'The very devil incarnation': the dramatic function of the Jew in *The Jew of Malta* and *The Merchant of Venice*

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The sudden boom of growth, change, productivity and development in Renaissance England was as much responsible for instigating a vast level of social upheaval as it was for laying the foundations of modern civilisation, as we know it. Trade, travel and empire all began to play an increasingly important part in the socio-political landscape of English culture; scientific development advanced significantly; art was growing in sophistication, and consequently taking on an ever more crucial role in culture; and the boundaries of social hierarchy were interrogated as never before. Thus, issues such as race, religion, gender and class became frequent topics of debate, and this is reflected in both the shifting hegemonic ideology and in the literature of the age. The handling of racial issues in the Renaissance is of particular interest, for whilst transitions in the church, humanitarian concern on behalf of the deprived classes and early movements for gender equality created huge divisions of opinion, each of these had their roots in more familiar concerns. Foreign exploration and the building of empire, however, brought an aspect into English life that was altogether ‘alien’. The socio-political influence of other cultures, together with the appearance of foreign traders and slaves, prompted a whole range of different views in terms of economic and societal change, which manifested itself both through prejudice and liberality. Certainly, to the public in the Renaissance, foreign figures represented a marginalised minority and thus were viewed as strange or ‘other’; racism, fuelled by widespread misconception and negative stereotyping, became common, and it is this issue that Marlowe and Shakespeare seek to debate in (respectively) *The Jew of Malta* and *The Merchant of Venice*. What is surprising – especially considering the superficial resemblance in terms of plot and narrative structure between the two plays – is the way in which they do this so differently. Using characters who appear to represent the archetypal Jewish figure, both writers consider the role of an outsider in a Western, fundamentally Christian society in terms of politics, prejudice and identity. Crucially, however, Marlowe and Shakespeare take markedly different approaches in terms of the use and function of the Jew in each play. Perhaps most significant is the way in which Shylock is not a central character in Shakespeare’s play, whereas Barabas is placed in the role of protagonist in *The Jew of Malta*. 
In many ways, it is Marlowe’s central placing of his principal Jewish character – a protagonist from a culture of which he arguably knew very little – which leaves *The Jew of Malta* more widely open to criticism of anti-Semitic writing: the combination of limited cultural knowledge and the desire to create an appealing character inevitably invites the tendency to fall back upon stereotype. The apparent malicious and vengeful characteristics of the play’s protagonist further exacerbate this branch of critical analysis. In many cases, this has had the unfortunate effect of tainting critical analysis for the play to the point where the text’s representation of Jewishness is generally considered with a high level of hostility. Peter Berek, for instance, calls Marlowe’s Jew ‘a monster: shrewd, self-absorbed, rapacious, devious, gleefully contemptuous of religion and morality’ (1998, 137). That this has become a common viewpoint is hardly surprising, especially considering the often farcical level of villainy to which Barabas eventually descends. Taking into account the way in which the protagonist is presented in the early sections of the narrative – prior to his ‘downfall’ – however, Berek’s reading can be considered somewhat limited. Arthur Humphreys puts forward a less biased argument, suggesting that ‘Whether as great merchant or ingenious avenger, Barabas is the supreme operator. Yet the professed Christians are no better, and act by act Marlowe’s inventive gusto shows them up for the double-dealers they are’ (1987, 286). Humphreys’ statement raises a crucial point, suggesting that the play is as much about Christianity (and, by default, Western society) as it is about Jewishness. Indeed, this is something that can be said of both *The Jew of Malta* and *The Merchant of Venice*. Each play fundamentally interrogates racial characteristics and identity by means of juxtaposing two very different cultures. Such is the level of injustice that the Jews suffer at the hands of the Christian government, in Marlowe’s first act, it seems odd that the text’s principal Christian figures are not critically attributed with the same villainous qualities which many perceive Barabas – and, through implication, the Jewish race as a whole – to possess. Although it is not possible to entirely absolve him of his sins, the forced repossession of the protagonist’s wealth almost certainly provides the catalyst for his malicious behaviour. Taking this into account, perhaps it would be more accurate to suggest that Marlowe’s Jew is merely the reflection of – or reaction to – a ‘monstrous’ society.

In many ways, *The Jew of Malta* is a play which thrives upon such cultural juxtaposition, particularly as it becomes used as a method through which to explore different racial identities, religious divides and cultural differences. Indeed, there is a sense of paradox present in the text from the outset: Machevill and Barabas’s opening speeches, for example,
concurrently present us with two completely contrasting images of Jewishness. That the first reference to Barabas is of ‘a Jew, / Who smiles to see how full his bags are crammed’ (Prol. 30-31), as though this is the character’s single most defining attribute, is especially significant. Machevill’s statement heavily reinforces the clichéd stereotype of the Jew as greedy and miserly, suggesting that Marlowe immediately attempts to place his audience in a position of intentionally biased perception against Barabas. With this in mind, it isn’t difficult to see why so many critics have described The Jew of Malta as an anti-Semitic text. What marks this out from being a work of prejudice, however, is the way in which this negative archetype is immediately counteracted in Barabas’ speech, at the opening of the first act, wherein he states ‘what a trouble ’tis to count this trash!’ (1.1.7). In showing his central Jewish character as resentful of his wealth we immediately get the impression that Marlowe is, in fact, challenging a cultural stereotype through offering an alternative perception of apparently typical racial characteristics. At first, this instance of racial countertype seems to be a one-off. Barabas is repeatedly seen to define anything of value – be it material or otherwise – in terms of wealth and commodity: his opening speech, for example, is laden with frequent references to money and precious jewels. In fact, this hints at a greater paradox, for in a play where money is recurrently associated with power, it is ironic that Malta’s Jewish population is marginalised and repressed.

Stephen Greenblatt states that ‘Marlowe’s heroes fashion themselves not in loving submission to an absolute authority but in self-conscious opposition’ (1984, 203) and this is an important element of the narrative, because it is upon this sense of conflict and tension between two cultural factions that the play thrives, the apparent critique of Jewish society actually reflecting a repressive Christian hierarchy. In this sense, Barabas’ role is two-fold. Firstly, he provides the literal voice of scepticism, in response to the Christian system of values upon which Malta is governed, who ‘can see no fruits in all their faith, / But malice, falsehood, and excessive pride’ (1.1.115-116). He is, however, limited in this function: the Renaissance audience’s general level of anti-Jewish prejudice would mean that Barabas’ words would be considered self-pitying and thus received with scorn. For this reason, it is important that the character also works on a metaphorical level: an unwitting product of Western society, whose racially stereotyped identity is actually used as a feature of rhetoric to highlight the hypocrisy of Western civillisation and religion. For a start, Marlowe seems keen to reinforce the notion that it is Western society which is responsible for creating and perpetuating the clichéd Jewish image. When Barabas is summoned to the governor, the first
Knight dismissively shrugs off the implication that the government could require Jews as soldiers, effectively constructing a fixed racial identity for him through his assertion that ‘thou art a merchant, and a moneyed man’ (1.2.53). The intentionally satirical implication is clear: the Jew’s only social value is one of wealth. And, as Greenblatt again argues, ‘not only are Barabas’ actions called forth by Christian actions… his identity itself is to a great extent the product of the Christian conception of a Jew’s identity’ (1984, 207). Therefore, to a large extent, it could be argued that Marlowe’s use of Jewish stereotype is one of parody, serving as little more than a dramatic function to project villainy onto the Maltese government – and, more generally, the sixteenth century society of the spectator – and therefore highlight their own flaws.

Never does Marlowe create a greater level of sympathy for Barabas than in Act I, Scene II where the government makes their demands upon the Jewish citizens. By insisting that the protagonist give up ‘half his estate’ (1.2.71), convert to Christianity – or, failing this, be deprived of all possessions – the character is placed into a position whereby he is victimised regardless: either his material wealth is seized or his cultural identity is repressed; if he fails to acquiesce, he is persecuted. In short, Barabas is placed in a position of total restraint, particularly considering that his protests are taken as an immediate unwillingness to submit. Still, even this rare moment – which provides a marginalised race with a voice and highlights Jewish mistreatment – is less surprising than Marlowe’s portrayal of Christians as willing persecutors, a heavy sense of irony in their belief that ‘excess of wealth is cause of covetousness: / And covetousness, oh ‘tis a monstrous sin’ (1.2.124-125). In fact, not only is it the Christian government who covert the wealth of the Jews, they attempt to justify it through claims of righteousness. Barabas himself highlights this irony, retorting ‘your extreme right does me exceeding wrong’ (1.2.154). Also of importance is the way in which Marlowe elaborates upon the reasoning behind Barabas’ refusal of the government’s demands. Rather than playing upon a racial stereotype of Jewish stubbornness, Barabas’ subsequent conversation with the other Jews shows the character’s genuine sense of pride and value, both for his religious heritage and personal achievement. Furthermore, the Barabas of the first act displays an obvious love and affection for his daughter, taking recompense in her appearance and seemingly prioritising her needs in the recovery of his wealth. Arguably, in fact, these scenes show Barabas as the most sympathetic, morally commendable and humane figure in the narrative. Even considering a justified desire for vengeance, the character’s shift towards villainy is almost unprecedented. In relation to this, Simon Shepherd talks of ‘the
treacherous power of the man who presents this morality to us’ (1986, 177), and yet it could be argued that even Marlowe’s portrayal of such distinct dual-identity has its function in the text, contrasting the reality of racial persecution with stereotype and parody for just long enough to stir up compassion without veering too far from audience expectation.

Although arguably attempting to achieve similar ends, Shakespeare creates a much more ambivalent portrayal of Jewishness. Indeed, one of the crucial distinguishing differences of The Merchant of Venice – in comparison to Marlowe’s text – is the way in which the narrative actively explores cultural liminality, where The Jew of Malta focuses upon racial binaries. This sense of ambiguous identity is mirrored by the play’s Venetian setting ‘where the tension between indigenous and alien subjectivity may be dramatically pursued to the point of violent dialectics’ (Oz 1997, 188). By allowing for the existence of ‘otherness’ – Italy’s mixed-race community created something of a fractured cultural identity for the nation in the Renaissance era – Venice itself acts as an important metaphor for the actions played out in the text: ‘a convenient prototype of nowhere-land’ (Oz 1997, 189). Crucially, this allows Shakespeare to create a world where the Jews are interwoven throughout Christian society, rather than in opposition to it. Thus, whilst Marlowe goes to greater lengths to highlight the way in which Jewish misdeed actually reflects the harshness of Western religiopolitical hegemony, Shakespeare is able to show Jews more comfortably operating within such a society.

In many ways, it is this very ambivalence, which leads to a more obviously favourable portrayal of Jewishness. For this reason, although the text still incites a good deal of divided opinion, critics have tended to consider The Merchant of Venice more favourably than The Jew of Malta in terms of Jewish representation. Herbert Bronstein, for instance, argues that ‘Shylock is portrayed not as a hateful character, but one who commands our sympathies’ (1969, 3). Admittedly, taking the play at face value, evidence for this is initially scarce. Solanio mocks Shylock for viewing his daughter, Jessica, in the same way he views his money, playing upon the cliché that the Jews consider everything in terms of commodity. Launcelot Gobbo calls the Jew ‘the very devil incarnation’ (2.2.25), whilst Shylock, in desiring ‘to feed upon / The prodigal Christian’ (2.5.14-15), even represents himself as a parasitic figure. Such statements, however, display an intentional ambiguity on Shakespeare’s part. The clown, by his very nature, speaks with double meaning and satire; Solanio authentically represents the voice of Western prejudice; Shylock ironically mimics this
prejudice through his own self-deprecating portrayal. Furthermore, many elements of the text can be interpreted with ideological duality. For example, Shylock’s apparent hatred of Antonio – ‘for he is a Christian’ (1.3.40) can be paradoxically viewed as a satire of the blind loathing with which the majority in English Renaissance society viewed the Jewish race. Furthermore, as James O’Rourke points out, ‘Shylock’s scathing account of his customary treatment by Antonio… suggests that Shylock’s hatred for Antonio does not originate in his nature as a Jew, but is the result of having been continually harassed by Antonio’ (2003, 377).

If we are to consider Shakespeare’s representation of Shylock as purely villainous, even this is too often misread. Modern western critics frequently approach portrayals of the Jewish race with the baggage of post-war cultural anxiety – a trend that has only subsided in recent years – resulting in a tendency to perceive Shylock with disproportionate negativity, compared to other Shakespearean villains. The character’s importance as both a comic and tragic figure in the play is also often underestimated. And yet, this is not to deny that Shakespeare does use a certain amount of racial cliché in the text. That Shylock would ‘rather choose to have / A weight of carrion flesh, than to receive / Three thousand ducats’ (4.1.39-41), for example, shows the character in a thoroughly malicious light, initially raising questions as to whether Shakespeare actually reinforces negative stereotype. It is unlikely, however, that this is merely an illustration of prejudice, especially considering the playwright’s frequently evident liberal humanism. Even this example of Shylock’s apparent characteristic spite evidences how the play shirks the common clichés of Jewishness: Shylock appears more concerned that his bargain with Antonio is fulfilled than that his debt is repaid, showing both that money is not his main concern and that he holds some code of honour and value. Arguably, the narrative intentionally colludes with negative Western stereotype, both as a means to satirise the ideological prejudice of such cultural ignorance, and as a way of presenting the text’s message in a form that will appeal to Western audiences. As such, Shakespeare – like Marlowe – uses the Jew as a character of rhetoric. As a particularly vilified figure in Renaissance society, the Jewish stereotype effectively plays a dual-role in the play, creating audience appeal and allowing Shakespeare to attach the deterioration of values which accompanied the rise of capitalism: a recurring motif throughout the narrative. As Bronstein suggests, ‘in Shakespeare’s time, the Jew symbolised usury, and Shakespeare could most forcibly express the evils he was attacking in the figure of a Jew’, but his aim was in fact to ‘attack the greed and materialism of the Christians all about him’ (1969, 8).
Ultimately, in terms of racial representation, *The Merchant of Venice* is a text of paradox, irony and ambiguity, challenging the different ethnic perceptions in Western society at the same time as seemingly reinforcing them.

Considered within the confines of their respective narratives, the function of the Jew in Marlowe and Shakespeare’s works appears to differ considerably. That *The Jew of Malta* can be seen as a text which both discusses the role of Jewishness but arguably ‘figures only as a satire of hypocritical Christianity’ (Humphreys 1987, 281) seems contradictory, but it is this sense of racial binary upon which it thrives. Shapiro’s suggestion that ‘a Christian is the antithesis of Jew and yet, in certain circumstances, is potentially indistinguishable from one’ (1996, 8) in *The Merchant of Venice*, meanwhile, marks Shakespeare’s work out as one of extreme liminality. The roles of Barabas and Shylock are indeed markedly different, and yet – considered in a metaphorical sense – they actually perform a very similar social function, particularly as catalysts for authorial social critique. Arguably, that this critique should be an anti-Semitic one is a gross misconception, for whether as a representation of, or reaction to, a Christian-dominated world, the use of Jewish characters in each play actually suggests more about the Western societies they inhabit. In turn, although each narrative takes place abroad, this can be seen as a reflection of the England in which Marlowe and Shakespeare lived: a country trying to assert its identity in an ever-expanding world, a country attempting to establish itself as an imperial power, and a country which – despite its developments in science, technology, art and politics – appeared to be becoming more corrupt and degenerate. In this sense, the Jews in Marlowe and Shakespeare’s texts do not function as literal racial critiques, as many have interpreted them to be, but as convenient allegories for each writer’s concern over the possible degeneration of societal values in the hands of a dominant Christian hegemony.

**Bibliography**


