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SHAKESPEARE'S *MERCHANT*. EVENTUALLY PERCEIVED FROM THE 16TH CENTURY JEWISH EXPERIENCE IN DUBROVNIK AND VENICE

Shakespeare's Merchant is a peculiar interpretation of the Elizabethan era mentalities, particularly with regard to attitudes towards the Jews, almost exclusively defined by prejudices, stereotypes, palpable envy and malice. The Merchant of Venice is an introduction to the 17th century Western Christian treatment of minorities, including Venice and Dubrovnik. Despite their historic rivalry, Venice and Dubrovnik were linked by a unique doctrine of their republican, oligarchic constitutions, economic priorities and the rational use of historical experiences. In 1204, when Venice occupied Crete during the Western dismemberment of Byzantium, Serenissima acquired a sizable Jewish population, whose local history was rooted in antiquity. Such experience has probably generated their tolerance towards Jews that, later on, became a reflection of realistically unfavorable economic conditions in relation to trade development since the beginning of 16th century. The degradation of Venice into a second-rate naval and mercantile power justified the increasing tolerance, and the privileges to Jewish merchants were allowed in 1593 and 1594, similar to those afforded by Venice in 1589. In the Renaissance Dubrovnik, the rationalization of the attitude towards the Jews was mostly founded on the profits from the Jewish businesses. After 1583 the status of Jews in Dubrovnik was significantly improved. In that sense Dubrovnik was also influenced by changes in attitude toward the Jews in Venice. The Venice Jews became important intermediaries in the economic and political relations with the Muslim eastern Mediterranean. Jews in Turkey were considered as subjects, unlike the Ragusins who were treated as foreigners, although they enjoyed the vassal status. The Jews were first introduced into the literature of Dubrovnik by Shakespeare's Renaissance predecessor Marin Držić (1508 – 1567). In the famous play Dundo Maroje, primarily played in 1551, he introduced the character of the Jew ("Žudio") named Sadi, while revealing his attitude towards Jews as reflected at the metaphorical and stereotypical levels. Although episodic personality, he remained a symbolic appearance, and although he is not a local – he is from Rome – Sadi "Žudio" was bearing many notorious human features in an intimate content. But the Jew was neither common in contemporary Italian comedy.

Key words: Venice, Dubrovnik, Jews, antisemitism, prejudices, stereotypes

An in-depth reading of the Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, – otherwise his most controversial play – may reveal a sophisticated us-and-them satirical concept of a Christian hypocrisy related to the 16th century Jews.¹ "Even a 'sympathetic' presentation, with Shylock as victim" ends up with saying that "the Christians are as bad as the Jews who function, therefore, as an index of badness."² Shakespeare's ingenuity implies multi-layered messages that have been reinterpreted and unveiled again over centuries. Shakespeare's ideas sometimes contain multiple meanings, leaving space for the supposition of

¹ James O'Rourke, "Racism and Homophobia in 'The Merchant of Venice'", *English Literary History*, 70/2, 2003, 375.

² Alan Sinfield, *Cultural Politics-Queer Reading*, Philadelphia 1994, 6.

a shrewdness capable of communicating with generations to come. The interdependence of the Jewish “fiscalism” and Christian “mercantilism” opened a space for rationalization of minorities’ treatment, in spite of a reasonable postulation that *The Merchant of Venice* is a reaction to a real event, an antiracist response to the hanging of Roderigo Lopez. Lopez was the head doctor of Elizabeth I, but over time secretly supported the interest of the Spanish crown, and became involved with the Earl of Essex conspiracy. At the beginning of 1594 he was arrested and tortured, eventually signing a forced confession. During the process, he and two alleged Portuguese accomplices were described as “worse than Judas himself”, and executed.

To what extent the Venetian realities and prejudices, located in late Tudor’s England and reflected in the Shakespeare’s play, derive from the local perceptions of Jewish communities along the Italian and South-Slav Adriatic? The Renaissance Dubrovnik was a Roman Catholic enclave, destined from both economic and demographic historical perspectives to deal in with Orthodox and Bogomil (Patarens) hinterland that, after the Ottoman conquests of the 15th century, started turning to Islam. A large number of Jews exiled from Spain in 1492 settled in Ottoman European provinces. The Republic of Ragusa (Dubrovnik) became an Ottoman vassal in 1526 – but already involved in complex relations between Ottomans, Venice and Spain – and directly dependent on the goodwill of the sultan and his governors in the region. Like Venice, Dubrovnik was more of a “system of functions” than a territorial state. During the 16th century Dubrovnik balanced between the Ottoman Empire and Spain, developing its economy through trade centers deep in the Balkans, and using a strong merchant fleet in the Mediterranean. In this way Dubrovnik endangered the Venetian regional interests. And although in many ways resembling the Venetian replica on the Balkans side, Dubrovnik was extraordinary in almost every sense. The religious and cultural characters included Dubrovnik in streams of Roman Catholic reformation, along with complex challenges by Islam and Eastern Orthodoxy from the Balkan backgrounds. Relations with Spain and Turkey became more complicated by the appearance of Sephardic Jews who, after being expelled by the “Catholic kings” of Spain, settled in the Balkan cities and founded their community in Dubrovnik.³

The Merchant of Venice is a reflection on the unfortunate nature and destiny of the Spanish emigrant Antonio Pérez, who was investigated by the Inquisition in 1592 for alleged sodomy, and, moreover, he was disgraced in the eyes of Elizabeth I. Just a few years before, in 1586, Anthony, the brother of Francis Bacon, was accused of similar crimes in France. Francis Bacon interceded strongly on behalf of both his brother and Pérez. Bacon and Shakespeare indicate the unlucky destiny of those that differ from an intolerant environment either by their descent or sexual orientation.⁴

The Tudor audience was becoming used to prejudices in relation to the Jews, although the Renaissance London had no Jewish bankers or “usurers” (however one looked at them). The financial market was mostly dominated by “the Lombards”, and the general odium was directed at Italians. Since the expulsion of the Jews from England in 1290, Italians had the most prominent role providing foreign financial capital to the market. Thus, it

³ Radovan Samardžić, “Ragusa come sistema di funzioni”, in: Antonio Di Vittorio (ed.), *Ragusa e il Mediterraneo. Ruolo e funzioni di una Repubblica marinara tra medioevo ed Età moderna*, Bari 1990, 3-11.

⁴ O’Rourke, “Racism and Homophobia”, 378-379.

was no coincidence that petitions were submitted to the Parliament in order to expel the Italians. The xenophobic rebellions of the London workers expressed the more general social dissatisfactions with alien economic inflows. Most probably, Tudor xenophobia did not try hard to underline the distinction between Italians and Jews, although the "Jewish question" was not an issue until the end of the 16th century.

Aside from the attitudes towards Italians and their businesses, Shakespeare's contemporaries tended to observe Venice as an ideal republic, a state that embodied the rule of law. Shakespeare, by contrast, imagined Venice as a system that sheltered social and individual depravity. Tudor stereotypes otherwise considered Venetians from the point of view of anti-Semitic prejudice and the antagonisms between Christians and Jews.⁵

The Sephardic and Italian Jewish populations have settled throughout the Southeastern Europe, and established their communities within the existing social and economic structures, while preserving their cultural traditions.⁶ The mid-16th century Istanbul numbered about 10.000 Jewish families. By 1519, the Jews represented 56% of the population in Thessaloniki, 3,143 families, approximately 15,715. "The victory of the Ottoman Empire symbolized, in the sphere of economics, a victory of Greeks, Turks, renegade Christians, Armenians, Ragusians, and Jews over the two-century-old commercial hegemony of Venice and Genoa". Until the end of the 16th century, together with the Ragusians, Moslems, Italians and western Europeans, the Jews were the initial principal beneficiaries of urban expansion in the western and even central Balkan provinces.⁷

Jews settled in Dubrovnik after establishing all of the more important centers of the Balkan part of Turkey. New wave of Jewish settlers appeared from the southern Italy after being expelled in 1514 – 1515. Their success in commerce caused repeated expulsion orders, which were revoked on the intervention of the Sultan. The Jews dealt mainly in fabrics, silk, wool, leather, and spices. The Dubrovnik Ghetto was established in 1546, and was enlarged by the end of the century.

After being attracted by Turkey with offered economic and religious freedoms and the general absence of racial exclusivity, Dubrovnik was also promising exquisite business opportunities. Jews "through their work and lives, although not numerous, represented for Dubrovnik important group of its population and economic activities." They established international merchant connections with several important Italian ports and made contact with Jewish business partners deep in the Balkans. The physical segregation was also in relation to the organization and orientations of economic enterprises, so the Jewish businesses in Dubrovnik were taking place in parallel with those of the Christians. That detail was of paramount importance for Dubrovnik. Jews covered some specific activities due to networking with Jewish business communities elsewhere in the continent, and those businesses could not include the local Christians. Certain Jews were forced to leave Dubrovnik on several occasions and, during those times, others were unable to take over

⁵ More about the Jews in 16th century Venice: Benjamin C. I. Ravid, "The First Charter of the Jewish Merchants of Venice", *Association for Jewish Studies Review*, 1, 1976, 187-222.

⁶ Andrew Jason Schoenfeld, "Immigration and Assimilation in the Jewish Community of Late Venetian Crete (15th-17th Centuries)", *Journal of Modern Greek Studies*, 25, 2007, 8.

⁷ Traian Stoianovich, "The Conquering Balkan Orthodox Merchant", *The Journal of Economic History*, 20, 1960, 239-244.

their business role; thus, Dubrovnik was temporarily deprived of an important segment of the Balkans imports and exports. That is also the best explanation of a relative tolerance towards the Jewish community in the Renaissance Dubrovnik.⁸

The Jews maybe could not bring innovations in the business character and manners, but citizens of Dubrovnik sometimes used Jewish middlemen when dealing with Turkey and Italy, probably due to special connections that the Jews maintained with these vast and respectable markets – particularly in regard to monetary transactions. At the same time, Jews were excluded from the range of certain monetary transactions, on the occasions when Dubrovnik Christians refused to deal with the Jews, including those that had resided in the city for several generations. Considering the contemporary states of mind and mentalities, that discrimination has raised a certain intolerance, since money transactions were one of the initiators of anti-Semitism, fed by conspiracy theories and, in particular, accusations of usury.

Rationalization of the attitude towards the Jews in the Renaissance Dubrovnik was mostly founded on the profits from the Jewish businesses. Special customs duties were applied to the Jews, leaving other domestic and foreign merchants in favorable position. Furthermore, the Jewish trade was providing income in the sectors of land and sea traffic, during the period in which the scope of Dubrovnik's shipping businesses on the Mediterranean shrank as a result of English, Dutch and French competition. In the new, altered circumstances that prevailed in the 16th century, Jews kept Dubrovnik in the structure of international traffic based on the specifics of the Ottoman system that encompassed important traditional routes between the Near East and European market. With their dwellings and business activities the Dubrovnik traders, both Christians and Jews, were present, in the deep Balkans hinterland, as in Sarajevo, Belgrade and Sofia. In that way, the Jews belonged to the system of Dubrovnik's trade and finances, and to that of the Ottoman Empire in an intermediate political sense. The coexistence of the Jews and Christians was one of the keys for the survival of both business communities in Dubrovnik's complex and vivacious society.

During the Ottoman conquests of Serbia and Bosnia, during the 15th century, Dubrovnik was under pressure from the Balkan interior refugees, thus forcing city authorities to stop the newcomers at the city gates. The authorities tried to feed and dissuade the refugees, sometimes even shipping them to southern Italy.

The Jewish refugees from Spain (Convertos) were admitted at the beginning of 16th century. Several cases of religious intolerance were recorded, but not often. Dubrovnik saw the benefits of the Jewish trading experience and widespread international connections. For centuries, Dubrovnik relied on a system of functions that demanded networking in Mediterranean and Balkan trade and constant adjustment to the fluid circumstances that were considered to be a major facet of European politics.

Disputes between the Jewish community in Dubrovnik and the local government were rare. Several cases were recorded of the traded merchandise that was inferior to contract obligations, as well as the cases of bankruptcies. The court in Dubrovnik intervened often in disputes within the Jewish community. Testaments show, certainly, strong family con-

⁸ Jorjo Tadić, "Značaj dubrovačkih Jevreja", in: *Zbornik 1. Studije i građa o Jevrejima Dubrovnika*, Beograd 1971, 1-8.

nections and considerable affection between ancestors and progeny. Family members are mentioned with great tenderness. Emotions are stronger and more oft-mentioned than in the wills of the Christian fellow citizens. Testaments mention the Holy Land and a support for it is maintained. Many also donated money to charities. Poor, young girls were assisted in relation to marriage, while the slaves were liberated and the synagogues were endowed.

Additional insight on the position of the Jews in the Renaissance Dubrovnik is given by the 86th special series of the local Historical archive *Fedi et Attestati*, introduced in 1624 for the purposes of further specialization of administration in the Republic, containing documents concerned with proving blood links, business inability, death certificates, certificates on sojourn, certificates of citizenship (*nazionalità*). Everyone wishing to travel outside the Republic borders received a certificate of citizenship, which served as personal document, an ID or passport. Dubrovnik issued these documents only to its citizens or to foreign residents with an additional denotation that they were subjects of a different state. This document was issued upon the decision of the Senate to do so – public law considered Dubrovnik a sovereign Republic, thus entitled to govern its citizens. Administration was considered with class and religious affiliation. Only those practicing the state religion – Roman Catholicism – had all status rights afforded to them. Since trade was the basis of the state's existence, the most important freedom of Dubrovnik citizens was the right to travel. Therefore, the Republic was forced to try to satisfy all of its citizens, by maintaining their equality in a private-legal sense, as well as giving them the right to own private property and court protection.

Not only religious and class segregation were applied to the Jews. They were also obliged to live in the Ghetto. However, there were no limits as to one's right to full and free property and trade. Jews were treated more like residents, *habitatores*, rather than as citizens. In any case, that was their initial status. Dubrovnik was a society arranged around the class, with a state religion. Religion and the status of the state, both in relation to the Ottoman Empire and Papal Rome, determined political and social development, more than genuine ethnicity. The character of the state was reflected in the status of its citizens and residents. Jewish travel documents regularly had the denotation *Ebreo – Žudio*. "Žudio" and "merchant" in travel documents were synonyms. It was not established at what point the Republic began to consider Jews as its citizens. At first they were not considered foreigners, but foreign residents. They were represented by *consul Haebreorum*, a head of the Jewish community. Only documents from the 18th century sustain the assumption that expressions as *nazionale raguseo, suddito vero e reale* are synonyms related to citizenship. All the bearers of travel documents were treated equally abroad, but within territory of the Republic, differences between subjects were evident. Jews of Dubrovnik had rights restricted in comparison with the other *cives* and *cittadini*. The Republic started treating Jews as citizens no later than in the fourth decade of 18th century, while France introduced the same practice only in 1791, and Germany in 1812. In the Ottoman Empire they were considered equal to Christians and, later, in the 18th century, even to poor Moslems, who by then were considered second-rate citizens. In its dealings with Jews, Dubrovnik took into consideration their status in the Ottoman Empire.

The government of the Republic of Ragusa was not strict with regard to the Jewish dwellings in the Ghetto, which was positioned in Žudioska Street, between Placa and Prijeko Streets. Jews also resided outside the Ghetto and their decisions to move back

to the Ghetto were not always approved by the state authorities. It also seems that the old measure was not respected: *signum Haebraismi* – the Jewish sign – a yellow ribbon worn on a bonnet or hat. That measure was more than anything a concession to clerics. The local Christian Proselytism forced the government to react, and the priests who used force or deception were not sanctioned. Dubrovnik in general respected religious freedoms, but ascription to Roman Church was an important characteristic of national and cultural identity, as well as a framework for being part of the mighty European circles and maintaining closeness to the Papal Rome, a unique factor in comparison with the Slavic and Ottoman neighbors. Movement of Jews was regulated from time to time, so one can assume it was not rigorously restricted. They were forbidden to move at night, and were not allowed to enter houses of Christians – however, most influential houses admitted the Jews freely. Measures of intolerance never gained a convincing majority in the Senate.⁹

The Jews were first introduced into the literature of Dubrovnik by Shakespeare's Renaissance predecessor Marin Držić (1508 – 1567). In the famous play *Dundo Maroje*, primarily played in 1551, he introduced the character of the Jew ("Žudio") named Sadi, while revealing his attitude towards Jews as reflected at the metaphorical and stereotypical levels. Sadi remained the single Jewish character in his preserved comedies. His "Žudio" Sadi has metaphorical attributes, linked to the real characters or ones mentioned in his comedies, implying either his personal prejudice or his connivance to the audience. Thus, it relates to a bully or someone to whom money is both a goal and the ultimate measure. Sadi lives in Rome. In the play he speaks Italian. It is assumed that Držić once stayed in Rome, and based the Jewish character on the contemporary Italian comedies where the Jews were merchants, brokers and usurers. One way or another, by introducing Sadi with no particular dramaturgic reason, Držić likely deferred to the prejudices and stereotypes from his encirclements, but decided to ease these emotions by mocking the archetypal characters from his surroundings, and he painted the local society and its vibrations in vivid colors.

The most refined Croatian Renaissance playwright and prose writer, Držić introduced a Jewish character in the Dubrovnik's literature by almost announcing the trajectory that led to the famous Shakespeare's peace, *The Merchant of Venice*. Držić considered the Jews in accordance with the local customs and mentalities. Jews were for him, and maybe even more for his audience, a paradigm of a specific character with a relation to the specific historical destiny. Držić portrays Jews as he experienced a state of mind, beliefs and preconceptions of his encirclements. Sadi "Žudio" still remains the single Jewish character preserved in his known comedies, and the only Jewish character in the Dubrovnik's literature of the 16th century. Although episodic personality, he remained a symbolic appearance, and although he is not a local – he is from Rome – Sadi "Žudio" was bearing many notorious human features in an intimate content. But the Jew was neither common in contemporary Italian comedy.

Since the beginning of the 17th century, under the influence of the Counterreformation and the Jesuits, the position of the Dubrovnik's Jews was regulated by a local church synod of May 19, 1606, presided by the archbishop – Italian by the way – Fabio Tempestivo.

⁹ Branislav Nedeljković, "Putne isprave dubrovačkih Jevreja", in: *Zbornik 1. Studije i građa o Jevrejima Dubrovnika*, 113-134.

In the brief related to Jews, *De Judeis*, the archbishop and the synod kept to anti-Semitic bulls of the popes Paolo IV and Clement VIII. A strict segregation from Christians was declared, and Jews were strictly confined to the Ghetto. The stances of the synod were supported by the most prominent Dubrovnik thinker and theologian of the time, Nikola Vitov Gučetić, in his thirteen lectures on interest and usury, as well as in three lectures "against the Jews". Gučetić devoted his lectures to the differences between the beliefs of the Jews and Christians. He was prepared to vocalize his "lectures" in front of the Jews, in case they came to listen, addressing them in those documents directly, like friends or confraternity, whilst simultaneously regretting their absence of belief that "offends God and is both their whip and their calamity". In any case, the response to both the ecclesiastic decisions and Gučetić's documents was largely negligible.¹⁰

What was interesting from the eastern Adriatic perspective was the coincidence of the appearance of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and the opening of the Venetian port in Split. The busiest port of the middle Adriatic, Split was under strong Turkish pressure from the neighborhood. Venetian interests were threatened by Turkish attempts to open ports in the bays of Solin and Stobreč. Too busy with their own conflicts, the citizens of Split had no power to encourage such decision, despite the certainty that Dubrovnik would link to the Split's territory on behalf of both itself and the Turks. An important role in the founding of Split's port was played by a Sephardim, Daniel Rodríguez, a person with a host of experience in trading between inland Dalmatia, Venice and Ancona. His first project for the port of Split – from 1566 – was ignored by the Senate in Venice. The Cyprus war 1570 – 1573 temporarily halted economic activities. Facing economic and political consequences, as well as the possible closure of borders with Turkey and the Balkans hinterland, the *doge* appointed Rodríguez as a consul for the Jewish nationals of Venice. His work on the demarcation of Venice and Turkey enhanced Rodríguez's reputation and influence on both sides. He presented a new proposition for the opening of Split port in 1577, with the explanation that the "Split area will become a wide funnel that would gather all the wealth of the Levant." At that moment, Venice was faced with the consequences of the Cypriot war, penetration of West European merchants and political influences on eastern Mediterranean, in addition to the local competition provided by Dubrovnik.

Significant changes in the overall status of the Jews in South Eastern Europe performed a decision which appeared to be local. In Dubrovnik on July 6, 1583 was proclaimed a customs regulation, after three years of negotiations with the city government and the three Venetian "consuls of Levant Jews", Daniel Rodríguez, Samuel Ergas and Solomon Oef. A new role of Jews in the Mediterranean economic structure was based on the opening of the Split port (assuming the construction of docks, warehouses, quarantine and customs). Rodríguez initially predicted a road construction, from Split to Sarajevo. The project was supported by the majority of domestic and foreign traders in Turkey, Jews, Muslims, Christians, and the increasing number of Venetians and Florentines.¹¹

The plan was accepted, but a lack of funds delayed its implementation. Venice turned to Split only in 1588, primarily as a result of the appearance in the Adriatic of pirates sup-

¹⁰ Miroslav Pantić, "Jevreji u dubrovačkoj književnosti", in: *Zbornik 1. Studije i građa o Jevrejima Dubrovnika*, 211-238.

¹¹ Toma Popović, "Dubrovački Jevreji u trgovini Turske i Italije krajem XVI veka", *Istorijski časopis*, XXXIX, 1992, 71.

ported by the Knights of Malta. In such a context, the decision was probably compelled by Ottoman concessions to England and Holland in 1580, thus bringing the reality and logic of new the Atlantic economy closer to conditions of the Eastern Mediterranean. Under supervision of Daniel Rodríguez, the Split port was established in 1592.

Opening of the Split port faced Dubrovnik with a competition from domestic merchants in the interior, primarily in Sarajevo and Belgrade. They reminded in vain the neighboring Turks that Split was "a nest of buccaneers and criminals" doing so as a result of being faced with the disappearance of the economy-based influence of the previous period, which one might consider to be the peak of their Balkan trade. It is likely that this sudden change resulted in their failure to make use of the talents of Daniel Rodríguez, who stayed in Dubrovnik whilst awaiting a Venetian decision on opening of Split port, which he had so insightfully envisaged.¹²

After 1583 the status of Jews in Dubrovnik was significantly improved. In that sense Dubrovnik was also influenced by changes in attitude toward the Jews in Venice. The Venice Jews became important intermediaries in the economic and political relations with the Muslim eastern Mediterranean. Jews in Turkey were considered as subjects, unlike the Ragusins who were treated as foreigners, although they enjoyed the vassal status. Similarly Dubrovnik was seriously considering a growing influence of Jews in the Ottoman Porte during the eighties and nineties the 16th century, acquired after the assassination of Grand Vizier Mehmed-pasha Sokolović who preferred the Serbs, Croats and other South Slavs, his former compatriots and neighbors. The establishment of the Bosnian pashalik in 1580 attracted Sephardies in Sarajevo and other Bosnian towns, and the depth of the Balkan market made further appealing to Venice, Ancona and Florence. The Dubrovnik government has also been well informed, that the wealthiest Jews settled in Istanbul though, as the Ottoman Porte took very much care about. But even such tendency, arising from the business interests and economic conjuncture, rather than a formal status, was the outcome of Dubrovnik's mediatory role in relations between Turkey and Italy.¹³

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Despite their historic rivalry, Venice and Dubrovnik were linked by a unique doctrine of their republican, oligarchic constitutions, economic priorities and the rational use of historical experience. In 1204, when Venice occupied Crete during the Western dismemberment of the foundering empire of Byzantium, *Serenissima* acquired a sizable Jewish population, whose history on the island was rooted in antiquity.¹⁴ That long continuity is probably one of reasons for their tolerance towards Jews that, later on, became a reflection of realistically unfavorable economic conditions in relation to trade development since the beginning of 16th century. The degradation of Venice into a second-rate naval and mercantile power by

¹² On Split port opening: Grga Novak, *Židovi u Splitu*, Split 1920, 12; Idem, *Split u svjetskom prometu*, Split 1921, 85; Idem, *Povijest Splita*, Zagreb 1961, 76-88; Tadić, *Jevreji u Dubrovniku do polovine XVII stoljeća*, Sarajevo 1937, 91-94; Duško Kečkemet, *Židovi u povijesti Splita*, Split 1971, 31-51; Popović, *Turska i Dubrovnik i XVI veku*, Beograd 1973, 361-364.

¹³ Popović, "Dubrovački Jevreji u trgovini Turske i Italije krajem XVI veka", 73.

¹⁴ Schoenfeld, "Immigration and Assimilation", 8.

a combination of Turkish advances into Mediterranean and the process of emerging "world market", forced the acceptance of market logic, something that was understood by both Livorno and Ancona, who decided to allow privileges to Jewish merchants in 1593 and 1594, similar to those afforded by Venice in 1589.¹⁵ The Jewish press had an important role in both the cultural and religious lives of Venice in the 16th century, while oligarchy pushed Jewish culture towards a tolerance justified by financial compensation.¹⁶

Shakespeare's *Merchant* is a specific interpretation of the mentalities, particularly with regard to attitudes towards the Jewish minority that the Christian majority defined almost exclusively through prejudices, stereotypes and palpable envy and malice. *Merchant* is an introduction to the 17th century Western Christian politics, including both Venice and Dubrovnik. The new coming era in Western politics announced important deliberation on the nature of governance, social life and the value system.¹⁷ With its underlined representation of the attitude of the majority towards the Jews, *Merchant* is seriously dealing with categories of guilt, justice and charity, of a paramount importance. Almost to the same extent that Shakespeare managed to remain relevant to the debates and dilemmas of epochs to come, the power of *The Merchant* did not remain limited to its time.¹⁸

The layer of *The Merchant* is based on the historical dichotomy of the common Christian doctrine towards credit economy, and the reality in which that doctrine was challenged by Jews and all those promoting a culture of the free trade and open market. That is the same dichotomy that might explain historical success of Protestantism. If anti-Semitism is one of the sources of modern totalitarianism, the essence of that was revealed by Shakespeare in *Merchant*, for he also questioned the moral dilemmas towards Jews-turned-Christians. No matter if their new Christian "façade" was genuine, or merely the result of a compromise, in that new context Christianity focused on racial origin, attributing conversion to a political pressure.¹⁹

The strange admiration for Catholic Venice in Protestant England lay in traditional Venetian antagonism toward the papacy and in the positive "myth" of its mixed political constitution, which balanced elements of monarchical, aristocratic, and republican government, thus contributing to the prevention of a princely tyranny. Even the Puritans had praise for Venice. By learning about Venice, England was learning about itself.²⁰ In *The Merchant*, Venice is not merely an exotic stage – it is a narrative frame enabling Shakespeare to provide deep and layered meditations over the contemporary characters, culture and economy.²¹

¹⁵ Ravid, "The First Charter of the Jewish Merchants of Venice", 187-222.

¹⁶ Paul Grendler, "The Destruction of Hebrew Books in Venice, 1568", *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, 45, 1978, 103-104.

¹⁷ Henry S. Turner, "The Problem of the More-than-One: Friendship, Calculation, and Political Association in *The Merchant of Venice*", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 57, 2006, 413-442.

¹⁸ Zeno Ackermann, "Performing Oblivion / Enacting Remembrance: The Merchant of Venice in West Germany 1945 to 1961", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 62, 2011, 364-395.

¹⁹ Anne Heather Hirschfeld, "We All Expect a Gentle Answer, Jew", *The Merchant of Venice and the Psychotheology of Conversion*, *English Literary History*, 73, 2006, 62-63.

²⁰ John Eglin, *Venice Transfigured: The Myth of Venice in British Culture, 1660-1797*, New York 2001.

²¹ Walter S. H. Lim, "Surety and Spiritual Commercialism in the Merchant of Venice", *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 50, 2010, 355-356.