothing about his nature. As a human being, his heart is full of love for Portia.

Another duplicity in measures used by Portia in terms of human rights is clear in the way she deals with Shylock. Deep inside, Portia knows that Shylock has full right to Antonio's pound of flesh, yet, Portia, disguised as a lawyer, does her best and succeeds in preserving Antonio's right to live; however, she denies Shylock his right to his money. Shylock, when losing hope to take Antonio's pound of flesh, accepts to take the money. He says, "I take this offer then; pay the bond thrice, / and let the Christian go" (IV.i.314-5). However, Portia refuses saying, "he shall have nothing but the penalty" (IV.i.317). Again Shylock accepts to take the money without any interest as clear in: "give me my principal and let me go" (IV.i.332). However, Portia again insists on him taking the pound of flesh without shedding blood: "Thou shalt have nothing but the forfeiture" (IV.i.339). She even goes so far as to deprive him of his money and possessions:

It is enacted in 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 coffer of the state,  
and the offender's life lies in the mercy  
of the Duke only ... (IV.i.344-52).

By showing no mercy to Shylock and exhibiting an intention of depriving Shylock of his money, which is his main source of living, Portia deprives Shylock of his life. He comments saying: "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" (IV.i.371-3). Thus, Portia uses a double standard when seeking her rights while denying other people theirs. This fact is intended by Shakespeare to reflect human nature, a nature that is known for its dichotomy; When it comes to taking, people are conscious of their rights, but when it comes to giving, people overlook the others' rights. By highlighting this feature in his characters, Shakespeare creates characters that are life-like. They reveal the human nature and thus, people from different ages can relate to them

Not only does the play *The Merchant of Venice* address the right of the female, Portia, the Moor, and the servant, Launcelot, but it also tackles the characters' right to have freedom of belief. This is so vivid in the characters of Shylock, Antonio and Jessica. Shylock is hated by the people for being a Jew. Racial representation of the Jews at the time of Shakespeare, and as obvious in *The Merchant of Venice*, as Kaplan maintains, "draws upon a similar set of ideas developed in medieval England" (2007, p. 2). In medieval England, Jews were viewed as "sinful religious others" (Kaplan 2007, p. 10) and as "political aliens" (Shapiro, 2000, p. 128). They were looked upon as inferior and as sinners as they were, for Christians, the killers of Christ. By the year 1290, "the entire Jewish community of England had been expelled and forbidden on pain of death to return ..." (Greenblatt 2004, p. 258). He adds, "England was the first nation in medieval Christendom to rid itself by law of its entire Jewish



population” (2004, p. 258). At the time of Shakespeare, there was hardly any Jew left in England. However, the beliefs about the Jews remained. To the Christians of the Elizabethan period, “there was no difficulty in recalling the nature of the Jewish threat, a threat which was never-ceasing” (Hunter, 2000, p.54). Their aim was to “protect Englishness from the potentially contaminating influence of Jewishness” (Shapiro, 2000, p. 135). Jews, for them, were by nature villainous, unnatural, coldhearted” (Greenblatt, 2004, p. 259). Thus, Shakespeare and other Elizabethan writers still used the Jews in their works as “conceptual tools” (Greenblatt, 2004, p. 259). They remained in works of art and in everyday conversations and, in Venice, they remained as money lenders.

In fact, Shakespeare made use of the negative stereotypical idea about Jews in his works. “The evidence of the plays suggests that the old framework of assumptions about Jews, Turks and Moors -- and this means theological assumptions -- provided the controlling image in his [Shakespeare's] mind” (Hunter, 2000, p. 53). Therefore, in portraying Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare presents the people’s detestable image of the Jew. He makes use of “such beliefs to rationalise or prescribe the racial group’s treatment in society as well as to explain its social position ...” (Solomos and Collins, 2010, p. 3). Shylock is presented as “the rigid, inflexible representative of the old law, an unforgiving, remorseless, embittered, and murderous alien who threatens the happiness of the entire community” (Greenblatt, 2004, p. 280). Not only that, but also “Jewish usury itself was seen by Shakespeare's contemporaries as more than an economic fact. It was an anti-Christian practice only proper to Jews ...” (Hunter, 2000, p. 54).

For all the previous reasons, Shylock is mistreated by the characters in *The Merchant of Venice*. Shylock comments on Antonio saying, “he hates our sacred nation ...” (I.iii.41). Antonio calls Shylock a devil and a villain in: “mark you this, Bassanio, / the devil

can cite Scripture for his purpose” (I.iii.90-1). Furthermore, Shylock accuses Antonio of mistreating him, and Antonio does not deny:

Signior Antonio, many a time and oft  
In the Rialto you have rated me  
about my moneys and my usances  
Still have I borne it with a patient shrug,  
for sufferance is the badge of all our tribe.  
you call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog,  
and spit upon my Jewish gabardine... (I.iii.99-104)

Antonio replies, “I am as like to call thee so again, / to spit on thee again, to spurn thee too” (I.iii.123-4). Also, Antonio makes fun of Shylock in front of Bassanio, “Hie thee, gentle Jew. / [To Bassanio] The Hebrew will turn Christian, he grows / kind” (I.iii.172-4). For Antonio, “Shylock is wholly other, viewed through the lens of his difference. Shylock is something less than fully human and Antonio treats him as such” (Bilello, 2004, p. 25). This ill-treatment of Shylock as a Jew is aggravated at the end of the play by Antonio’s condition that Shylock becomes a Christian in order not to lose half his money. Antonio states, “two things provided more, -- that for this favour / he presently become a Christian; / the other, that he do record a gift, / here in the court, of all he dies possessed / unto his son Lorenzo and his daughter” (IV.i.382-86). This demand is the peak of Shylock’s ill-treatment as a Jew. Greenblatt believes that this forced conversion “is an attempt to evade the nastier historical alternatives: the grisly execution Shakespeare may have personally witnessed ...” (2004, p. 280).

However, it is still considered unfair to force somebody to convert to another religion, as stated in the UNUDHR 1948. The dehumanization of Shylock as a Jew recalls articles one, two, seven, and eighteen in the UNUDHR. According to article one, “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights ...” That is not the case with Shylock. He should have the right to be judged for who

he is, for his personality. Nobody should oblige him to convert to Christianity. According to article two in the UNUDHR, “race, color, sex, language, religion ... etc” should not matter when it comes to human rights. Thus, Shylock should not be treated inhumanly just for belonging to a certain race or religion. Shylock calls for equity; he wants to be treated as any human being as clearly manifested in the following speech:

Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs,  
Dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the  
same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same  
diseases ... 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! (III.i.46-52)

This speech is very significant as it clearly shows Shylock’s appeal for justice and equality. He wants to be treated as Christians are treated. He should enjoy the same rights of a Christian, or at least be treated as a human being.

Moreover, as stated in article seven of the UNUDHR 1948, “all are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law.” Although Portia claims that she is implementing the law on Shylock in: “the Jew shall have all justice” (IV.i.316), yet it is not likely that she could have done the same if the convicted was a Jew. She plays with the law to save a Christian friend. Portia informs Shylock,

This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood;  
the words expressly are ‘a pound of flesh’;  
take then thy bond, take thou thy pound of flesh,  
but in the cutting of it, if thou dost shed

one drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods are (by the law of Venice) confiscate unto the state of Venice (IV.i.302-8).

Furthermore, in Article 18, it is clearly stated that “everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance.” Therefore, in *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock should have the right to remain Jewish and to act as such. Antonio has no right to deprive him of that right for any reason.

It is not only Shylock who is ill-treated as a Jew and deprived of his rights, but, ironically, Antonio himself is hated by Shylock for being a Christian. This duplicity in measures is used by both Shylock and Antonio. Shylock is ready to take Antonio's life had it not been for Portia's interference. It is as early as in act one that Shylock shows his hatred for Christians. He assures Bassanio, “I will buy with / you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you, and so / following, but I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor / pray with you” (I.iii.28-31). Few minutes later, Shylock states it directly that he hates Antonio as a Christian: “I hate him for he is a Christian ... / if I can catch him once upon the hip, / I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him” (I.iii.35-40). He later informs Jessica that he accepts to have dinner with Antonio and Bassanio but out of hate. It is part of his plan to have full control over Antonio when he fails to pay the money in time: “But yet I'll go in hate, to feed upon / the prodigal Christian” (II.v.14-5). When Antonio fails to pay the debt, Shylock seeks revenge through insisting to take a portion of Antonio's flesh: “it will feed my revenge. He hath disgraced me, and hindered me half a / million -- laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains ...” (III.i.43-4). He later adds: “I am very glad of it -- I'll plague him, I'll torture him -- I am / glad of it” (III.i.94-5). Antonio keeps pleading for his right to live: “Hear me yet,

good Shylock” (III.iii.3). Later he says, “I pray thee hear me speak” (III.iii.11). However, Shylock refuses to listen neither to his pleas nor to the pleas of others for him. He insists, “I’ll not be made a soft and dull-eyed fool, / to shake the head, relent, sigh, and yield / to Christian intercessors” (III.iii.14-6).

This double standard as used by both Antonio and Shylock towards each other is very ironic. Whereas each of them asks for his right to live, to be loved, and to be treated fairly as any other human being, yet each is full of prejudice against the other merely for his religion, whether it is Christianity or Judaism. They pursue freedom and equity as mentioned before in articles one, two, seven and eighteen of the UNUDHR, yet deprive others of it, a feature of all human beings.

It is also worth mentioning that Jessica, Shylock’s daughter, is damned by her father when she runs away to convert to Christianity and marry Lorenzo. When Shylock learns that, he comments saying, “she is damned for it” (III.i.25). He exclaims, “my own flesh and blood to rebel!” (III.i.27). He could not accept the idea of her turning into Christianity. On the other hand, Jessica was happy for what she did: “I shall be saved by my husband; he hath made me a Christian!” (III.v.15). She has taken her right to choose her religion, a right mentioned in article eighteen in the UNUDHR 1948: “everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion ....” Thus, Jessica is proud that she became Christian.

### **Conclusion:**

To conclude, in *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare skilfully tackles numerous human rights such as the right of the female, the right of the Jew, and the right of the Moor. By doing that, Shakespeare is far ahead of his age, as he discusses issues that are later formulated into theories such as Feminism and Ethnic Studies. His characters are typical manifestations of controversies about human rights that are mentioned in the United Nations Universal Declaration

of Human Rights, that was written three centuries later, in 1948. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare does not only expertly shed light on fundamental human rights, but he also shows the duplicity of measures used by the characters in terms of human rights. This double standard that the characters use when judging others is what gives the play its universality as this is exactly the nature of mankind. Whereas man is so attentive to his rights, he neglects or even denies the rights of others. As declared by Thanky, “Shakespeare is still so popular because he understood the human character and its weaknesses and imperfection” (2017, p. 362).

Notes:

- <sup>1</sup> The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights is abbreviated as UNUDHR

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