



Religious Conversion and Otherness in Venice in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*

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Abstract:

This article examines the otherness of Jews and Muslims after their conversion to Christianity in *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello: The Moor of Venice*. The article argues that Shakespeare criticizes Venice, as its inhabitants appear to accept the converts and their residence in the city for the purpose of benefiting Venice economically and politically. Specifically, the article investigates how Jews (Shylock and Jessica in *The Merchant*) and Muslims (Othello in *Othello*) are ostracized and mistreated regardless of whether the conversion is willing or forced. In order to investigate this prejudice, the article considers the views of historians of and travelers to Venice about discrimination in the city during the Renaissance. It also refers to social critics' views (such as Fredrick Russell's) about the Christians' suspicion of the efficacy of the converts' baptisms. The article concludes that Shakespeare manifests that Venice is not a mythical city as it is imagined in the English and European mind; rather, Venice alienates and humiliates its non-Christian Venetian subjects.

Keywords: conversion to Christianity, *Merchant of Venice*, *Othello*, otherness, Venice

1. Introduction:

It is not hard for the literary critics or the general readers of Shakespeare to notice that the playwright was fond of Venice. Two of his plays, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello: The Moor of Venice*, take place in Venice and deal with Venetian issues and matters. However, it was not Shakespeare only who adored the city; Europeans generally, and the English people specifically, also had a great admiration for Venice in the late Renaissance. It was the period during which Shakespeare wrote his two Venetian plays. As David C. McPherson explains, Venice carried “values” for Europeans, and historians “have shown that certain aspects of the city’s reputation became so powerful that, in the aggregate, they may justifiably be called the Myth of Venice, and that England was the country in Northern Europe in which this Myth was most strongly felt” (1990: 13). Then it does not come as a surprise that Shakespeare made use of the “myth of Venice” to make his plays charming and to brighten up his stage. *The Merchant* and *Othello* were written during the peak days of the “myth of Venice”; even so, as Eugenie R. Freed comments about the two plays, “Shakespeare goes on in both plays to create dramatic situations that conflict with and seriously question ... [the] perception” (2009: 47) of Venice as a mythical land.

This article builds on such views by Freed. It argues that the Venetian scene is loaded politically in *The Merchant* and *Othello*, and that Shakespeare depicts Venice in a contrary way to the popular “myth” of the time. The two plays show that in Venice justice is deficient, religious tolerance is unavailable, and acceptance is questionable. In particular, this article focuses on religious conversion to highlight Shakespeare’s conflicting attitudes towards Venice through relating the otherness of the converted Jews in *The Merchant* to the otherness of the converted Muslims in *Othello*. The paper suggests that in the supposedly mythical and the cosmopolitan city of trade, non-Christians, whether originally Jews or Muslims and whether they change their faiths willingly or not, are doomed to suffer from fixed otherness. While Venetian laws supposedly protected their civil rights and residence in Venice, conversion, surprisingly, reinforces the converts’ otherness instead of dismantling it.

The article develops earlier literary critical readings of the two plays. M. Lindsay Kaplan establishes links between travel writers’ views about Venice and Jewish suffering in *The Merchant of Venice* (2002: 127). However, Kaplan sheds light only on Shylock’s otherness as a Jew without going further to comment on or predict Shylock’s situation after his conversion. Kaplan also comments briefly on Jessica’s conversion without considering how she is othered as a convert. Efraim Sicher reads Jessica’s conversion in terms of sexuality and monetary value (2016: 278). Indeed, Sicher contextualizes the conversion of Jessica, but he does it in an English proto-capitalist context. Other critics primarily focus on the psychological aspects in the play. For example, Robin Russin argues that *The Merchant* is only “On the surface . . . a romantic comedy” (2013: 115), but deep down it is “a study of vanity, ostracism, anger, abuse, and hypocrisy” (126). John Drakakis examines the intersectionality of race and othering in *Othello* (2013: 115). Drakakis also looks into the role which religion plays in *The Merchant* and how this may complicate the experience of the racialized other (105). However, Drakakis’ study fails to conclude that the common otherness in the two plays about Venice is religious and racial in nature. While these critics point to the otherness in the two plays, the current paper considers the historical context of Venice and its ill-treatment of Jews and Muslims in the Renaissance period, and it reads Shylock’s otherness in light of Jessica’s otherness after her voluntary conversion. Then, the paper examines the Jews’ otherness by analyzing Shylock’s silent position after his conversion. *Othello*’s character will also be examined to indicate that his born-into faith, Islam, and place of origin contribute to his otherness, even after his conversion to Christianity. As this paper shows, *Othello*’s Islamic background puts him at the margin of Venice as much as his dark skin does. The converted Muslims suffered from religious otherness as much as converted Jews did in Venice in the 16th century. Nevertheless, the darker the complexion of those who convert to Christianity, the more racialized their experience becomes.

In order to draw the above conclusion, we briefly survey some views from historians and English travelers who visited Venice from the 1540s-1620s. Some travelers such as William Thomas primarily commented on the relationship between Venetians, wealth, and legal corruption. Thomas notes, “there can be no better order of justice in a commonwealth than theirs, if it were duly observed. Howbeit corruption (by the advocate’s means) is so crept in amongst the judges that poor men many times lack no delays in the process of their matters” (1549: 134). Thomas condemns Venetian materialistic avarice, which is a condition that, as he explains, led to corruption in the Venetian legal and judicial systems (132). Other travelers reflected on the dynamics between Venetian Christians and other non-Christian residents. Thomas Coryate asserts that the Venetian acceptance of the Jews’ residency in Venice was solely for material purposes, which explains the continuity of the mistreatment of Jews in the city even after their conversion to Christianity. Moreover, Coryate observes that in Venice the Jews used to live in “the ghetto,” an area to which they were constrained (1611: 102). Likewise, McPherson confirms that Venetian Jews were required to live in a ghetto and were forbidden to own real estate in the city (1990: 64). In this sense, Jews were not seen as equal fellow citizens. As Freed puts it, “Jews provided the Venetian economy with an essential service: moneylending, which was forbidden to Christians” (2009: 52). Although few Jews converted to Christianity, Coryate notes, once the conversion took place, the converts’ goods were “confiscated” as a kind of punishment, because the Jews made “their fortunes by usury” (1611: 105). Kaplan explains that Coryate condemns Venice’s policy of “confiscating” the wealth of the converted Jews for the benefit of the country (2002: 138). Venice and its people’s persecution of non-Venetians supported the city’s finances. Hosting alien residents in Venice benefitted Venice economically and politically, as well.

Other minority religious groups’ conditions were not much better than the situation of the Jews in Venice. Muslim traders and residents were treated suspiciously and were subject to strict residential codes. For example, Graham Holderness explains that “Venetian fear and mistrust of Muslim Turks was of course greater than any anxiety about the Jews since the latter had no political affiliation, while the Turks were from time to time an enemy power, and the Turkish merchants potential enemy agents” (2010: 53). In part, this anxiety about Muslims and Turks can be explained by the historic conflict between Islam and Christianity in the area. The situation was worsened in Venice in particular due to the Venetian government’s prolonged struggle with the Islamic Ottoman Empire. Eventually, the city’s animosity became focused on the Muslim traders and visitors in Venice. According to David Chambers et al., after the conflict of the 1570s between Venice and the Ottomans, the Venetian government assigned the Turks a specific house on the Grand Canal in which to reside on the condition that “All the doors [of the house] on the landward side shall be walled up ... so that the Turks cannot be seen by their neighbors” (2001: 350). Furthermore, the house was required to have a guardian who “shall be obliged to lock the doors, both to landward and to seaward, at dusk, and to open them again at sunrise, from the outside, with good and effective keys, which he must keep” (Chambers et al. 2001: 352). Holderness specifically comments on the strict residential codes for Muslim Turks, writing that “An obsessive particularity about sealing up means of access and egress is heightened here by the need to inhibit physical interaction, and even to close off any visual contact between Muslims and Christians” (2010: 53). The Venetians treated Muslims as if they were some type of contaminant that threatened to pollute Venice and its residents both physically and morally, and therefore they must be contained and limited.

In *The Merchant* and *Othello*, Venetian Christians regard Jews and Muslims as inferiors. This prejudice stems from anti-Semitic beliefs and Orientalist views. Venetians held disagreeable views about Judaism, illustrated by the fact that Jews are treated as outsiders in *The Merchant* to the extent that one Jew is forced to change his religion. Similarly, Orientalists “came to ‘know’ the ‘Orient’” as being inferior and barbaric, since they regarded Orientals as “the other” of “the self” (Ashcroft and Pal 2001: 47). In *Othello*, for example, this stereotypical image of Orientals leads Venetian Christians to adopt ideologies about Orientals’ moral inferiority. In Venice in the age of the Renaissance, as Shakespeare’s two plays indicate, after converting to

Christianity whether voluntarily or not, Jews and Muslims were still alienated. As the two plays suggest, Venetians are not really interested in the spirituality of the new followers of Christ; rather, their interest is highly deceptive and their endeavor to proselytize to non-Christians stems purely from political and economic benefits. Religious conversion is a means to accept the residency of converted Jews and Muslims while making financial and political use of their residency.

The converts to Christianity, whether Muslims or Jews, suffered from being treated as outsiders in Christian societies. The fixed alterity results from the Christians' suspicion about the perfection and the efficiency of the "other's" baptism. Robert Markus clarifies that conversion involves "disenchantment," meaning that the convert displaces his/her old religious rituals with new ones (qtd. in Russell 1997: 13). Fredrick H. Russell, however, argues that there is no complete genuine conversion: "In conversion there is always something left behind" (1997: 13). To Russell, conversion "seems to mean a sudden and a complete change of belief," yet in fact that does not happen (13). Christians in the medieval period were worried and anxious about the effectiveness of Jews' and Muslims' conversions to Christianity. Steven F. Kruger questions whether "religious conversion truly transformed those bodies" spiritually as well as physically (1997: 167). Jonathan M. Elukin, while analyzing the "inefficiency" of conversion from Judaism to Christianity, asserts that there are "doubts in the minds of Christians about the fixity of baptism" when Jews are baptized (1997: 178). Such suspicions continued to emerge in the 16th century, when Christians doubted the efficacy of baptizing Jews and Muslims. This doubt, featured in *The Merchant* and *Othello*, cements the newly converted figures' otherness, in spite of their conversion to Christianity and their residency in a cosmopolitan city such as Venice.

2. Discussion:

In *The Merchant*, Shylock and Jessica, the two Jewish characters, convert to Christianity: Shylock is coerced to do so, whereas Jessica chooses the conversion. Some critics do not see anything wrong with coercing Shylock to change his faith, and, instead, they choose to defend his oppression and justify it. For example, Gorman Beauchamp argues that the play has nothing to do with anti-Semitism. On the one hand, Beauchamp reads Shylock's forced conversion as an act that shows Antonio's goodwill. He asserts that "Antonio saves Shylock from eternal damnation" when asking for Shylock's conversion in return for Shylock's intention of killing him (2001: 55). On the other hand, Beauchamp completely ignores Jessica's ill treatment after her conversion when he rhetorically asks, "Where is the anti-Semitism in the portrait of Jessica?" (66). Nevertheless, and despite Beauchamp's assertion, the play gives direct evidence proving that these newly converted figures are not treated as authentic Venetian Christians. Jessica is mistrusted although she willingly accepts Christianity. Shylock is manipulated and, indeed, misjudged before and even after he is coerced to change his religion. The two characters, regardless of the nature of their conversion, are othered by the Venetian Christian community.

In Jessica's case, to some degree her husband, Lorenzo, supports and accepts her as a Christian after her conversion; yet, mainstream society regards her as "the other." It seems that Jessica's ethnicity prevents her from being completely accepted by Christian society in Venice, both on earth and in heaven. The clown Lancelot rebukes Jessica by asserting that she is still Shylock's daughter, saying to her, "I fear you are damned both by father and mother" (*The Merchant of Venice* (Greenblatt) 2008, 3.5.12-13), and that she will have "no mercy" (3.5.28) in heaven since she was a Jewess. Lancelot here voices some of the common attitudes toward the converted Jews, which includes the belief that Jews can never completely assimilate into Christian society or its traditions and even baptism cannot remove the stains of being a Jewess. What Lancelot, whom the critic Russin regards as "the truth teller" (2013: 121), speaks of is the inevitable otherness of Jessica. The inhabitants of Venice will not accept her as a Christian. Jessica protests that she "shall be saved" by her husband, since, as she explains it, Lorenzo is the one making her "Christian" (*Merchant* (Greenblatt) 2008, 3.5.15). Nevertheless, Lancelot replies by saying, "the more to blame he! We were Christians enough before, e'en as many as could

well live one by another” (*Merchant* (Greenblatt) 2008, 3.5.17-18). Lancelot also refers to the market economy to give more possible reasons for the Christian Venetians to regard Jessica’s conversion negatively. For Lancelot, “This *making* of Christians will raise the price of hogs” (*Merchant* (Greenblatt) 2008, 3.5.19), and if all the Jews living in Venice become pork-eaters, the Christian Venetians “shall not shortly have a rasher on/ the coals for money” (*Merchant* (Greenblatt) 2008, 3.5.20-21).

Lancelot’s straightforward objection to more people becoming Christian in Venice is contrasted with the hypocrisy of the Christian Venetians who are willing to accept Jessica as long as they can gain an economic advantage from her conversion. By stealing the “ducats” from her father, Jessica is satisfying the Venetians’ greed for Jewish money. Jessica assumes that by stealing “some more ducats” (*Merchant* (Greenblatt) 2008, 2.6.50), she might prove her loyalty to the Christian Venetians and sincerity and love to Lorenzo. To Venetian society in general and to Lorenzo in particular, without “the ducats,” Jessica is nothing. Sicher describes Jessica’s conversion as “an exchange of both sexual and monetary value, as she converts the Jew’s money and her body to Christian use” (2016: 278). As Russin puts it, “It is the money that matters to Lorenzo” (2013: 125). Venice regards Jews, especially the ones who converted to Christianity, as a source of money. Otherwise, Venice would not have hosted them after Britain’s expulsion of numerous Jews in the 13th century (Kaplan 2012: 248).

Neither renouncing her heritage nor accepting Christianity is enough for Jessica to be treated as an equal by the Venetian Christians. As Russell argues, conversion is never complete (1997: 13), and this encompasses Christian Venetians’ views on those who convert to Christianity. That is why Jessica’s sincerity will always be doubted. If Jessica were not, as Lorenzo describes her, “wise, fair, and true” (*Merchant* (Greenblatt) 2008, 2.6.56), and if her father were not making money, Lorenzo would not be interested in marrying a Jewess. It is true that Lorenzo stands up for his wife whenever the Venetians attempt to insult her because of her past, like Lancelot does (*Merchant* (Greenblatt) 2008, 3.5.31-32). This support, though, is not enough. In fact, their marriage does not seem to be based on love or compassion; Jessica herself regards her marriage to Lorenzo as a controlling power. She admits to Lancelot that she fulfills Lorenzo’s desire for her to convert because she believes that she will be “saved” by him (*Merchant* (Greenblatt) 2008, 3.5.15). As Mary Metzger explains, Jessica here reveals that her marriage to a Christian man is “a force for order” (1998: 57). Through her own assertion that Lorenzo “hath made” her “a Christian” (*Merchant* (Greenblatt) 2008, 3.5.15-16), Jessica declares her total submission to her husband’s domination as if she is now a second-class Christian woman because once she was a Jew.

Jessica is not othered only by the men in Venetian society. Even Portia in her palace marginalizes and manipulates Jessica. As a sincere Christian, Jessica openly tells Portia and Bassanio about her father’s plan of taking revenge on Antonio. Jessica asserts without hesitation that Shylock “would rather have Antonio’s flesh” than having “twenty times” the sum of money that he lends to Antonio (*Merchant* (Greenblatt) 2008, 3.2.285). Jessica here openly tells her father’s plan to the Christians, with whom Jessica thinks she belongs now that she has converted to Christianity. This behavior reflects that Jessica seeks “to gain favor with her new host, Portia” (Russin 2013: 125). She is loyal to her husband and his friends. Yet, although Jessica tells Portia her father’s plan, Portia snubs Jessica by not replying to her. As if Jessica is not the origin of the talk, Portia uses the detail Jessica gives in order to ask Bassanio, “Is it your dear friend that is thus in trouble?” (*Merchant* (Greenblatt) 2008, 3.2.290). Portia here ignores Jessica’s role in helping a Christian as if to remind Jessica that she is an outsider, and Jessica will not be addressed directly, even if she shows her interest in helping Christians. After her conversion, even if Jessica has a chance to speak, the Christian addressees do not seem to react to her words. Instead, they begin another conversation, similarly to what Portia does. This situation indicates that the Jews who were newly converted to Christianity while in Venice are used for certain purposes, including spying on “the others” – the Jews – and telling their plans to “the self” – the Venetian Christians. Thus, Jessica is allowed to be in Portia’s palace as long as she can prove herself to be serviceable.

For Venetian Christian society, it seems, being a follower of a non-Christian faith is an indication of irreversible moral weakness. Due to Jessica's past religious background, Lorenzo tends to doubt her fidelity. At the moment he sees Lancelot talking with Jessica, Lorenzo says, "I shall grow jealous of you shortly, Lancelot, if you thus get my wife into corners" (*Merchant* (Greenblatt) 2008, 3.5.24-25). Jessica, who knows very well the stereotypical image that Christians have about her, says, "Nay, you need not fear us, Lorenzo. Lancelot and I are out" (*Merchant* (Greenblatt) 2008, 3.5.26-27). Lorenzo's suspicion of Jessica's chastity aligns with Christians' doubt about the effectiveness of changing women's sexual attitudes through baptism. For instance, "the early church father Tertullian" doubted that "baptism could efface the deep and dangerous sexuality of women" (Elukin 1997: 180). In Peter Brown's words, "Christian baptism did nothing to change" sexuality (qtd. in Elukin 1997: 180). Sicher, who critically considers similar theological views, comments on Jessica's relationship with Lorenzo after her conversion, suggesting that "both marital and religious fidelity are not constant, that hearts may be stolen as much as the Jew's money" (2016: 280). Lorenzo is suspicious of Jessica because he believes that her baptism did not entirely purify her, particularly sexually. It is as if she is always on the verge of giving herself to any man who might show some interest. This doubt is influenced by the Christian view about the sexuality of "the other." Thus, Jessica's otherness seems inevitable, since even her husband doubts her fidelity despite her baptism. Jessica encounters this misjudgment after her voluntary conversion because she will always be seen as Shylock's daughter, the Jew and usurer.

Shylock, then, will most likely suffer more than Jessica in the play. He will be always looked at suspiciously, as he accepts Christianity under duress. In order to understand the ill treatment Shylock suffers from after his conversion, it is important to comment first on how Shylock was fooled by the Venetian laws before his conversion. Shylock was clear with Antonio, who borrowed some money from him, about the content of his contract:

If you repay me not in such a day,
In such a place, such sum or sums are
Expressed in the condition, let the forfeit
Be nominated for an equal pound
Of your fair flesh, to be cut off and taken
In what part of your body pleaseth me. (*Merchant* (Greenblatt) 2008,
1.3.140- 47)

Although Antonio responds "Content i' faith: I will seal to such a bond" (*Merchant* (Greenblatt) 2008, 1.4.148), towards the end of the play the bond is broken by Portia in the trial scene. Portia disguises herself as a lawyer to find faults within the contract, and her purpose is manipulative. Portia protects Antonio's life yet deceives Shylock. Shylock asks for justice in a land of false justice. He barely understands the nature of Venice and its people.

It seems that conversion to Christianity causes a loss of personality and voice for Shylock, as if his conversion is used as a method to silence the talkative and disobedient Jew and marginalize him. It is ironic that after Shylock converts to Christianity he is not given an opportunity to speak, although he was allowed to speak when he was a Jew. When his daughter addresses Portia after her conversion, she is ignored, and a similar thing happens with Shylock in the trial scene. Shylock chooses not to speak, because the nature of the trial makes him prefer silence over expressing his rejection of the Portia's judgment. Even after Venice's court has control of his daughter and half of his possessions have been taken for the "the general state" (*Merchant* (Greenblatt) 2008, 4.1.366), Venice entirely marginalizes Shylock. Although Venice has laws that should protect non-Venetians' rights, it treats Shylock as an alien resident, an outsider, who should not ask for justice while in Venice. Antonio talks about the rights of the non-Venetians when asserting to Solanio that

The Duke cannot deny the course of law,

For the commodity that strangers have
 With us in Venice, if it be denied,
 Will much impeach the justice of the state,
 Since that trade and profit of the city
 Consisteth of all nations. (*Merchant* (Greenblatt) 2008, 3.4.26-31)

Yet, by suppressing and silencing Shylock, Antonio reveals the fakeness of the rights he talks about. In spite of his coerced conversion, Shylock is “an alien, not a citizen, and still without any rights” (Russin 2013: 123). Hence, Venice’s purpose is not to prevent Shylock from practicing usury in his trade. Instead, the conversion is employed for the benefit of Venice’s economy.

Shylock, already on Venice’s margins while a Jew, will undoubtedly remain marginalized after his conversion. His conversion is coerced, and Christians will refer to him as the revenge-taker, if not as the Jew. Because Shylock was forced to change his religion, Shylock’s hatred of the Christians will reach a peak. Even before his daughter’s elopement with a Christian and before the court forces him to convert, Shylock asserts his hatred for Christians, saying, “I hate him [Antonio] for he is a Christian” (*Merchant* (Greenblatt) 2008, 1.3.37). Shylock never fits in among the Christian community spiritually. This is clear from Shakespeare’s titling of the play as “The Comical History of the Merchant of Venice, or Otherwise Called the Jew of Venice” (*Merchant* (Greenblatt) 2008, 1112). Referring to Shylock in the title of the play as “the Jew” and not as the converted Jew or the new Christian merchant emphasizes that Shylock’s otherness is inevitable even after his conversion. He will encounter rejection from the Christian community since he was a Jew once.

There is no doubt that the Christian community in the play is suspicious about the authenticity of Shylock’s conversion. It can take the converted figures some time to forget the habits or customs of their original religions, to borrow Russell’s opinion about conversion (1997: 13). Similarly, Kruger points out that some people have serious anxiety about whether a convert can forget his/her original beliefs; “the uncertainty about whether religious conversion truly transformed those bodies, cleansing them of their impurities” when being baptized as Christians (1997: 167). Shylock, then, might never be spiritually Christian because he has been coerced to convert. The suspicion of Shylock’s Christianity can also be linked to Elukin’s view about Christians’ suspicion of the converted Jews’ new Christian identities. To some Christians, “Jewish identity remained immutable” even if they were baptized physically (Elukin 1997: 176-9). Being suspicious of the sincerity of the Jews’ conversion might lead the Christians to further marginalize Shylock. This is what Portia indicates in the trial scene when she makes the judgment that Shylock is to convert his religion and that his money is to be divided between Venice and Jessica. Even Portia’s reaction to Shylock’s silence when she says, “Art thou contented, Jew?” (*Merchant* (Greenblatt) 2008, 4.1.388) presages his ill-treatment in Venice. Portia’s question, which addresses Shylock as “Jew” instead of his name, shows that Shylock’s otherness after being sentenced to convert his religion is similar to Jessica’s when she is ignored while talking with Portia, as mentioned previously.

Venice deceives its alien residents. It has laws that should protect its residents; yet, as *The Merchant* indicates, former non-Christian residents, even after they convert to Christianity, encounter fixed otherness. Even if their residence in the city is accepted, it is only for material gain. Although Shylock might no longer be allowed to practice usury due to his conversion, he will always be classified as the usurer. Also, the Christian community will still remember his intention of killing one of them. Shylock is doomed never to be accepted as a Venetian Christian. The state orders Shylock to change his religion, making it apparent that Venice’s interest is in having his wealth. There is no evidence which indicates the state’s interest in developing Shylock’s personality by being a Christian. Coryate, who visited Venice during the period in which *The Merchant* was composed, condemns the enforcing of Jews to convert since the land makes use of the wealth that the Jews gained from usury (1611: 105). Whether or not they are coerced to convert from Judaism, Jessica and Shylock

remain the other. Their conversion to Christianity is a method by which the Venetian community makes use of the converted Jews' money while pretending to develop and accept them spiritually.

This pattern of pretending to accept foreigners in the Venetian community is present in other Shakespearean plays about Venice such as in *Othello: The Moor of Venice*; however, this time the victim is a Muslim character. Othello is another marginalized character who converts from Islam to Christianity (Cohen 2008: 2116). Although Othello has become a sincere nobleman in Venice, the Christian Venetians in the play, including Iago, Roderigo, and Brabantio, keep calling him "the Moor." Holderness comments that "the signs seem to point to Othello as a north African ... and implicitly at least by origin as a Muslim" (2010: 52). The word "Moor" carries prejudiced implications. It is used to refer to non-Christians: Orientals, Turks, Indians, and Muslims (Butler-Evans 1997: 143). In other words, in the Renaissance era the term "Moor" was used to loosely refer to non-white and non-Christian subjects regardless of their nationality. Othello's status in Venice is further complicated because of his dark skin. Even if Othello is accepted as a Venetian Christian subject without either explicit or implicit prejudice, his skin color will still broadcast him as the "other." His problem is that he wants to believe that his assimilation into Venetian society is complete. However, as Holderness explains the matter, "Othello thinks of himself as Venetian, and is at least tolerated by others as a Venetian by necessity" (2010: 54). This fake tolerance is present everywhere in the play. For example, in act 1, scene 1, Othello is never once referred to by his name. He is dehumanized and always described using animalistic images: "old black ram" (*Othello* (Greenblatt) 2008, 1.1.87), "gross ... lascivious Moor" (1.1.124), and "a Barbary horse" (1.1.113). The stereotypical image that the Venetians have in mind about "Moors" is obvious when Brabantio, Desdemona's father, says to the Duke that his daughter "fall[s] in love with what she fear'd to look on!" (*Othello* (Greenblatt) 2008, 1.3.98). Brabantio here not only creates contrasting physical images between Desdemona and Othello, but he also implies ethical and spiritual faults in Othello's character based on the color of his skin. As Ian Smith explains, in Venetian society, "seeing blackness is never just a natural sensory experience but a fortiori an ideologically encoded act" (2016: 408).

Prejudice against Othello reaches its peak after the Duke accepts Othello's elopement with Desdemona. This acceptance is deceptive, purely for political reasons, and resonates with what happened in Venice during the Renaissance. The Duke hires Othello and aims to make use of Othello's ability to defeat the Turks. The Venetians and the Turks had a long history of competition over trade in the Mediterranean Sea: "Venice was at war on and off with the Turks throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries" (Holderness 2010: 52). Some Muslims who converted to Christianity in this period and even in the 17th century in Venice served in the Venetian army, and thus their conversion was employed as a technique to strengthen Venice's "imperial power relations" (Rothman 2007: 40-44). Othello is perceived accordingly as an asset to the military. The Duke chooses Othello to go to Cyprus because, as he explains to Othello, "the fortitude of the place is best known to you" (*Othello* (Greenblatt) 2008, 1.3.221-22). The Duke knows very well that Othello still knows the Orientals' way of thinking. The Duke makes use of Othello to carry out Venice's political agenda. Othello is made to believe that he is one of the Venetians. He invades Cyprus, a nation whose religion he once followed, an event seemingly indicating Othello's assimilation to Venetian society. While the Duke here treats Othello as a Venetian, he allows Othello to reside in Venice and even to elope with a Venetian girl only to make use of Othello's knowledge of the Orientals' military plans. Consequently, Venice will have a sort of military security without worrying about the Turks.

Othello is not truly accepted among the Venetians, and the only character who shows sincere devotion to Othello is his wife, Desdemona. Her devotion to Othello is "unchanging" (Gajowski 1991: 101). She loves him without seeking any end, as opposed to the other Venetians in *Othello* and even in *The Merchant*. While Desdemona accepts Othello's otherness, similarly to Lorenzo when he marries Jessica in *The Merchant*, Othello's situation is more complex. He is regarded as both "insider" and "outsider" (Drakakis 2013: 117). On

one hand, Desdemona accepts him as her husband. On the other, he is othered by Iago and other Venetians. To Debra Johanyak, marrying Desdemona and even showing military service to Venice means that Othello is “a Moor [who] wishes he were European” (2010: 79).

While Venice marginalizes but pretends to integrate him, Othello sincerely commits himself to the service of Venice by defeating the Turks. Before stabbing himself, Othello says to Lodovico, but wants all Venetians to know, that “I [Othello] have done the state *some service*, and they know’t. No more of that” (*Othello* (Greenblatt) 2008, 5.2.348-49). That he does not mention what he did for Venice reflects his sincerity to Venice. He is willing to keep Venice’s secrets even when he knows he is going to perish. Previously, Othello assumed that one day he would be seen as an authentic Venetian. However, he ultimately realizes that his integration is far from a reality. Othello is disillusioned because he was seemingly “confident that his religious conversion, his service to the state, his command oratory, and the intimacy of marriage have sanctioned his admission and his assimilation into Venetian society” (Bassi 2016: 1). Othello lives among a society that proves itself to be prejudiced and unaccepting. Othello’s final request from Venice and its people is, as he says to Lodovico, “Speak of me as I am” (*Othello* (Greenblatt) 2008, 5.2.351). He clarifies that he loves his wife, whom he ultimately murders, “not wisely but too well” (*Othello* (Greenblatt) 2008, 5.2.353). He wants the community not to be prejudiced against him, a request which is next to impossible.

Before stabbing himself, Othello refers to Oriental locations such as Aleppo in Syria. Realizing his racial and religious otherness in Venetian Christian society, he recalls these places:

in *Aleppo* once,
Where a malignant and a turbaned *Turk*
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
I took by the throat the circumcised dog,
And smote him, thus. (*Othello* (Greenblatt) 2008, 5.2.361-65)

Othello here seeks to turn back to his original region and authentic religion. Othello’s reference especially to *Aleppo* in which “Moors are ... dwellers” maintains that Othello is still deeply attached to his “Islamic Orient” and to his “cultural heritage” as well (Johanyak 2010: 82). Othello’s allusion to the Orient invites us to explore the strangeness this character encounters in different places (Danson 2002: 4). He comprehends his position as an outsider whose alienation in Venice is determined. Eventually Othello commits suicide “and thereby indelibly associates himself with the Other, the enemy of Venice; the stranger, the alien the Muslim” (Holderness 2010: 54), because he ultimately realizes that he can never be accepted genuinely as a Venetian.

Long before Othello realizes that he will never be accepted as a Venetian, those around him (Iago, Roderigo, and Brabantio) were plotting against him. Othello finds suicide an escape from his fixed otherness. Neither an insider nor an outsider, Othello is left on the margin of Venice. He was not born Christian and his color and physical appearance damn him in a society that measures the ethics and character of an individual based on their religion and region of birth. This otherness echoes what Shylock has already encountered in Venice in *The Merchant*.

Indeed, Othello remains the other from the perspective of the Venetian Christians. Iago questions the effectiveness of Othello’s baptism. He considers Othello as a worshipper of Desdemona’s love and lust. Iago confesses:

His [Othello’s] soul is so enfeathered to her love
That she may make, unmake, do what she lists,
Even as her appetite shall play the god
With his weak function (*Othello* (Greenblatt) 2008, 2.3.340–43).

Iago’s suspicion that Othello might worship Desdemona’s pleasure instead of worshiping God is what the critic Dennis Britton also notices when asserting that “Iago questions Othello’s religious conviction” and assumes

that Othello is loyal to Desdemona's "appetite" instead of following the orders of "the Christian God" (2011: 35). In other words, Othello's perceived image remains stronger than the influence of baptism in the Venetian mind. This Christian suspicion about the sincerity of "the other's" conversion is indicated in this play as well as in *The Merchant*. Othello, then, similarly to Shylock and Jessica, remains othered in the Venetian community in spite of his conversion to Christianity and his military commitment to Venice.

3. Conclusion:

In Shakespeare's two plays about Venice, Jews or Muslims who changed their religion to Christianity suffer from being othered. Jessica, Shylock, and Othello join the majority of the Venetian population when they accept Christianity, yet they are still treated as outsiders. Venice pretends to have laws and norms that protect its visitors and residents; however, its converts seem to be seen as undesired organs in the Venetian body yet beneficial for the economy and politics. Indeed, the converts at some occasions might behave in the ways they were brought up with, as noted by social critics about conversion. Breaking religious instructions does not come suddenly or easily. The people of Venice are aware of this, yet their laws manipulate the conversion of the new converts to enhance the city's economic and political position. The historian E. N. Rothman declares that Venice in the 17th century "exercised conversion not as a miraculous moment of rebirth but as a lifelong process intended to transform foreigners into loyal juridical subjects of metropolitan state and society" (2007: 41). The long process required for those converts to be fully accepted and assimilated is not a random act. As represented in *The Merchant* and *Othello* and as noted by historians and even the travelers who visited Venice during the Renaissance, Venice, whether or not its alien residents were coerced to convert to Christianity, uses conversion as a method to benefit from its alien residents. As Freed insists, Shakespeare was aware "of a certain image of Venice as it was presented by Italian historians, and as English visitors recorded their experience of the city" (2009: 47). Venice did not aim to develop its outsiders spiritually once enforcing or even convincing them to convert to Christianity. Conversion was a manipulative act intended to support its politics while marginalizing those who are not born as Christian Venetians.

This conclusion builds on literary critics' views about otherness in the two plays and about Shakespeare's perception of Venice as a mythical city. Previous studies discuss Shylock's conversion but without relating it to Jessica's conversion and otherness in *The Merchant*. Sometimes, these studies locate the play in the context of proto-capitalism in England, as Sicher does when analyzing Jessica's conversion. In the current article, we read Jessica's and Shylock's conversions within the play's Venetian historical context. Furthermore, we relate the otherness of the converted Jews to the alterity of a converted Muslim in *Othello*. We conclude that the acceptance of Shylock's, Jessica's, and Othello's conversions is deceptive and is intended to feed the greed which Shakespeare shows to exist within the so-called mythical land and society. The Venetian Christians are suspicious about conversion, for the converts might go back to their original faiths. Venice uses Jessica's, Shylock's, and Othello's conversions as a tool to reinforce their otherness while benefiting the city.

المستخلص:

التحول الديني والغيرية في البندقية في مسرحية شكسبير "تاجر البندقية" و مسرحية "عطيل"
 عنود زياد الطراونة
 علي محمد النوايسة

يبحث هذا المقال في التعنصر ضد اليهود والمسلمين بعد تحولهم الى المسيحية في مسرحية "تاجر البندقية" ومسرحية "عطيل". ويبين المقال بأن شكسبير ينتقد مدينة البندقية بسبب أن سكانها يقبلون المنتصرين وإقامتهم في المدينة فقط لغرض إفادة البندقية إقتصادياً وسياسياً. على وجه التحديد، يبحث المقال في كيفية إساءة معاملة و نبذ اليهود (شايлок وجاسيكا في مسرحية التاجر) والمسلمين (عطيل في عطيل) بغض النظر عما إذا كان دخولهم في المسيحية طوعاً أم قسراً. من أجل توضيح هذا التحامل، ينظر المقال في آراء المؤرخين والرحالة إلى البندقية حول الاجحاف في المدينة خلال عصر النهضة. كما يشير المقال إلى آراء النقاد الاجتماعيين (مثل رأي فريدريك راسل) حول شكوك المسيحيين في فاعلية تعمد المنتصرين. ويخلص المقال إلى أن شكسبير يظهر أن البندقية ليست مدينة أسطورية كما يتصورها العقل الإنجليزي والأوروبي. بل إن البندقية تهمش وتهين رعاياها غير المسيحيين في المدينة.

الكلمات الدالة: اعتناق المسيحية، "تاجر البندقية"، "عطيل"، التعنصر، البندقية.

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