

The Evolution of Jewish Representations from *The Jew of Malta* to *The Merchant of Venice* from the Perspective of New Historicism

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Abstract

In the 16th century, there was a deep-rooted anti-Semitic cultural soil in Britain. Taking New Historicism as the analytical framework, this paper examines the representation of the Jewish “Other” in Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta* and Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*. Marlowe simplifies Barabas and Abigail as cold symbols lacking in immanence. On the contrary, Shakespeare embeds Shylock and Jessica in the humanized emotional spectrum and psychological struggle. The differentiation of the two dramatists at the level of characterization is not only a literary projection of the ideological changes of their respective times, but also a reflection of the complex interaction mechanism between literary practice and social history.

Keywords

New Historicism; Jewish “Other”; *The Jew of Malta*; *The Merchant of Venice*; anti-Semitism.

1. Introduction

Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593) was one of the core members of the “University Wits”, and his iconic “mighty line” have profoundly promoted the development of drama in the Elizabethan period. In contrast, William Shakespeare (1564-1616), who was born a civilian and did not receive a university education, broke through the limitations of the times with his outstanding creative power, and Ben Jonson had a comment that “He was not of an age, but for all time”[1].

Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta* (1589) and Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* (c. 1596 - 1597) both take Jewish merchants and their daughters as the main characters to show the tension between the Jewish community and Christian society in the Renaissance. The two plays not only responded to the social and religious anxiety at that time, but also participated in the shaping process of several core practices of early modern drama.

England in the sixteenth century was characterized by the simultaneous advance of religious strife and trade expansion. The doctrinal opposition caused by the religious reform further eroded the basis of trust between different faith groups. The growth of overseas business activities poses new challenges to lending practices and moral judgment. In this context, the literary representation of the Jews-although the group was officially expelled at that time-became a symbolic operation with a heavy ideological load.

The academic research on the two plays has accumulated a lot of results: Hua Yu (2020) explored the anti-Semitic narrative in *The Jew of Malta*[2]; Feng Wei (2022) saw the evil of Barabas as a stage projection of social anxiety[3]. Jin Lingjie (2004) examined the racial and religious oppression suffered by Shylock[4]. Using Freudian concepts, Yao Wenhao (2022) connected the anxiety of Jewish return and the psychology of the island of England [5]. Liu Wengang (2021) explored memory discipline and text-history interaction in *The Merchant of Venice* from the perspective of costume symbols [6].

Although the existing achievements have made significant contributions, there is still a lack of investigation on the Jewish father-daughter interaction model. Based on the approach of New

Historicism, this paper examines how the two plays present Jewish father-daughter relationship, and focuses on the synchronic control of patriarchy and religious power over marginal communities. Therefore, this study further clarifies the evolution of anti-Semitic attitudes in the British Renaissance.

2. Theoretical Framework: New Historicism

2.1. Origins and Development

New Historicism sprouted in the late twentieth century, and its theoretical motivation lies in the critical sublation of formalism and historical determinism. Stephen Greenblatt first defined the term “New Historicism” at *Genre* in 1982, making it an identifiable category of criticism [7]. In the 1980s, Louis Montrose deepened this theoretical framework with the two propositions of “historicity of text” and “textuality of history”, and understood literary interpretation as an endless intertextual dialogue between text and historical production conditions.

2.2. Core Concepts

The core concern of new historicism is embodied in two interrelated propositions. One is related to the ontological nature of history : Hayden White regards historical writing as a narrative structure, and believes that historical narration completes the production of meaning by borrowing the plot paradigm of literary genres such as tragedy and romantic drama, and is essentially a product of discourse organization [8]. The second is the definition of the existence of the text: Montrose emphasizes that literary practice is always embedded in the power network of a specific historical period, and the text interpretation out of context will inevitably lead to the loss of its deep meaning [9].

New historicism breaks through the traditional cognition of “literature passively reflects society,” and emphasizes the constructive role of text in the formation and maintenance of power dynamics. This interactive perspective constitutes the theoretical core of Greenblatt’s so-called “cultural poetics.” He regards literature as a cultural field full of tension, in which ideology and power intersect through the circulation of “social energy” he describes. Whether it is derived from religious anxiety, economic interests or other collective desires, these energies have injected vitality into the text, making it an active space for cultural negotiation to continue [10].

3. Reduction in *The Jew of Malta*

3.1. Social Context in Sixteenth-Century England

In 1290, King Edward I issued an order to expel all Jews from his kingdom and threatened them with the death penalty. As a result, tens of thousands of people were forced to leave the country, and most were unable to dispose of their property [11]. The move kept Jews out of the country for nearly four centuries. During this period, no publicly recognized Jewish settlements took root [12]. The core of expulsion is religious pressure, and it also reflects the British island mentality. The kingdom is geographically separated from the European continent, so the persistent anxiety about external threats gradually pervades the collective psychology. This insecurity, in turn, contributes to the view that Jews may endanger the state and its cultural traditions and are therefore considered aliens [5]. However, this view is not simply paranoid. It also reveals a fundamental impulse to maintain cultural homogeneity.

The true Jewish population was almost invisible, so Barabas became a convenient symbol in the British mind to exclude Jews. This distorted image inherits the legacy of the long-term suppression of Judaism by Christianity. As early as the fourth century, Christians called the *Hebrew Bible* the *Old Testament*. This means that God established the new covenant through

Christianity. The anti-Semitic debate in the *New Testament* further deepened the hostility of ordinary Christians [4]. In the 16th century, these prejudices were further utilized by the religious reform movement. Negative stereotypes are thus more firmly integrated into the narrative that defines British culture.

Marlowe intends to put together the Ottoman siege of Malta in 1565, an important conflict between the Ottoman Empire and the Order of St. John, with memories of the Spanish Armada's attempted invasion of England in 1588. He linked these two conflicts and constructed a powerful story: Christians defeated foreign invaders. This theme resonates with the British audience. This narrative strategy not only strengthens the national consciousness of Protestantism, but also unites the audience to jointly cope with external threats. As a result, drama became a tool for political cohesion [13].

3.2. Barabas: The Demonized Jewish Merchant

Barabas combines greed, cunning, cruelty and miserliness. Together with Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, he is regarded as a model of the evil Jews in Elizabethan drama [11]. From the perspective of New Historicism, Barabas is not just a dramatic figure. He is a textual place that condenses the social energy of religious anxiety, economic resentment and national insecurity and endows it with narrative form.

3.2.1. Defunct Familial Ethics

Barabas treats his daughter Abigail as a disposable instrument instead of a cherished offspring. Although he pretends to show fatherly affection, insisting that "as Agamemnon did his Iphigen: / And all I have is hers" [14], he deliberately meddles with her marriage prospects. His real intention is to set Lodowicke against Mathias, and both of these suitors are Christians. This scheming proceeds despite his awareness that Abigail genuinely loves Mathias. His chilling vow confirms this ruthlessness: "I meane my daughter: —but e're he shall have her / I'll sacrifice her on a pile of wood" [14].

Later, Abigail is shattered by the innocent bloodshed that her father's intrigues have caused. Seeking refuge, she converts to Christianity and enters a convent. Barabas, however, responds with unforgivable cruelty: he arranges to poison both his daughter and the nuns alongside her. When his servant Ithimore asks if he feels any sorrow, Barabas gives a heartless answer: "No, but I grieve because she liv'd so long, / An Hebrew borne, and would become a Christian" [14]. This outright denial of kinship faithfully matches the prevailing stereotype of the time, which depicted Jews as people incapable of genuine family affection.

3.2.2. Aestheticized Violence

Anxiety about Jews persisted and even intensified in sixteenth-century England, fed by persistent rumours that they "poisoned wells" and "spread plagues" [14]. Barabas' excessive violence intentionally brutality deliberately plays upon these deep-rooted fears.

His savagery manifests two distinctive qualities: indiscriminate cruelty and a theatrical relish in its execution. Upon learning of Abigail's conversion, he prepares a lethal porridge with meticulous care. He boasts that he bought "a precious powder" from an Italian in Ancona, a substance whose "operation is to bind, infect, / And poyson deeply: yet not appeare / In forty houres after it is tane" [14]. Later, when the funeral bell rings for the poisoned nuns, he remarks with chilling nonchalance: "There is no musicke to a Christians knell: / How sweet the Bels ring now the Nuns are dead / That sound at other times like Tinkers pans [14]. The soliloquy generates a unique theatrical effect: the audience condemns Barabas's hypocrisy, yet their awareness of his schemes also fosters a certain complicity. Through this technique, Marlowe exposes what Feng Wei (65) terms "the Christian's secret fascination with evil" [3].

3.2.3. Hypocritical Faith

For Barabas, wealth serves as the sole object of worship. Through usury that preys upon ordinary people, he crams prisons with debtors and orphanages with destitute children, accumulating a fortune large enough to purchase an entire city:

Then after that was I an Usurer,
And with extorting, cozening, forfeiting,
And tricks belonging unto Brokery,
I fill'd the Jails with Bankrouths in a yeare,
And with young Orphans planted Hospitals,
And every Moone made some or other mad,
And now and then one hang himselfe for grieffe,
Pinning upon his breast a long great Scrowle
How I with interest tormented him.
But marke how I am blest for plaguing them,
I have as much coyne as will buy the Towne. [14]

In the above discourse, Barabas openly replaces the Jewish religious commitment with material acquisition, thus strengthening the familiar stereotype of Jewish “greed”. He gave up the worship of God and worshipped gold instead. Although he claimed to be a faithful Jew, he blatantly violated the *Ten Commandments*, committed adultery, and frankly admitted it in the face of monks. Therefore, his religious identity is purely performative. He secretly plans to overthrow the Maltese government while pretending to believe in Christianity in order to win trust. After the governor confiscated his property, his old house was converted into a monastery. Barabas let his daughter Abigail disguised as a nun into it, and handed out the gold coins hidden under the floor from the window. This complete hypocrisy is the core of Machiavelli’s paradox that Barabas finally embodies. The paradox lies in the self-defeating nature of his strategy: his cunning and hypocrisy, meant to secure power and survival, ultimately lead to his own destruction.

On the whole, these characteristics together create a completely one-dimensional image of Barabas, making him the embodiment of the devil. This practice echoes the behavior of medieval rulers: they used Jewish financial services while persecuting Jews. Marlowe separates the protagonist from realistic motivation and moral complexity. On the contrary, Barabas is seen as a product of the stigmatization of cultural and religious differences in British society [3]. Marlowe not only reveals the hostility of the Elizabethan society to the Jews, but also makes his views credible in the dramatic world of the play. By writing Barabas so evil, Marlowe turns him into a symbol of religious threat. In this way, his plays serve the broader Protestant agenda, which is to suppress other competing beliefs. This interpretation also confirms a core tenet of New Historicism: literary works do not simply reflect the existing power structure, but actively participate in shaping and strengthening these structures.

3.3. Abigail: The Victim in Religious Conflict

Abigail’s self-awareness occupies very little space in the play, for she operates almost entirely within a framework shaped by patriarchal authority and religious antagonism. Even her conversion to Christianity is not genuinely her own choice. At first, her turn toward the convent appears to offer a path to redemption, yet Barabas quickly twists this act of faith into an instrument of retaliation against the Christian community.

Forced by her father to feign affection for Lodowick as part of his scheme to provoke discord among the Christians, Abigail confesses in despair, “He has my heart, I smile against my will” [14]. This split between inner feeling and outward performance is more than a private

moment of grief. It reveals how personal belief can be co-opted and weaponized in the service of larger religious struggles. Ultimately, Abigail remains trapped in her function as a useful symbol, demonstrating how easily faith becomes a tool within systems of power.

Abigail endures oppression from two directions: the authority of her father and the control exerted by religious institutions. Barabas treats her as a bargaining chip: he first deploys her marriage as part of his scheme to take revenge on the governor, and later, when she converts, her act of faith leads directly to her murder at his hands. Although she seeks acceptance within the Christian community, she remains confined by their perception of her as a Jewish "Other". Deprived of genuine agency, she ultimately becomes a sacrificial figure, tragically suspended between two religious worlds that refuse to reconcile.

Even Abigail's death carries symbolic weight that extends beyond her personal tragedy. The violent manner of her poisoning resonates with the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots, in 1587, an event whose own meaning was deeply entangled with questions of religious allegiance. Through this implicit parallel, Marlowe complicates the religious divisions of his day, suggesting that an individual's faith could never be entirely separated from its political implications. Even after Abigail renounces Judaism, she is still poisoned, a warning that superficial conformity offers no real protection within a society torn by confessional conflict. Her body thus becomes a site upon which the anxieties of the English Reformation are inscribed, reinforcing the emerging Protestant identity by marking the Catholic past as irredeemably other [13]. In this reading, Marlowe uses Abigail's fate to underscore the impossibility of neutrality in an age of religious polarisation.

Abigail is in a state of relative aphasia in the play. Marlowe does not give her more lines and actions, as Shakespeare gave Jessica, so her image is flatter. Jessica has more abundant words and actions in *The Merchant of Venice*. She takes the initiative to elope, convert, and take away Shylock's property, and the characterization is more full. This textual difference needs to be understood in the context of the 16th century after the Reformation in England. At that time, Protestant national interests and overseas trade expansion were in parallel. The financial role of Jews or converts was utilized, but official anti-Semitism did not subside. Therefore, the difference between Abigail and Jessica is more suitable as a textual sign of the coexistence of religious dogma and commercial pragmatism. This difference implies the tension between the two: religious hostility still exists, but commercial interests and the economic function of the apostates have begun to change the way Jewish characters are presented on the stage.

If Abigail's image is more passive and single, Jessica is obviously more active in the face of commercial and social changes in the late 16th century.

4. Humanization in *The Merchant of Venice*

During the late sixteenth century, British commerce expanded rapidly. The Royal Exchange, founded by Sir Thomas Gresham and officially opened by Queen Elizabeth I in 1571, became an enduring sign of this commercial growth. In the same period, the Spanish armed forces, widely thought to be invincible, were defeated. That victory strengthened British national pride. Commercial growth required trust and shared rules, while military success reinforced a sense of national unity. Together, these developments produced a society that increasingly looked for common norms and a recognized code of conduct. This setting gave Shakespeare room to move beyond simple moral opposites and to examine the complexity of human motivation.

4.1. Shylock: From Stereotype to Humanized Individual

Shakespeare did not write Shylock as a simple villain. He gives the lender a recognizable emotion and an understandable reason to act. This humanitarian treatment does not excuse Shylock's actions. On the contrary, it shows that in a society where business has gradually

become the center of daily life, marginalized people face difficult situations and their choices are limited. Shakespeare's humanization of Shylock can be understood as an act of cultural negotiation. The text does not just reflect the anti-Semitic attitude of the times. It puts these attitudes into the identifiable human psychological tension, and then reshapes them.

4.1.1. Contradictory Familial Bonds

Shylock's attitude towards his daughter Jessica shows a deep tension. This tension stems from the dual pressures of patriarchy and religious hostility. As a member of the Jewish minority in Venice, he has always been wary of the possible threats posed by the surrounding Christian society. This caution prompted him to strictly control Jessica's every move:

Lock up my doors, and when you hear the drum
And the vile squealing of the wry-necked fife,
Clamber not you up to the casements then,
Nor thrust your head into the public street
To gaze on Christian fools with varnished faces;
But stop my house's ears—I mean my casements. [1]

Beneath this stern command lies an unspoken wish to shield his daughter from harm. Yet when Jessica steals his money and elopes with Lorenzo, a Christian, Shylock's frantic outburst in the streets lays bare the sheer anguish of betrayal by a trusted family member: "My daughter, O my ducats, O my daughter! / Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats! / Justice, the law, my ducats, and my daughter" [1]. As a man pushed to the margins of mainstream society, Shylock had invested all his emotional hope in his daughter. Her loss, therefore, signified not merely a financial setback but a collapse of his inner world. This moment of raw grief offers a moving testament to the universal bond between parent and child, a bond that transcends religious and cultural boundaries.

4.1.2. Resistance Against Oppression

Shylock's greed and his thirst for vengeance cannot be understood apart from the institutional discrimination that Jews had endured for centuries. Since medieval times, Western European Jews had been excluded from most professions and consequently forced into moneylending as a means of survival [12]. In 1555, Pope Paul IV decreed that Jews must reside in segregated quarters known as "ghettos", and this spatial confinement deepened their social isolation [15]. Shylock's profession, therefore, was not a free choice but a response to societal constraints. His resentment toward Antonio arises from two sources: he resents Antonio for being a Christian, but he is even more angered by Antonio's practice of lending money without interest, which undercuts Shylock's livelihood. As Shylock puts it, "I hate him for he is a Christian, / But more for that in low simplicity / He lends out money gratis and brings down / The rate of usance here with us in Venice" [1]. Shylock's fixation on money and property, then, stems not simply from professional habit but from a deeper anxiety about survival within the confines of the ghetto.

Years of persecution naturally breeds Shylock's desire for reprisal. When Christians reduce him to the label of "Jew", they reinforce his alienation and confirm his status as an outsider. Antonio publicly calls him "misbeliever" and "cut-throat dog" and kicks him "as one would spurn a stranger cur" [1]. This insult is directed not only at Shylock personally, but also at his Jewish faith. At its core, Shylock's pursuit of revenge is a struggle for equal treatment and an expression of violent retribution.

This struggle reaches its peak in Shylock's demand for "a pound of flesh". In the courtroom, he turns down Bassanio's offer of money and insists on the letter of the bond "The pound of flesh which I demand of him / Is dearly bought, 'tis mine, and I will have it" [1]. This is not merely a settlement of personal grievances but a counterattack against the double burden of economic

exploitation and religious humiliation. What makes this moment so powerful, however, is the speech that precedes it:

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, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? 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. [1]

With these lines, Shylock asserts his common humanity and claims the right to be treated as an equal. The outcome, however, is bitterly ironic. He comes to court hoping the law will treat him fairly, yet he leaves convicted as a criminal. This reversal exposes a troubling truth: the law, though it appears neutral, actually operates with different standards for different groups [16]. The Venetian law, as Jin Lingjie observes, employed two distinct sets of rules: it forced Christian authorities to rely on Jewish capital for the maintenance of their economy, yet it also persecuted the Jews in ways that were made to seem legally justified [4]. The Christians' deliberate acts of humiliation only compounded this injustice. Even as Shylock pleads for mercy, they mock him as an "unfeeling man" and a "wolf" [1]. What they call mercy turns out to be a denial of Shylock's humanity, exposing the hypocrisy that lay beneath their professed religious tolerance [17].

4.2. Jessica: From Passive Victim to Autonomous Subject

Jessica's characterization marks a significant departure in Shakespeare's treatment of Jewish women. Unlike Abigail, who remains a passive emblem throughout Marlowe's play, Jessica emerges as a figure with discernible will and agency. The essence of this portrayal lies in showing how an individual responds to oppression with concrete actions, and this is precisely what distinguishes her from her predecessor in *The Jew of Malta*. Jessica's limited agency illustrates Montrose's idea of the "historicity of texts and the textuality of history." Her choices are shaped by the patriarchal and religious structures of her world, yet her actions also help to reshape how Jewish women could be imagined on the early modern stage.

Shylock's control over Jessica operates on two levels: patriarchal domination and religious constraint. As a father, he regards her as property to be guarded; as a member of the Jewish community, he tries to bind her with religious enmity toward Christians. He even declares that he would prefer any of "the stock of Barabas" as her husband rather than a Christian" [1].

In the face of this double pressure, Jessica clearly expressed her position. She calls her family "hell" [1] and chooses to elope with Lorenzo, disguised as a boy. She abandoned women's clothing and changed into men's clothing, so as to enter the space that was originally closed to her, and also gained the freedom that she did not have. This female dress is not just a practical means. It symbolically rejects the physical discipline imposed on women and implicitly challenges the patriarchal order [6].

Jessica later lives in Portia's idyllic Belmont Manor, which reflects Shakespeare's vision of a harmonious Christian community. However, this ideal society is based on the exclusion of those who do not conform to the norms. Whether Jessica can be accepted depends on whether she abandons Judaism. For British audiences in the 1590s who feared that Jews might return to England, this narrative provides comfort: it shows that conversion can bring redemption and social integration [5].

Jessica's treatment of her father's property best illustrates her choice to deviate from her father Shylock, reject Jewish family belonging, and turn to the position of Christian social assimilation. She took Shylock's precious ring—a gift left by his late wife Leah—to exchange for "a monkey" [1]. This exchange carries multiple meanings. On the one hand, it frees her from the patriarchal

control of property. On the other hand, it shows her rejection of family relations and emotional inheritance. However, this liberation also has a price. She confessed that she was ashamed of being her father's child. Selling her mother's ring is a betrayal of the memory that binds her to her family. This behavior reveals that minority individuals often experience identity fragmentation under the pressure of assimilation [18].

Jessica chose to marry Lorenzo and converted to Christianity, thus getting rid of the shackles of Judaism. However, the conditions for her acceptance were clear: Christian society would accept her only after she had renounced her original faith. This pattern is consistent with the Christian teaching that conversion brings salvation [12]. Jessica does gain a degree of freedom from patriarchal and religious constraints, but this freedom is conditional. It is achieved only by assimilating into a society that continues to marginalize her ethnic and religious group. In this process, Christianity achieved victory over Judaism on both material and ideological levels [19]. Jessica breaks through the constraints and makes compromises. Therefore, she is no longer a single image, but a typical "humanized" Jewish woman in the sixteenth-century commercial society. Her choice comes from the struggle and desire of an ordinary person, rather than ideological manipulation. These choices also reflect the core quality of her humanity.

5. Conclusion

All in all, these two works show that literary texts are not passively recording history, but actively participating in the generation of history. They shape the audience's framework for understanding religious differences, economic exchange and cultural belonging. From Marlowe's allegorical treatment to Shakespeare's humanized portrayal, this transformation is not only a sign of literary development, but also an important moment for the continuous interaction between British drama and social ideology in early modern times.

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