Chapter V

Politicizing Shylock

Robert Brustein has stated that “the 20th century has often been called the century of the director” (Marowitz xviii). Quite a lot of overlooked classical plays were brought into public attention by interpretive artists during this period. These writers brought original readings and sensible insights into the plays. Among them is the famous Malibu resident Charles Marowitz (b. 1934), who has occupied many positions throughout the years in the literary and cultural field. He is mainly acclaimed as a stage director and then a theatre critic. As a director and critic he serves as a link between the discussions related to adaptations, reworking and re-evolution of Shakespeare by modern dramatists. He has produced a series of Shakespearian recreations and in many ways has been at the forefront in experiments concerning the adaptation of Shakespeare’s plays. He is the author of over two dozen books, mostly works of criticism and instruction relating to the theatre. He has authored a more recent book *The Other Chekhov: A Biography of Michael Chekhov, The Legendary Actor, Director and Theorist*, the only English language biography on that great man.
Marowitz is one among the few theatre critics who has managed to combine careers both as a director and playwright. He has founded his own theatre, the Open Space, in 1968 in order to produce experimental writing by himself and other like-minded dramatists and this system has evident effects in his writings. He has to his credit several plays including *Sherlock’s Last Case* which was presented on Broadway after winning the Louis B. Mayer Playwrighting Award. He was co-director with Peter Brook of the Royal Shakespeare Company Experimental Group and established The Open Space Theatre in the United Kingdom. At present, he is a member of the Artistic Director of the Malibu Stage Company. His seven adaptations of Shakespearean dramas, anthologized in *The Marowitz Shakespeare*, are performed worldwide. In it he probes the mysteries of some of the more problematic plays in the Shakespeare canon. *The Variations on The Merchant of Venice* (1977), a rewrite of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, is one among them. He shows how rewriting the classics invalidate the canonized reading practices which lead to an aesthetic distanciation. Through his play he engages the audience to re-read the source play and highlights how institutionalized our conception of Shylock the Jew has become. As Michael Bristol has observed regarding the play *The Merchant of Venice*, “great literary works are
more like complex and difficult memories that trouble the walking life of successor cultures” (138). The play is riddled with ambiguity and the portrayal of the Jew and the Christian comes under scrutiny.

An obvious problem that confronts the takers of Shakespeare’s play is that it has all the staleness of a piece of work that is executed very often. To put the story in a nutshell, it is the tale of the friendship of an unselfish Venetian merchant Antonio with Bassanio, a charming young gentleman. Bassanio is in love with a beautiful heiress Portia, whose choice of a husband is based on three caskets as dictated by her late father. Antonio helps Bassanio but unfortunately falls on evil times. He offers to make a noble sacrifice when plunged into disaster by the vengeance of a repulsive Jew from whom he has borrowed money. Finally, contrary to expectations, a lovely young lady arrives in the garb of a lawyer and logician, in the nick of time, and thwarts the evil desire of the Jew who at length is properly punished for his wickedness. The story is so familiar that re-reading alone “saves the text from repetition (those who fail to re-read are obliged to read the same story everywhere) and multiplies it in its variety and pluralities” (Barthes 16).

The play offers a great opportunity to transact the correlation between cultural myths and people’s identities. Marowitz and Wesker, in
their respective plays, venture to demythologize Shylock differently and in their attempt they follow the tradition of their contemporary dramatists. The Shylock tragedy focuses on the problems that represent a stylistic imbalance which the author cannot reconcile though he tries his best. As a result the directors in turn try to resolve the contradictions in their productions and that may be the underlying raison d'être of all revisionist Shakespeare productions. In fact, we observe that it is the deeply embedded imperfections of the plays that cause some of the most imaginative productions. Shakespeare’s portrayal of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* has been a cause of ceaseless controversy. It is noticeable that he makes no striking anti-Semitic slurs in any of his writings except in this play. In Shakespearean England, Jewishness and anti-Semitism were inter-related and hostility towards both cannot easily be wiped out. Shakespeare wrote this play during a period which witnessed extreme persecution of Catholics under Elizabethan laws. The repressive atmosphere might have prompted Shakespeare to dramatically polemicize the issue of religious persecution in his play. The historically and politically effected consciousness of the Holocaust would have compelled Marowitz to look more intently at the issue of religious persecution and victimhood in *The Merchant of Venice*. In rewriting Shakespeare’s play, Marowitz touches upon the
political and social issues and makes the function of Shylock more complex in his play *Variations on The Merchant of Venice*. He puts the plight of the Jews in Venice analogous with the Jews who are rounded up in Jerusalem. In the play, Shylock is acting in the margins of the social order and Marowitz politicizes him by making him central to the terrorist activities. He places Shylock in a position of rootedness and domicility as opposed to the archetypal eternal wandering and marginality of the Jews. Marowitz’s play is not one of reconciliation or pacification, but of political vengeance.

The story of *The Merchant of Venice* ends on a happy note with the marriages of three young couples. But the audience does not feel at ease with this happy ending because it includes the story of a man who is ruined both financially and spiritually. He appears only in six scenes, but his downfall is the key to the success of the love story. The audience is aware how the couples achieve their marital happiness and is also conscious of the kind of people who cheer them up. The play is considered to be a comedy by overlooking this fact, but it makes us think because of the memorable character of Shylock. Maybe it is his own short-sightedness that leads him to his undoing, but we cannot help feeling sorry for him. He is despised because he is a Jew and due to the ill-treatment he constantly receives from others, he is weary of anyone
who is not of his group. As Marowitz says in his introduction to the text, "it was to try to redress this balance that I decided to reorder Merchant and 'vary' its moral implications" (Marowitz 22). He adapts Shakespeare's play for the 20th century and makes it his own. He refashions the play in such a way that the modern audience reacts against the assumptions representing the myth in Shakespeare. Since the play The Merchant of Venice has Judaeo-Christian undertones, it is possible to reduce it into a dispute between two Venetian merchants. It can also be expanded into a metaphysical parable with enormous religious connotations or of a man of Jewish faith plotting against a Christian who appears to be a personification of Christ. "Every artist is his own leader and every work its own personal revolution," observes Marowitz (105). It is from his own narrative reading of the play that Marowitz has culled his interpretation of Shakespeare's play. His intention is to break up the play and then design it through new pattern. His dramas constantly concern themselves with political and social problems. In Variations on The Merchant of Venice he underscores the social implications of the source play and attempts to draw the consequences with contemporary society. The moral programs are so significant that the comic aspect of the play is lost. In order to achieve the expected effects, he first established the original events of
Shakespeare's play and then proceeded to create discretionary diversions. But this practice is not often admired by people who expect every treatment of Shakespeare to be a total demolition of the original play. However, being meant for different purposes, an adaptation can resort to different methods. Marowitz intentionally deviated at the points where the moral impact would be greater. To a great extent he lifts lines from Shakespeare and then chisels and shuffles them and again supplements them with borrowings from Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*. The play contains some inherent problems which require different tactics. When we observe Shakespeare's play, we find that the most memorable character there, is Shylock and equally memorable are Antonio and Portia. The very first words that Shylock utters when he makes his appearance in the play are: "Three thousands ducats—well" (1.3.1). It is very natural that since he is an usurer, his focus is on money. Again, when he considers the loan for Antonio, though meant for Bassanio, he seems more careful in trapping Antonio than with the loan itself. He openly says that he hates Antonio, among other reasons, for being a Christian. By proclaiming this, he is actually posing a serious threat to the harmony of the dominant Christian community and to the capitalist Christian majority. He is keeping himself away from the proclaimed notions of the Christian values and gentleness. In the
infamous trial scene, we find Shylock craving for Antonio’s pound of flesh and will not accept anything short of that—not even the offer of six thousand ducats in the place of three thousand. He makes his stand clear:

SHYLOCK: As there is no firm reason to be render’d
Why he cannot abide a gaping pig;
Why he, a harmless necessary cat;
Why he, a wollen bagpipe, but of force
Must yield to such inevitable shame
As to offend, himself being offended—
So can I give no reason, nor I will not,
More than a lodg’d hate and a certain loathing
I bear Antonio, that I follow thus.

A losing suit against him. Are you answered? (4.1.53-62)

He is unbending in his desire for revenge and no one can change his mind. All these protestations show his thorough re-enforcement of a hard Jewish heart.

But when the trial scene progresses, the tables are turned and it is bad luck for Shylock. Portia argues that his bond cannot be executed, since he should not shed even a drop of Antonio’s Christian blood. As it is impractical, his property is confiscated and he is forced to convert to
Christianity. It is a punishment for attempting to take the life of a Venetian. Though Shakespeare portrays Shylock as “bad” and Antonio as “good”, we cannot whole-heartedly agree with it. When we analyze the character of Antonio, we find that he is very much interested in eliminating Shylock, his business opponent. Susan Oldrieve observes: “If Antonio were not threatened professionally by Shylock’s business abilities, he would have less motivation to denigrate him in front of customers” (92). Shakespeare projects Antonio as a “self-sacrificing Christian” and his speech confirms it:

ANTONIO: I have heard,
Your Grace hath ta’en great pains to qualify
His rigorous course; but since he stands obdurate,
And that no lawful means can carry me
Out of his envy’s reach, I do oppose
My patience to his fury and am armed
To suffer with a quietness of spirit
The very tyranny and rage of his. (4.1.6-13)

In the trial scene, in contrast to Shylock’s cruelty, Antonio stands gentle and subdued like a lamb before the slaughterhouse. But we can also argue that his gentleness is only skin deep. Antonio shows no mercy to Shylock when Portia announces his punishment. If Antonio
was a genuine Christian, he would have affably accepted his acquittal and reconciled his difference with his enemy Shylock. Instead he takes half of Shylock’s possession without any prick of conscience. It shows his selfishness and religious mendacity with the result that Shylock-the-Jew falls victim to Antonio-the-Christian’s malevolence. It is quite possible that in a different time and community, the audience can take sides with the Shylock-as-villain representation. But in our post-Holocaust world, we cannot but acknowledge Shylock as a tragic victim. When we are faced with new circumstances and new ideology, it is possible to re-read Shakespeare’s play through new eyes.

If we want to exclude from our conscience the bitter past of Jewish history we should be prepared to forget the contemporary sensibility and stick on only to the fairy-tale elements of Shakespeare’s play. Again we should imagine that Shakespeare’s Jew has no real resemblance to an Israeli businessman or a present-day Hebraic scholar. Yet there is a strong cultural line that binds all Jews with their history even up to Shakespeare’s play.

Marowitz has found *The Merchant of Venice* an obnoxious comedy and in his Introduction to the play he states:

> It is difficult, almost impossible, to come to a play like *The Merchant of Venice* whose central character is an orthodox
Jew, without bringing to the experience all one has learned and read about the Jews in the past 2000 years; difficult to obliterate from the mind the last seventy-five years of Jewish history which includes European pogroms, Hitler’s “death camps”, the rise of Jewish Nationalism and the Arab-Israeli conflicts. Of course, Shakespeare had no knowledge of any of these things and it is undeniable that none of these factors enter into *The Merchant of Venice*—and yet, can they be excluded from the consciousness of the spectator who attends the play? (Marowitz 21-2)

He does not make direct reference to the Holocaust in his play though it is set in the disorder of the emergent state of Israel. Yet, there are echoes of the historical situation, the terror and mistrust among the people. “The Holocaust was the most demonic of conspiracies between literature and life. Designed as much by the Nazis, it was perceived by the Jews as a return to the hoary past” (Young 94). We may note the words of Shylock in *Variations*: “. . . For cruelty we have toiled to inherit here/ And painful nights have been appointed me, Great injuries are not soon forgot” (228). The play in a way helps to recognize *The Merchant of Venice* by mediating on the distress which the Holocaust has effected upon our reception of the text. As a result we can no longer receive
Shakespeare's text as it is, but only recognize it with a post-Holocaust understanding. In *The Merchant of Venice*, at the end of the trial, Antonio insists that Shylock become a Christian. It is also possible that Shylock demands that the defaulted Christian become a Jew. Shylock's vengeance against Antonio may be seen as kindled by the same tooth-for-a-tooth and eye-for-an-eye argument which can be seen in the pages of the Old Testament. Antonio seems to be a puzzling, melancholic, but virtuous man in the first scenes of the play, patiently bearing his own grief. He gets annoyed only when Shylock accuses him of insulting him and of spitting upon his Jewish gabardine. We can find in this an echo of Jesus's fury when he topples the table of the money-changers and drives them out of the temple. As a boy, Shakespeare might have seen the Passion Plays and it would have influenced him when he became a mature playwright, to picture a conflict between Christian and Jewish ethics. Thus the rivalry between Shylock and Antonio can be traced back to the conflict between their religions, which still continues today.

Shakespeare may have intended to balance three conflicting techniques in his play, namely romance, comedy and tragedy. We can trace the romance in the marital bargain—Bassanio's craving for Portia, Antonio's attachment to Bassanio and Portia's enthusiasm for the
adventurous suitor. Though some scenes seem quite irrelevant to the characterization of Bassanio, Shakespeare knew that they were effective episodes to please the audience. Play-acting can make wide and immediate appeal to people of ordinary intelligence and Shakespeare used it effectively. The common man does not want truth, but only confirmation of his prejudices. The comedy is made out of Shakespeare's depiction of a stereotypical Jewish usurer who values people almost as property. Even his daughter is not exempted from this attitude. When Shylock heard of his daughter's elopement he cried in the streets: “My daughter, my ducats! My daughter has run away with a Christian! A Christian has stolen my money! I want justice from the law. I must get back my ducats and my daughter” (2.8.15-7). Again there is the quiz, regarding the three sealed boxes, conducted by Portia and Nerissa and involving three male contestants who want to wed her. The tragedy which forms the gist of the play is based on the play's trial scene where Antonio's life is put in danger:

ANTONIO: I am a tainted whether of the flock,
Meetest for death. The weakest kind of fruit
Drops earliest to the ground, and so let me;
You cannot better be employ'd, Bassanio,
Than to live still, and write mine epitaph. (4.1.115-119)
Strictly speaking, Shylock’s contract with Antonio can be considered illegal because its proper execution would certainly violate a number of other existing laws. It can be against the laws of Grievous Bodily Harm or Conspiracy to commit murder. But the bond entered into between Shylock and Antonio was sanctioned by the state or the case would not have to come to trial before the Venetian court. The court, despite its pretence of impartiality, is obviously prejudiced against the Jews. Being a Jew in a Christian community itself is a guilty thing as far as Shylock is concerned. If he had realized it fully, he would not have brought the case to the court anticipating the outcome. As Walter Benjamin observes about *The Merchant of Venice*, “There is no document of civilization, which is not at the same time, a document of barbarism” (Ardent 258). As much as nine million Jews who lived in the European countries fell under the Nazi rule during the Second World War and around six million of them were murdered. It is possible that at a different time of history, critics and writers would have agreed with the “Shylock-as-Villain” representation. But in a post-Holocaust and post-Civil Rights Movement world, they cannot but acknowledge Shylock as a tragic victim who has lost his livelihood, property, self-respect and identity. With a postmodern ideology, writers are able to re-read the play through new eyes.
Marowitz’s play *The Variations*, begins with the familiar scene of terrorism with the sound of explosion followed by pandemonium to which the modern audience is very much accustomed to.

VOICE OVER (Slides illustrating events):

Jerusalem, July 22nd, 1946. At 12.30 p.m. today a tremendous explosion ripped off an entire wing of the King David Hotel destroying seven floors and 25 rooms occupied by the Secretariat of the Palestine government and the Defence Security office of British Military Headquarters. There are 91 known dead, 47 injured and 43 persons including senior government officials missing. Ambulance men are passing water to injured victims still lying buried under concrete blocks and fallen masonry while a way is being cut for their rescue. Across the road, on the white stone wall of the recreation hall of the YMCA building, a huge bloody patch shows where one man had been blown across the road against the wall 50 yards away. The Jewish Underground Terrorist organization, Irgun, has claimed responsibility for the atrocity which has been widely condemned by, among others, the executive of the Jewish Agency, Dr. Chaim Weitzman and President
Harry S. Truman. Known Zionist terrorists are being rounded up throughout Jerusalem. Several have been shot in skirmishes with British patrols in the old part of the city.

The action takes place in the Palestine of the 1940s towards the end of the British mandate. He views the mandate as stimulating anti-Semitism instead of liberating the Jews from the problem. Marowitz relocates the Venetian ghetto in the post-Holocaust setting of Palestine and thereby establish the Jew as the archetype of eternal victim. He also put forward the question of the perpetuation of the redemptive power of Jewish suffering. As the play opens, there are news reports regarding the bombing of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem on 22 July 1946 by Zionist guerillas. Shylock is presented as a revolutionary lamenting over the dead body of a comrade and calling for revenge. It was a period when Clement Atlee’s Middle East policy strictly restricted immigration to Jerusalem. As a result, large numbers of Jews who fled Europe had to return to the country where the concentration camps were awaiting them. The unfair policies were popularized by Earnest Bevin, the Foreign Secretary of the time. Marowitz disagrees with Shakespeare in portraying Antonio as a good man and Shylock his rival as a bad man. So he depicts Antonio’s character as disputable and
disagreeable. He identifies Antonio in a pin-stripe suit with Bevin and makes Shylock line up with the national forces, especially the more extreme groups like Irgun. Thus he was able to create a completely different balance between the social forces in the play, the Venetian capitalists representing British colonialists and the Jews into dedicated patriots. The miserable plight of the Jews is portrayed with the show of Shylock, Tubal, Chus and Jessica huddling around the dead body of a soldier. The incident provides a motivation for the Jews to struggle against Christian forces of oppression:

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SHYLOCK: The plagues of Egypt and the curse of heaven,
Earth’s barrenness, and all men’s hated
Inflict upon them, thou great Primus Motor.
And here upon my knees, striking the earth,
I ban their souls to everlasting pains
And extreme tortures of the fiery deep
That thus have dealt with me is my distress.
O wretched brethren, born to see this day!
Why stand you thus unmov’d with my laments?
Why weep you not to think upon these wrongs? (228)
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Marowitz then describes certain incidents that occur within Shakespeare’s play from a non-Christian point of view. Here it may be
noted that *The Merchant of Venice* offers varied insights into the issue of paternity. The most obvious paternal relationship is between Shylock and his daughter Jessica. It is out of sheer love and respect for his wife Leah that Shylock has kept the house in mourning; but this deification of her mother has created a distance between Shylock and his daughter. She can never understand the depth of the love that her parents shared. Ironically, neither Portia nor Jessica has a living mother with whom they can identify themselves. Shakespeare does not seem to give much importance to parenting when contrasted with the immense power of religion and ethnicity he portrays and which corrupts mankind. In spite of Shylock’s best efforts to protect his daughter from the evils that surround her, the indignities of racism and bigotry enter into her life. For Shylock, the loss of Jessica to Lorenzo is a daughter’s betrayal of a considerate father. Jessica and Lorenzo are two persons of opposing religions bringing together Judaism and Christianity through their inter-faith marriage. This made-for-each-other relationship between the couple helps us forget the religious discord that mars Shakespeare’s world and our own. The relationship between Jessica and Lorenzo is a technique to filter out the British enemy in Marowitz’s play *Variations on The Merchant of Venice*. In Shakespeare’s play Jessica’s elopement is within a Christian context and her thoughtless selling of a ring for a
monkey is justified. In *Variations*, when Salerio says that one of Antonio's creditors has brought a ring that Jessica spent for a monkey, Shylock bursts out:

SHYLOCK: Out upon me. Thou torturest me. (To Tubal)

Tubal it was my turquoise. I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor. I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys. (254)

Jessica is not a commonplace girl in Marowitz's play; he makes her a resolute revolutionary for the Jewish cause. She tells her father:

JESSICA: What'ere it be to injure them

That have so manifestly wrong'd us,

I shall, for thy sake, attempt. (229)

She exposes her independent nature throughout and is shown as a contrast to the roles which have been allotted to her over the centuries as meek and subservient. The complexity of her behaviour both as an archetype of past dramatic representations and as a personification of the struggle from colonial rule can be seen in her encounter with the British soldiers. She is tutored by Shylock to entertain Lorenzo as part of the plan against the imperialist forces. When she demurs to do this, Shylock asks her to dissemble and motivates her by explaining his moral stand:
SHYLOCK: It's no sin to deceive a Christian
For they themselves hold it a principle,
Faith is not to be held with heretics,
But all are heretics that are not Jews
This follows well and therefore fear it not. (229)

It is a sacrifice on Jessica's part to associate herself with the Christians and it shows her determination for revolution. As Michael Scott observes, “the female revolutionary is a part of modern experience, and hypocritical sexuality by male or female for the ulterior purpose of political or revolutionary policy is commonplace” (Scott 50). Marowitz emphasizes the feminine complexity which is evident in contemporary readings of Shakespeare's play.

The so-called moral concerns of the Christians are shown as mere pretension and hypocrisy which gives credibility to the revolutionary activity of the Jews. Gratiano has no hesitation to make advances to Jessica when left alone with her though she is his friend Lorenzo's wife. Lorenzo's humorous lines to Lancelot in Shakespeare's play are shifted into an angry statement made to Gratiano in Variations:

LORENZO: (Angry) I shall grow jealous of you shortly, Gratiano, if you thus get my wife into corners. (255).
Again, the wooing of Portia, in order to restore the fortunes of Bassanio, is shrewdly conducted by Marowitz. Shylock’s observation that pretense is a way of Christian life is exposed by the manner in which Bassanio woos her. The trial of the casket is merely a mock game to undermine Portia’s father’s will. We cannot blame Bassanio for his deception in view of Portia’s father’s scheme for selecting a husband for her. In Shakespeare’s play, the suspense and peril of choice fascinates Portia hardly less than her passion for Bassanio. In the play *Variations*, Bassanio plays the first two suitors in disguise to make sure that he gets the right casket. First he takes the golden casket dressed as the Prince of Morocco and then tries the silver casket disguised as the Prince of Arragon. Since the two attempts do not succeed, it is easier for him to choose the lead casket in his own person.

**BASSANIO:** The first, of gold, who this inscription bears:

“Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire”:

The second, silver, which this promise carries:

“Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves.”

This third, dull lead, with warning all as blunt:

“Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath.”

How shall I know if I do choose the right?

**PORTIA:** The one of them contains my picture, prince.
If you choose that, then I am yours withal. (250)

Marowitz shows this deception as a general tendency to make the British hostile, enabling us to understand Shylock’s refusal to forgive the Christians. Marowitz converts the adventurers of Venice into British military men and Shakespeare’s character is thus made into an outright terrorist. He turns Tubal into a kind of Zionist front man and the Jews are portrayed as committed nationalists. Their violence against the imperialist power can be recognized as a response to a violent situation along with their lack of Christian love and forgiveness. Shylock himself exhibits a sort of caricature role of a Jew among Antonio, Bassanio and other Jew-baiting Britishers. He is a man with the means—cold and stoic and effective—to further his own cause. He has traits that harmonize him and excite our sympathy. We are torn between hating Shylock for his cruelty and empathizing with him for his abuse by Christians. In spite of all the abuses directed at him, he is not dishonest. The exemplification of deceit by disguise, physical or otherwise, is attributed to the Christians mostly in Portia and Bassanio. When we consider Shylock as a victim of Christian hypocrisy, it is appropriate to examine Bassanio’s nature and Portia’s famous “quality of mercy speech.” She says to Shylock:

PORTIA: The quality of mercy is not strain’d
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice bless'd:
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes:
'T is mightiest in the mightiest, it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown;
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power. (4.1.181-7)

She preaches about the heavenly blessing of showing mercy but if we trace her words back to Act I, we can hear a private admittance of hypocrisy by a so-called Christian. Portia tells Nerissa:

If to do were as easy as to know what were good to do, chapels had been churches, and poor men's cottages prince's palaces. It is a good divine that follows his own instructions; I can easier teach twenty what were good to be done, that be one of the twenty to follow mine own teaching . . . . (1.2.11-15)

In the case of Bassanio, his desire to marry Portia is with a motivation to grow rich. He has recklessly spent his money around, and now has come to Belmont to buy up the rich lady with the support of Antonio. Thoughtlessly, he pawns his friend's life in the process. This self-centred parasite is unmindful of the value of love over riches in the act of purchasing a woman. Bassanio makes this part clear when he
compares love to an inflated language and phenomenon. And as for Shakespeare, it is akin to commercial dealings.

    BASSANIO: Madam, you have bereft me of all words,
    Only my blood speaks to you in my veins,
    And there is such confusion in my powers,
    As after some oration fairly spoke
    By a beloved prince, there doth appear
    Among the buzzing pleased multitude,
    Where every something, being blent together,
    Turns to a wild of nothing, save of joy,
    Express’d and not expressed . . . (3.2.176-184)

    Both Bassanio and Portia leave us with the impression that the deceit is concealed under the pretext of religious persecutions. There are various examples in the source text to form our impression of Shylock in a negative way and the descriptions are mostly linked to his creed. In Act I Scene iii of Shakespeare’s play, Antonio remarks thus:

    Mark you this, Bassanio,
    The devil can site Scripture for his purpose.
    An evil soul, producing holy witness,
    Is like a villain with a smiling cheek,
    A good apple rotten at the heart,
O what a goodly outside falsehood hath! (1.3.95-100)

Again in Act II Scene ii, Lancelot Gobbo states: “Certainly the Jew is the very devil's incarnation” (2.2.24). When contrasted to the high-flown verbosity of the Venetian Christians, Shylock’s language is plain, clear and bold:

You’ll ask me why I rather chose to have
A weight of carrion flesh than to receive
Three thousand ducats. I’ll not answer that,
But say it is my humour. Is it answer’d,
What if my house be troubled with a rat
And I be pleased to give ten thousand ducats. (4.1.40-45)

The court scene proceeds, as in Shakespeare’s play, to humiliate and denigrate Shylock. It is a scene where the Christians rejoice over the humiliation of the Jews and relish their victory over them. When law is interpreted, the spirit of the law should be respected as going beyond its letter. The judgement should be realistic and commonsensical, not merely pedantic or technical. In The Merchant of Venice then, it is Shylock who shows respect for the law and not Portia. Of course, Shylock does not state in writing the possibility of shedding Antonio’s blood along with his pound of flesh:

This kindness will I show.
Go with me to a notary, seal me there
Your single bond, and, in a merry sport,
If you repay me not on such a day,
In such a place, such sum or sums as are
Expressed in the condition, let the forfeit
Be nominated for or equal pound
Of your fair flesh, to be cut off and taken
In what part of your body pleaseth me. (1.3.140-148)

But this can be inferred, since no document can exhaustively enumerate all conceivable aspects of the situation to which it refers. It can also be pointed out that Shylock's bond is deficient because it does not mention the kind of knife he uses or specify the pose of Shylock or Antonio while cutting the flesh. So the overall context of operation and the generally accepted meanings should be taken for granted. Portia's interpretation of the bond is true to the text but utterly false to its meaning. Her ingenious readings of the bond would be ruled out as out of order in a modern court and Shylock's bond would be termed as legal and he would have won the case. Actually Portia is bringing the law into disrepute and is also trying to promote a sort of private law by her too faithful a reading. Shylock can claim that he is terribly vindicated by the Christians by their inhuman legalism and can unmask the Christian
justice as mockery. If the decrees of Venice are exposed as hypocritical then the political consequences will be significant in the state.

If, in Shakespeare’s play it is Portia who steals the show, in *Variations* it is Balthazar who manages the intricacies of the situation:

The quality of mercy is not strained,

It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven

Upon the place beneath. It is twice blessed:

It blesseth him that gives, and him that takes,

‘Tis mightiest in the mightiest, it becomes

The throned monarch better than his crown:

His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,

The attribute to awe and majesty

Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings:

But mercy is above this sceptred sway,

It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,

It is an attribute to God himself;

And earthly power doth then show likest God’s

When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew,

Though justice be thy plea, consider this,

That in the course of justice none of us

Should see salvation: we do pray for mercy,
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render

The deeds of mercy. I have spoken thus much,

To mitigate the justice of thy plea,

Which if thou follow, this strict court of Venice

Must needs give sentence ’gainst the merchant there. (274-275)

But here also the protective branch called law is never absolute or impartial. It has prejudices built into it because of the nature of the people who handle it. As it is man made, it suffers from the egoistic biases of the law makers. “The Law does not mete out Justice; it can just as readily mete out injustice” (Marowitz 102). Very promptly, invoking the Shakespearean scene, Balthazar pronounces the “quality of mercy speech”. He reminds of Shylock the value of the law when he refuses Bassanio’s cheque to “twice the sum”. Ultimately Shylock is deceived by the blood-and-weight argument followed by the proclamation of the Venetian law concerning foreigners in a court dominated by the British group. Shylock’s defeat here is not effected by a disguised woman but by the system of law itself. In the court Antonio proclaims that Shylock should be converted to Christianity and his possessions should be given to Lorenzo and his daughter. When Shylock is about to collapse, Marowitz reverses his fortunes by making
his supporters invade the courtrooms taking the authority from the hands of the British and placing it in the hands of the Zionist guerillas. The Jews attack and disown the British. Shylock’s famous speech from Shakespeare’s play—“Hath not a Jew eyes”—is voiced here with intense political effect and ends with a warning. For Shakespeare’s audience, the speech might be a revelation, but not for today's audience. Shylock is most eloquent when he is most obstinate and when he insists on the application of the bond before the court:

I am a Jew. 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 not 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. The villainy you have taught me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction. (282)
Anyway, British justice dominates in the end, but Shylock is not humiliated as much as in the source play. He contemptuously retorts to the Duke in a revolutionary statement:

   Rather had I a Jew be hated thus
   Than pitied in a Christian poverty
   For I can see no fruits in all your faith
   But malice, falsehood and excessive pride. (281)

For the first time in Shylockian history, he emerges victorious from the trial scene, and the Duke, Portia, Bassanio and Antonio properly reprimanded. The situation is ripe for revolution and accordingly the explosion is heard outside shattering the courtroom and causing the fall of the Union Jack. Chus, Tubal and Shylock’s fellow countrymen enter revealing their weapons. Jessica leaves Lorenzo’s side and joins her father. The vengeful Jewish nationalists come to Shylock’s defence, decimating the British colonialists. Like Shylock they believe in a cause more renowned than the partition of the state. The play ends resuming the story of the King David Hotel and with the response of the occupying forces. In the final act of violence, Marowitz’s representation of Shylock is one which casts out the Christians from the Jewish homeland. As Philip Cohen observes, it is:
... a humanity which is authenticated in the most extreme conditions of its denial, authorized when it is silenced, and which expresses itself in a series of triumphant epiphanies; for these are not just atrocity stories or survivors stories. They are narratives of human redemption. (qtd. in Forsyth 92)

In Variations on The Merchant of Venice we can feel occasionally the laborious manner in which Marowitz shifts the Shakespearean scenes about and imposes the Marlovian speeches. Probably he may be taking too much from Shakespeare and Marlowe and fitting it within contemporary times. For instance, in the last scene of Variations (281) where Shylock turns contemptuously on to the Duke, Marowitz lifts lines from the Jew of Malta and makes Shylock utter his revolutionary statement:

Who hateth me but for my happiness?
Or who is honour'd now but for his wealth?
Rather had I, a Jew, be hated thus,
Than pitied in a Christian poverty;
For I can see no fruits in all their faith,
But malice, falsehood, and excessive pride. (1.1.110-115)
This suggests a sort of alienation and confusion on the part of the readers. The integration of the different styles of Marlowe and Shakespeare does not go hand in hand in a well-known play like *The Merchant of Venice*. Very often the tone of the play tends to drop when Shakespeare’s poetic tone of voice is interrupted with the artifice of Marowitz. The ending of the play also seems to be melodramatic in a way that diminishes the political significance that was intended by Marowitz. Nevertheless it is a challenge to the cultural assumptions implicit in our reception of the source play.

In the modern theatre's conception of Shylock, the Jew is quite different from Shakespeare’s original design. In his *Variations on The Merchant of Venice*, “Marowitz attempts to contemporize the Shylock story within post-war history,” says Michael Scott (48). He projects the problem of Shylock as a character having complete stage evolution. In this modern age we cannot consider Shakespeare's play outside our historical period or exempt it from the anti-Semitism of the first half of the 20th century which the world has experienced. The present impressions and expectations of *The Merchant of Venice* are based on the intertextual life of the play that has predominated over the last centuries. The myths regarding the play can live on and be presented in radically exciting and appropriate ways. It should be taken for granted
that an old story which is rooted in mysteries can never completely disappear from the classical repertoire and it should be remade in order to translate effectively into the present. A sliced version of the Shakespearean play has nothing to do with the play Shakespeare wrote, even if it borrows his words and ideas. It is controversial how far Shakespeare himself can be accounted for his play, which is amalgamated with ancient group myths and other sources. It is not to underplay Shakespeare’s merits, but to estimate that he cannot be seen as an end in himself. Marowitz, instead of sentimentalizing a tragic character, focuses on the Jewish situation. He tries to break down the cultural traditions surrounding the play and confront the audience with the plight of the Jew battling against a moral code which discriminates against the race. But unlike Wesker, Marowitz does not attempt to sustain the Jew as eternal victim. He alludes to it in Shylock’s reference to a majority controlled by a minority of British people in post-war Palestine:

SHYLOCK: Why do we yield to their extortion!
We are a multitude, and they but few
That now encompasseth what is our own. (228)

His search is for the mythic qualities and appropriateness of the play. He attempts to translate the myth to the modern audience by use
of his selected dramatic syntax. The Marowitz Shakespeare is thus
directly related to its modern social and political relevances. Classics
like those of Shakespeare are timeless in their universality. But
contemporary writers like Marowitz question some of the assumptions
behind the attitudes employed to condemn and misread Shakespeare
through the reverence for tradition. In fact his attempt has helped to
problematize Shakespeare at a time when his works have been in
danger of being dominated and misrepresented by bourgeois
culture. “Marowitz both unsettles the cultural authority of the
Shakespeare myth and draws attention to the power relations that it is
customarily made to endorse,” observes Graham Holderness (137).

Marowitz and Wesker both consider Shylock a dangerous
 stereotype in the popular imagination. But the significant distinction is
that Wesker does not negotiate with the intratextuality of the source text
which has created him. Instead of liberating the character from the ties
that surround him, he operates within it. Marowitz on the other hand
utilizes the intratextual representation of the Jew to mediate our past
and present, providing us with a post-Holocaust consciousness. “The
intratextuality of Variations addresses not only empirically known
historical facts, but also the way in which the Jew has been represented
in literature over the centuries . . .” (Forsyth 85). Marowitz integrates the
cynicism of the post-Holocaust consciousness, which shapes our reception of Shakespeare's play, by way of intratextual interpretation and also by the acknowledgement of the centuries of persecution which culminated in the Holocaust. Both the rewritings address the anti-Semitic attitude produced by the source text and its cultural implication in the atrocity of the Holocaust. Both of them try “to retrace, rediscover, reconsider and re-angle the classics—not simply regurgitate them” (Marowitz 1991: 24). Marowitz constructs a recontextualized parody of the source text and conducts a theatrical coup by relieving the audience from their cultural guilt. He does this by presenting a transformed Shylock who steps out from the shadows of a centuries-old representational bondage to an untenable postmodern reception of the Jew. Though the focus is on the past perception of the source text, Marowitz's interpretation of the rewrite is not completely thematic. Marowitz and Wesker have succeeded in liberating Shylock from the shackles that link him to the conception of a negative and murderous Jew. Both of them revisit the perception of Shylock so that the character might give voice to his opinions for the present and coming ages. Their rewrite enables Shylock to step out from the ruins of his fictional ghetto and from the archetypical victimhood which he has simultaneously fought against and contributed to. Wesker maintains the Venetian
ghettoized setting and makes Shylock the mouthpiece of Jewish suffering:

SHYLOCK: . . . They had god and Abraham had them. But—they were now cursed. For from that day, moved they into a nationhood that had to be better than any other and, poor things, all other nations found them unbearable to live with. What can I do? I'm chosen? I must be religious. (1.2.5-6)

Since age-old stories are deep-rooted in mysteries, they can never entirely disappear from the conscience of generations of people. They have to be re-made in order to translate effectively into the present. In his reworkings, Marowitz searches for the mythic qualities and appropriateness of the plays. In his play Variations on The Merchant of Venice, he is concerned with the social implications of Shakespeare's Shylock and tries to bring out parallels with contemporary society. The play can be considered to be one of his most successful adaptations. He seems to be compelled by his modern sensibility to abandon the comedy revolving round the play, and reveals not only his own sensibility but Shakespeare's as well. He very effectively juxtaposes elements of Shakespeare with others and adds his own interpolations.
Arnold Wesker's *The Merchant* and Charles Marowitz's *Variations on The Merchant of Venice* can be considered to be two ironic subversions of Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice*. The readers become conscious of the notion of irony and thus are able to read specific historical contexts in their plays which refer to the problems of postmodernity. Wesker and Marowitz do not consider Shakespeare as a touchstone in world literature, but as a dramatist whose views can be questioned. Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice* was considered as a defence and representation of the premodern world. But the postmodern writers Wesker and Marowitz make new readings into it by recreating the supposedly original context for the benefit and satisfaction of a modern audience. In short, Marowitz and Wesker make bold attempts to expose the problems that arise from this popular Shakespeare play and to correct any false assumptions we may have had about them.
Works Cited


