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Ideas of Judaism in *The Jew of Malta* and *The Merchant of Venice*

Matthew Wilson

DWC 202—C 27 “Judaism” as an Idea in Western Civilization

6 May 2024

Out of all of Western literature, perhaps no two characters have come to represent Renaissance thinking surrounding Jews and Judaism more than Marlowe’s Barabas and Shakespeare’s Shylock. Both plays in which they appear (*The Jew of Malta* and *The Merchant of Venice* respectively) were written at a tumultuous time in English history, during which the nature of usury and moneylending in a Christian society was in question. Because of this, each playwrights employ ideas of Judaism—long associated with the practice—within their characters in order to give commentary on the issue. And, in doing so, both of their Jewish characters have come to represent the many ways in which Western society at the time thought about and used ideas of Jews and Judaism to critique aspects of their own culture.

Despite there not being any Jews in London at the time that each play was written, both Shakespeare and Marlowe had clear visions of what makes a person “Jewish” in their minds. Since both writers were Christians and existed within a predominantly Christian society, there is little doubt that much of their perspectives on Judaism came from the so-called “Pauline dichotomies” incorrectly interpreted from the Letter to the Galatians. These binaries—which are present in many, many works of Western literature ranging a variety of genres—are very much represented in both characters. According to these dichotomies, while Christians “receive the Spirit” through “faith,” Jews slave under “observances of Law” that are concerned with the “flesh.”¹ In practical

¹ Gal. 3:2-3

thought, this came to mean an association between Jews/Judaism and usury and moneylending, since the hording of wealth was seen as a fleshly pursuit. In the character of Barabas, this Pauline dichotomy comes across almost immediately. The very first scene in which he appears, Barabas is found within his counting-house musing upon how he has “pursed [the] paltry silverlings”² of men and feeling much “satisfied” over the “ventured summed” through financing trading ships.³ Here, Barabas’ “Jewishness” goes hand in hand with his usury: he takes such pride in his wealth *because* he is Jewish, and, from the audience’s perspective, he is Jewish *because* of his love for worldly goods. The same can be said for Shylock, whose character is also informed by Pauline dichotomies. Shylock is, same as Barabas, a merchant, and Shakespeare goes out of his way to associate him with the word “flesh” in juxtaposition to the “faith” of the Christians around him. The most notable example of this takes place during the infamous business transaction of Act I when Shylock asks for a pound of Antonio’s “fair flesh” as payment, to which the Christian, thinking the man to be in jest, replies with an enthusiastic “Content, in faith!”⁴ The Jewish-Christian binary is more than obvious in both characters, and audiences recognized Barabas and Shylock as Jewish simply due to how pervasive these ideas of Judaism were in similar Renaissance literature of the time.

But the idea of Judaism in both *The Jew of Malta* and *The Merchant of Venice* goes well beyond simply crafting recognizably Jewish characters. In both plays, Judaism is employed as “a powerful tool of cultural critique” aimed at each playwright’s audience.⁵ In a time when usury and lending with interest is a common and legally condoned practice, the question becomes whether or not taking part in such a worldly operation makes one more “Jewish” than “Christian.”

² Christopher Marlowe, *The Jew of Malta*, annotated Peter Luckas (ElizabethanDrama.org, 2020), 1.1.6.

³ Marlowe, *Malta*, 1.1.1-3.

⁴ William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice* (Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1.3.142-5.

⁵ David Nirenberg, “Shakespeare’s Jewish Question,” *Renaissance Drama* 38 (2010): 79.

Obviously, this question is not over ethnicity or even religious beliefs; one does not need to have any sort of conversion to act more or less Christian or Jewish. Rather, the question lies more or less within paradigms of Judaism and Christianity not much different from the Pauline dichotomies already mentioned: if a person is acting in a way that is more focused on worldly matters, then they are acting “Jewish,” whereas if they are acting based on spiritual principles, then they are acting “Christian.” *This* concept, much akin to “a compass needle trembling between Judaism and Christianity,”⁶ is what makes both Shylock and Barabas so powerful in their respective works: they both operate not as actual representation of Jews but instead as critiques of “Jewish” practices in a Christian society.

In the case of Barabas, much of the traits associated with Jews at the time—greed, vengeance, et cetera—are portrayed to a “singleminded”⁷ excess. Because of this, while Barabas can come across as “absurd and unreal,”⁸ this does have the upshot of making him a rather provocative and powerful image that “confronts us in the strongest way.”⁹ One instance of this “over-the-top” representation comes even before the opening scene: the prologue to the play begins with a character named “Machiavel”—an obvious reference to Machiavelli—presenting the audience with “the tragedy of a Jew” whose “money was not got without [his] means.”¹⁰ Marlowe is anything but subtle in his comparison between the two (at one point, Barabas even assumes a level of political power), and clearly we as an audience are meant to associate the evils of Machiavellian thinking with the evils of usury and other “Jewish” behavior. Like the prince whose only goal in life was political power, Barabas “is ruled by the single desire of heaping up infinite

⁶ Nirenberg, “Jewish Question,” 80.

⁷ Arthur Humphreys, “*The Jew of Malta* and *The Merchant of Venice*: Two Readings of Life,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 50, no. 3 (Summer 1987): 279.

⁸ Israel Davidson, “Shylock and Barabas: A Study in Character,” *The Sewanee Review* 9, no. 3 (July 1901): 337.

⁹ Humphreys, “Two Readings,” 280.

¹⁰ Marlowe, *Malta*, prologue lines 30-2.

riches,” which in the pursuit causes him resort to scheming, scamming, poisoning, and murder. All of these actions, while in the guise of vengeance against Christians, seem to “originate from his own wicked nature.”¹¹ It is not some external force that facilitates his crimes but rather his own “Jewishness,” his innate desire for all things worldly, that fuels his motives and actions in the play. There is little to no goodness, or “Christianity,” within Barabas; he is almost entirely of carnal origin. Marlowe even alludes to the fact that Barabas sometimes “go[es] about and poison[s] wells”¹²—a common accusation against Jews, especially following the Black Death—in order to heighten his evil nature. In the context of Elizabethan England, this certainly is not meant to apply to real-world Jews, if not simply due to the fact that there were none. Barabas then, while the epitome of “Jewishness,” cannot stand for anything but those Christians who lent money at high rates of interest in London. He is the representation of those who care too much for fleshly matters and fail to prioritize the spiritual. These people, while Christians, are acting like “Jews,” and, as with Barabas, are on the path to becoming evildoers themselves. And though he is being extreme for the sake of comedy, Marlowe is offering to his audience a bitter warning for those who want to “act like Jews” and take part in this seemingly un-Christian business.

But beyond just criticizing moneylending in particular, Marlowe seems to pull in ideas of Jewishness in order to critique any Christian society as a whole that is built upon earthly (rather than spiritual) desires. A character like Barabas represents all that is wrong with the institution of usury and moneylending; however, only a society in which these practices are legal and commonplace can accommodate (in any significant sense) people like Barabas—or, in a more broad sense, behave like “Jews.” And this is true for the play itself, whose society, while under the

¹¹ Davidson, “Shylock and Barabas,” 345.

¹² Marlow, *Malta*, 2.3.275.

guise of Christian leadership, often bends its values away from spiritual matters when money comes into question. In that same scene where Barabas proudly claims to occasionally poison wells, he also admits to practicing “psychic,” another term for medicine, and having “enriched the priests with burials” due to how many patients he killed.¹³ While Barabas is being facetious, this subtle line of dialogue hints towards Barabas’ worldly, “Jewish” practices garnering material wealth for some Christians, priests in this case, who would normally represent spiritual values. More shockingly comes the first of scene of Act IV, in which a set of friars fail to obtain a confession of poisoning out of Barabas, and instead the Jewish merchant manages to cause a fight among the two Christians, each one clamoring to have Barabas join their respective convent and “donate” all his wealth to them.¹⁴ Marlowe is once again anything but subtle here: if a society built upon Christian values is so easily persuaded to throw aside spiritual matters in the face of worldly gain, then such a society is acting more “Jewish” than “Christian.”

And if all of this is true for Barabas, then it is also true for Shakespeare’s Shylock, who, in many ways, is a reflection of Marlowe’s character (both are Jewish merchants in a Christian society that are meant to reflect the values of Judaism present in such a society). However, where Barabas’ character is certainly one of extreme wickedness, Shylock represents the more “myriad-minded and richly humane” writing of Shakespeare.¹⁵ There is a real human quality to the character of Shylock that is completely absent in Barabas, to the point that some scholars have claimed that there exists “not the slightest affinity” between the two.¹⁶ While Marlowe’s merchant seems to

¹³ Marlowe, *Malta*, 2.3.280-2.

¹⁴ Marlow, *Malta*, 4.1.

¹⁵ Humphreys, “Two Readings,” 279.

¹⁶ Davidson, “Shylock and Barabas,” 337.

revel in and proudly profess his multitude of wrongdoings, Shylock appears more as a the victim of a Christian society that oppresses Jewish men:

“He hath disgraced me, and hindered me half a million, laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned by nation, thwarted my bargains... and what’s the reason? I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?”¹⁷

The fame of this passage goes without saying, and many have hailed it as a representation of Shakespeare’s humanity and tolerance. However, while this passage certainly does offer a level of sympathy to Shylock that Marlowe never gives to Barabas, it cannot be forgotten that Shakespeare is employing “fleshly” language in Shylock’s speech, going back to Paul’s binaries. The only shared humanity between Shylock and the Christians around him are their fleshly qualities (both a Jew and a Christian have organs and feelings, of course), but at no point in Shylock’s monologue is there any semblance of spirituality, of something in Shylock that is more than just worldly. This important distinction has been seemingly lost on some interpreters of *The Merchant of Venice*, but without this context, unpacking the full extent to how and why Shakespeare includes these important ideas of Judaism are lost on the reader. This monologue of the fleshly nature of Shylock is meant, it would seem, to set up the trial scene, where the Jew’s strict adherence to the law—another Pauline dichotomy—leads to him losing the case because he is unable to do the Christian thing and exhibit “mercy,” which, in accord with the spirit, “droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven.”¹⁸

Shylock’s humanity is hardly meant to put “Jewishness” on par with “Christianity”—there is questionable doubt that Shylock, despite converting, will ever truly *be* Christian. Instead, Shakespeare, as with Marlowe, uses these ideas of Judaism to challenge his audience’s perception

¹⁷ Shakespeare, *Venice*, 3.1.43-7.

¹⁸ Shakespeare, *Venice*, 4.1.180-1

of a world in which fleshly matters lurk beneath the guise of spirituality. If Shylock the Jewish merchant is focused so much on fleshly pursuits that he is utterly unable to grasp at the spirit, then what is to be said of Antonio the Christian merchant? Shakespeare casts reasonable doubt as to “Which is the merchant here and which the Jew?”¹⁹ In this way, Barabas and Shylock, while plenty different in their representation of Jewish humanity, are not cut from different cloths. Both exist as conglomerations of ideas of Judaism that go back as far as the first century, and each are used by their respective playwright in order to offer critique of their own Christian audiences. So while there is plenty of ink to be spilled on Shylock’s realism compared to the more absurdist Barabas, in terms of the use of common ideas of Judaism, both playwrights were on the same page.

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¹⁹ Shakespeare, *Venice*, 4.1.170.