حوليات آداب عين شمس المجلد ٤٥ (عدد أكتوبر – ديسمبر ٢٠١٧)

http://www.aafu.journals.ekb.eg

(دورية علمية محكمة)

جامعة عين شمس

كلية الآداب

DESTEREOTYPING SHYLOCK IN ARNOLD WESKER'S THE MERCHANT

Ahmed Al-Kahky*

Faculty of Arts - Damietta University

Abstract:

Facing the serious existential question of whether it was still plausible to present the centuries-old Shakespearean stereotype of Shylock on world stages in the immediate aftermath of the 1973 war, Arnold Wesker restored to writing his version of the story of the contract between the Christian Antonio and the Jew Shylock. Thus, Wesker's The Merchant is not merely a destereotyping of the Elizabethan time villain, but also a negotiation of the dominant discourse of the world classic The Merchant of Venice. This paper studies Wesker's new historical negotiation of that dominant European discourse through a new historicist approach, which entails the rewriting of the old story and the recreation of a new Shylock: a philanthropic old-aged Jewish hoarder of rare books instead of money and jewels who is compelled by the Venetian laws that restricted Jews to work in usury as a large sum of its interest went to the Venetian treasury.

Literary works, same as artifacts, indicate the interplay of historical, cultural and political discourses interactively and reciprocally operating in the time and the place of their creation. Anglo-Jewish playwright Arnold Wesker declared in *"Why I Fleshed Out Shylock,"* The Guardian, 29 August 1981, that he was "unforgiving" of William Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice for its "contribution to the world's astigmatic view and murderous hatred of the Jew". The bluntness of that declaration reiterates another in which he ceased to be a "forgiver," of the play's "irredeemable anti-Semitism" in 1973—in the aftermath of the October war, and 28 years away from the Holocaust incident—after he had watched Laurence Oliver's "*oi-yoi-yoi* portrayal of Shylock in Jonathan Miller's production at The National Theatre." Wesker, in addition, disclosed that the Holocaust is not irrelevant to his responses, as he finds himself "seething at [Shakespeare's] portrait of a Jew, unable to pretend this is simply another Shakespearean character through whom he is exploring greed, or whatever." In 1977 Arnold Wesker wrote The Merchant, which is more than a mere adaptation of Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice in modern English.

Wesker's The Merchant is written in two acts—instead of the typical Shakespearean five-act plays—and with the same 1563 Venetian settings as those presented in Shakespeare's classic The Merchant of Venice. The basic alterations, however, pertain to the characterization of Shylock as well as other Jewish *dramatis personas* with thematic alternative perceptions of their attitude towards their position in the Venetian social milieu. Judith Weinraub quotes Wesker explicating his rewriting of the familiar Shakespearean plot, in *"What Made Arnold Wesker Rewrite Shakespeare?"* The New York Times: New York Online, 13th Nov.1977:

> At first I wanted to direct The Merchant of Venice, so that it would emerge the way I understood it. But then I realised how much rewriting would have to be done. So I wrote a play using the same stories that Shakespeare used, but with reconceived characters as stepping-stones to a completely different piece of land.

Thus, one of the main impetuses for writing The Merchant by Wesker is the impact of the Holocaust, which could be viewed in his own words as "the ball and chain to all attempts at reason, "and from which ensue" only a few positions to take and each of them is bound to be unnatural." Accordingly, Efraim Sicher affirms in *"The Jewing of Shylock: Wesker's "The Merchant","* that in the aftermath of the Holocaust the modern Jewish writer must suffer from a feeling of guilt and "be driven by guilt of survival." Wesker, and all modern Jewish writers, must, according to Sicher, adopt a corrective of the stereotype image of the Jewish Christ-killer and the ruthless money-lender:

> Shylock has long been an ominous epithet. Yet the Nazi genocide of the twentieth century, which used the medieval

> stock-type of the Jew as usurer and anti-Christ has brought Jewish artists to attempt a corrective of that public image, a corrective must of necessity be also a claim of cultural identity by the Jewish artist stamped with the image of Shylock. The existential compulsions governing Judo-Christian relations after the genocide of the Jews in the Holocaust demand that in confronting this dilemma every playwright reexamine the writing act and, if a Jew, the writing itself, for in a double sense the Jew writes himself out when seeking acceptance into non-Jewish art. (57)

Consequently, what Wesker seeks as a corrective in rewriting Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice is basically the undemonizing, and consequently the humanizing, of the stereotypically diabolic image of the Jew, Shylock. Nevertheless, another more important objective is the Zionising of Shylock's final destination after his defeat in the court scene. So, in Wesker's The Merchant, Shylock and Antonio "must be friends," and "Shylock must be a bibliophile." Indeed, the first scene of the play opens in Venice, 1563, the Ghetto Nuovo, in Shylock's study which is "strewn with books and manuscripts"(1). Shylock and Antonio, two old friends in their sixties, seem to be enjoying themselves in a friendly causerie while cataloguing Shylock's large collection of rare books and documents, his secret treasure. Shylock is a "saint" and Antonio is an "overgrown schoolboy" (2). The play also ends with Shylock's determined declaration of his final destination to "Jerusalem" in order to "be buried there" (82).

On one hand, Glenda Leeming sums up an overall presumption of three impetuses for Wesker's writing of The Merchant. The first, she assumes, is that the incident of the Holocaust should work as a reminder that persecution could recur in any age "which ought to have become more enlightened." The second, she alleges, is that the "prejudice against Jews is still common." But most importantly, the third impetus, according to Leeming, is that "the state of Israel that was declared in 1948 as a home for the Jewish nation is involved in military and political conflicts, and international opinion towards it may be influenced by residues of the old anti-Semitic prejudice" (xviii). Likewise, Leeming quotes Wesker in his unpublished diary that the writing of the play is not "it must be noted, unaffected by the sight of the world abandoning the Jews after *Yom Kippur* War (October 1973) and with a "growing sense of responsibility towards the Jewish Image" (xviii).

Nonetheless, Glenda Leeming's assumed impetuses could be partly rebutted as the Arab countries that were involved in conflicts with Israel were all Semitic in ethnicity, and the world did not abandon Israel at the time of war as the immediate military support from major countries

showed—not to mention as well that the October war was to liberate a land that belongs to another nation. Still, in addition to the fact that these impetuses impel Wesker to present Shylock as a bibliophile and philanthropic friend of Christians and Jews alike, there is definitely the call for a Zionist solution that comes at the end of The Merchant as an ultimate solution for the Jewish cause.

In his *Shakespeare's Freedom*, new historicist Setephen Greenblatt refers to Shakespeare's ultimate "authentic solution" of Shylock's dilemma in his forced conversion to Christianity. That conversion, as Greenblatt explains, meant the liquidation of the *persona non grata* and the discarding of his problem—so much an appealing solution to the taste of the majority of the Elizabethan audience. Greenblatt writes, "Shakespeare's aesthetic solution lies in an assimilation to which the enemy finally consents because the alternative is to lose his life" (70). Thus, Greenblatt explicates that Shakespeare's audience was offered a "reassuring, if uneasy, fantasy of conversion: Shylock would become one of us in doing so he would disappear" (72). In the trial scene in The Merchant of Venice, Antonio proposes that it is for Shylock's "favor" that he "*presently* become a Christian," upon which the duke promptly coerces Shylock into the conversion; "he shall do this, or else I do recant the pardon that I late announced here" (70). Wesker's The Merchant, on the other hand, ends with Shylock calling on his fellow Jews to immigrate to a final destination: an ultimate solution in a life-ending Zionist immigration to Jerusalem. So, unlike Shakespeare's Shylock, who is pardoned his life on condition that he coverts to Christianity, Wesker's Shylock declares that "now is the time to make that Journey to Jerusalem. Join those other old men on the quayside, waiting to make a pilgrimage, to be buried there" (82).

Thus, Wesker's rewriting of Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice seems to be basically directed toward the reformatting of the most notoriously stereotypical characterization of the Jewish other in English literature. However, the desired outcome in Wesker's The Merchant is double-edged as it entails the demythologizing of that demonized literary figure as well as the Zionizing of his final destination. The interest of this study as its title suggests is to investigate Wesker's new historicist iconoclastic representation of Shakespeare's stereotypical characterization of the Jew Shylock through recreating him in a humanized mold. In fact, Wesker's The Merchant negotiates the prevalent Anglo-European dominant discourse at the Elizabethan time and gives voice to the subjugated Jewish discourse to deliver its own version of the story in a sheer practice of new historicism.

Literary criticism dealing with Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice is either condemning the characterization of a mean Christ-killer Shylock, or blandishing another victimized and stooping Shylock bleeding for the recognition of his share in humanity. The oscillation between

negative and positive responses to the image of the Jew in The Merchant of Venice, a literary product of England in the Elizabethan age, is concomitant with the controversy between historical interpretations and new historicist reinterpretations of that text. On the one hand, historical analytical discourse, of course, cannot be objective; neither can it be but subdued by the Christian Anglo-European hegemonic cultural discourse of its times. On the other hand, new historicist reinterpretation focuses on the iconoclastic deconstruction, as well as the reconstruction, of that suppressive cultural interpretation of literary texts.

Montagu Frank Modder, for instance, in *The Jew in the Literature of England*, deems that the Elizabethan portrayal of the Jewish character is "prejudiced and false" because of the lack of "firsthand information concerning the Jewish character"(24). Furthermore, Modder points out to the trial and execution of Dr. Lopez—Queen Elizabeth's Jewish physician who was accused of plotting against her life—as the incident that prompted Shakespeare to write his most controversial play The Merchant of Venice. Therefore, Modder elaborates that Shakespeare named Shylock's foe Antonio after the name of Dr. Lopez's chief foe according to prevalent historical account:

> The bitterness of feeling provoked by the unfortunate incident clearly revealed the fact that, even as late as the end of the sixteenth century; three hundred years after their expulsion from England, the Jews were discriminated against with the same race-hatred that prevailed in Angevin times. And, as Professor Stoll points out, race-hatred, indeed, or the desire to profit from it, may have prompted the writing of the *Merchant of Venice*, in order that Shakespeare's company might in the present excitement compete with Henslowe's in their *Jew of Malta*. (25)

Modder, however, refers to other critics, William Hazlitt among them," who adopt the view point that Shakespeare held a sympathetic attitude towards Shylock, and adds his rebuttal of that argument wondering, "if Shakespeare had the figure of Dr. Lopez in mind while creating the character of Shylock, is it not possible that the dramatist shared the contemporary sentiments against the Queen's physician to whom even the judges referred as "that vile Jew?" (26) Likewise, in *Shakespeare's Freedom*, Stephen Greenblatt refers to the historical fact that England was void of Jews by the order of law since 1290:

> As for Tudor London, there were no Jews, at least none who acknowledged themselves as such, the entire population have been expelled in 1290. Fear of the Jews—alarm that they might be meeting in their synagogues to hatch vicious plots against the innocent—was entirely phantasmatic, as it was,

> for that matter, in nineteenth-century Russia or twentieth-century Berlin. (56)

Consequently, there is so much controversy in the appreciation of Shakespeare's characterization of Shylock. Oscillation is usually between the adumbration of the notorious accusations of anti-Semitism against Shakespeare for the creation of such a melodramatic Jewish Christ-killer, and the hesitant acknowledgement for his philanthropic endowment of human qualities to that Jew in order to defend. Shakespeare allows Shylock to bleed the Christian foes for the merciful recognition of his equal share in humanity as he says,

> 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, do we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. (III. I. 54-64)

From a new historicist perspective, this is *per se* the clash between cultural discourses, which Lois Tyson refers to in his *Critical Theory Today*. To begin with, Tyson identifies discourse as "a social language created by particular cultural conditions at a particular time and place, and it expresses a particular way of understanding human experience" (285). Then, he asserts that there is neither a "*monolithic*" comprehensive cultural discourse of any age nor a *"totalizing"* explanation of it; instead, there is

> A dynamic unstable interplay among discourses: they are always in a state of flux, overlapping and competing with one another (or, to use new historical terminology, *negotiating* exchanging of power) in any number of ways at any given point in time. (285)

Accordingly, literary texts are not merely the products of those cultural discourses; nevertheless, they are part of the dynamic interplay of these discourses, as well as they are reciprocally constitutive with them. Furthermore, historical criticism of literary texts tends to be biased toward a domineering cultural discourse that deliberates the eclipsing, sometimes the obliterating, of the other discourses, especially those of the subaltern and the underrepresented. New historicist approach, by contrast, aims at the exposition of those historically suppressed discourses as Lois Tyson elaborates because new historicism has

> deconstructed the white, male, Anglo-European historical narrative to reveal its disturbing, hidden subtext…In fact, a focus on the historical narratives of marginalized peoples has been such an important feature of new historicism that some theorists have asked how new historicists can accept narratives from oppressed peoples any more readily than they have accepted narratives from the patriarchal Anglo-European power structure. One answer to this question is that a polarity of voices, including an equal representation of historical narratives from all groups, helps ensure that a *master narrative*—a narrative told from a single cultural point of view that, nevertheless, presumes to offer the only accurate version of history—will no longer control our historical understanding. (287)

In fact, the distinctive universality of Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice in general, and the controversy over the implications of the play in particular pertain to Shakespeare's poetic enrichment of his creation with that polarity of voices which Tyson refers to above. Nevertheless, Shakespeare's depiction of the vengeful Shylock was under the sway of the dominant cultural discourse of his time and that resulted in the stereotypical image of the Christ-killer Jew. For instance, D.M. Cohen writes in *The Jew and Shylock*, "it is quite possible that Shakespeare didn't give a damn about Jews or about insulting England's minuscule Jewish community, and that, if he did finally humanize his Jew, he did so simply to enrich his drama" (53). Yet, from a new historicist perspective, Shakespeare's unique characterization of the Jewish money lender who is given the chance to speak for his equal share in humanity transcends its time and place because it is in fact a practical, though very limited, acceptance and representation of that Jew's culturally suppressed discourse. For instance, Stephen Greenblatt writes in *Shakepeare's Freedom* that Shakespeare possessed an unlimited power as an artist whose authority as a playwright and a poet "seems absolutely free and unrestrained"(5). Shakespeare's universality, furthermore, stems from his artistic radicalism that prevented him from simply submitting to the norms of his age. So, Greenblatt argues, "he at once embraced those norms and subverted them, finding an unexpected, paradoxical beauty in the smudges, marks, stains, scars, and wrinkles that had figured only as signs of ugliness and difference" (15). Shakespeare was writing within the limits of the cultural context he lived in, yet he was capable as an artist to rebel against whichever constrains imposed by that cultural context through the creation of radical individuals who outlived his time:

> Radical individuation—the singularity of the person who fails or refuses to match the dominant cultural expectation and is thus marked as irremediably different—is suggestively present throughout the plays and poems but is perhaps most vividly exemplified not in Shakespeare heroines but in two disturbing figures of otherness, Shylock and Othello. The Jew and the Moor do not run merely the risk of stain: they are what almost everyone in the dominant cultures in which they live defines as ugly. (5)

Wesker's The Merchant by means of contrast, is a deliberate recreation of that suppressed Jewish discourse with the didactic purpose of destereotyping it by a playwright who belongs to and speaks for the contemporary Anglo-Jewry. Michael Kustow argues in *Arnold Wesker's Messianic Ideal* that Anglo-Jewish playwright Arnold Wesker belongs to "the clutch" of playwrights who are always referred to as the signifiers of the re-birth of the sixties British theater. Wesker's plays, Kustow explains, "stood for an assertion of the need for vision, for principle, for care, love, wholeheartedness, without which no program of social or personal reform could call itself worthwhile" (46). It is also the same universality of concern, to which Sicher Efraim refers in *Beyond Marginality*, which characterizes a host of Anglo-Jewish playwrights among whom Wesker is the most distinguished. So Efraim writes that the works of Emanuel Litvinoff, Wolf Mankowitz, Bernard Kops and Arnold Wesker are "social documents but their primary meaning is universal; they claim merit today on grounds of literary and not ethnographical appeal"(55). Nevertheless, the universal commitment of Arnold Wesker's, as well as those of the aforementioned writers, had to be grounded in specifically Jewish concerns especially in the case of Wesker who comes from London's East End that had witnessed the drastic threat of organized anti-communist and anti-Jewish attacks by Oswald Mosley's fascist black shirts.

In 1936, the British Union of Fascists marched into London's East End—densely populated by Jewish residents who adopted Communism and believed in collective proletarian revolution. Acts of murderous violence ensued as Sicher Efraim refers to Wesker's literary representation of them in his drama, "When a seven-year-old girl is thrown through a plate-glass window in Wesker's *Chicken Soup With Barely* a stand had to be made"(56).

In fact, Chicken Soup with Barely is one of the three plays that make up Wesker's masterpiece trilogy, which includes Roots and I am Talking about Jerusalem. Rachel Cooke writes in "*I've Never Understood My Reputation for Grumpiness"* The Guardian Online 22 May 2011, that Wesker's trilogy—specifically his Chicken Soup with Barely—is "the most autobiographical." In fact, the trilogy depicts the dramatic changes that happen to the Kahans family between 1936 and 1956 and ends with its

disintegration. The Kahans family is among many East End families who believed ideally in communism then they became bitterly disillusioned by it. It is not that communism had failed as a principle; it is rather the people who had once believed in it failed to stick to whatever they believed in. And it is also Arnold Wesker's bitter feeling for the disillusion of an idealist dream of communism and the disintegration of the collective proletarian endeavor—mainly by East End Jewry—of social progress that finds expression in almost all of his work. This disillusionment comes as a result of his disappointment with the major communist countries that aided the Arabs during the 1973 war with Israel. Therefore, failed idealist communism and the disintegration of East End Jewry are staples in the backdrop of Wesker's theater. Michael Billington writes in *"Arnold Wesker: Food for Thought " the* Guardian Online. Online 21 May 2012 that as the playwright turns 80 he finds "there is one theme running through all Wesker's work, it is the collapse of utopian dreams and visions."I think I always knew," he says, "that utopia was an impossibility, but what touched me was the energy of human aspiration."

Wesker was among the East End Jews who believed ardently in the principles of communism, though not as much naturally as they believed in their Jewish faith. Wesker, however, has always been aware of his Jewishness which Sicher Efraim refers to, in his *Modern Jewish Literature and Culture: Beyond Marginality*, as the "dusty family heirloom, the Jewish condition" (79). We also learn that the household where Wesker was raised was not religiously committed and that Wesker began paying heed to his Jewish ethnicity as a concomitant interest to his support of Zionism, "There was not much religion in the Wesker household and the boy didn't have a *barmitzvah*, but at fourteen he did join the Zionist pioneer youth movement *Habonim* (the builders)" (59). In "*I've Never Understood my Reputation for Grumpiness"* The Guardian Online 22 May 2011, Rachel Cooke adds more on Wesker's parents Leah and Joseph who were both the children of immigrants from East Europe and who worked as tailoring machinists:

> Both were devout communists. "My father wasn't much committed to anything [Joseph, like Harry, found it hard to stick at any job for long], but in argument, he was a communist. My mother, though, was deeply concerned about justice and good behaviour and honour, and she felt you had to be a communist to be that, or rather, she felt that those who weren't communists were frequently unpleasant people."

Cooke also wonders if Wesker's parents had held fast to their religion and he gives an enigmatic answer that they did not and that they "were completely atheist. But they were also – this is difficult for gentiles to understand – fiercely Jewish." Cooke's presumption, however, disregards

the fact that those whom he calls gentiles are always capable of discerning the difference between Judaism *in se* and Jews' pragmatic collaborative Zionism.

Nevertheless, Wesker's disillusion with Communism and his disappointment at the disintegration of the East End Jewry were the strongest impulses for writing his plays. Still, those plays neither brought him the desired popularity nor achieved the cultural impact hoped for. In the interview, *What Made Arnold Wesker Rewrite Shakespeare, The NewYork Times, Nov.13, 1977*, Judith Weinbraub quotes Wesker saying, "all my plays are about people who have attempted to live through their ideas and failed and disappointed themselves, but who survived those disappointments or mistakes." Likewise, in *"The Existentialism of Jewish-Christian Relations After the Holocaust—Arnold Wesker's "The Merchant"* Efraim Sicher's deals with the semi-autobiographical element in Wesker's plays from an existentialist perspective as he explains that The Merchant is "a major attempt to tackle that existentialist problem." Sicher explains:

> Wesker is bitter, he tells us, with his protagonists and with himself, and it is a bitterness that comes not just from the disappointment that nobody is listening to the playwright. It has also to do with the disillusion that came with the social progress of those East End Jews who neither descended to the grave nor ascended on *aliya* to Israel but who acquired the bourgeois comforts of North-West London, where they all with perpetuating success and prosperity through their children. (187)

Wesker who has been knighted in 2006, is now in his eighties, as Michael Billington writes in *"Arnold Wesker: Food for Thought,"* The Guardian Online. Online 21 May 2012, and he still feels like "an outsider in the British theater," and suffers "a sense of regret that his work often had difficulty reaching the stage." Billington, however, quotes Wesker saying, "I can only think…it's because the plays are not English and don't sit comfortably on the English scene." Michael Billington also writes in *"The Party's Over: A Revival of Arnold Wesker's Neglected Play about the Failure of the Socialist Dream Couldn't be More Timely,"* The Guardian Online, 9 April, 2005, Online, "Wesker was - and is - an intensely Jewish writer, which means that, in Kenneth Tynan's definition, he "thinks internationally yet feels domestically." Likewise, in "*I've Never Understood My Reputation for Grumpiness*" The Guardian Online, 22 May 2011, Rachel Cooke asks Wesker whether he believes there is anti-Semitism in modern theatre and he answers that he believes so:

> Is there really still a problem with anti-Semitism in the theatre? Wesker believes that there is. A certain famous theatre director, he says, once told a mutual acquaintance that "'the trouble with Arnold is that he can't be objective about

> his Jewishness,' something he would never have dared say about a black or an Irish writer.

Efraim Sicher, however, affirms, in his *Modern Jewish Literature and Culture: Beyond Marginality*, that "Wesker is didactic […] arts and politics are one to him and this is what makes as well as strains his plays on the English stage" (60). But, regardless of this uneasy acceptance on the English stage, Sicher refers to the fact that Wesker's sense of belonging to the Jewish ethnicity prompted him to assume a defensive role especially after the 1973 war:

> Wesker is one of those "1967 Jews" who came back to public commitment to Jewish identity when the tiny state of Israel seemed threatened by another Holocaust. It was only in the years after the Six Day War that Wesker awoke to the extent that he felt Jewish "in a belonging or a protective way." (72)

Due to this biased attitude and protectiveness, Wesker, affirms that he ceased to be a forgiver of Shakespeare's portrayal of what he thinks is only a confirmation of the "Jew as a bloodsucker." Wesker, in addition, says, though in a complementary tone, that he reveres the Elizabethan playwright Shakespeare, but he cannot forgive his "creation of an unforgiving Jew." In his article *"Why I Fleshed Out Shylock,"* The Guardian, 29 August 1981, Wesker writes:

> I revere Shakespeare, am proud to write in his shadow, the world is inconceivable without him and I would passionately defend the right of anyone anywhere to present and teach this play. But nothing will make me admire, nor has anyone persuaded me the holocaust is irrelevant to my responses. Try though I do to listen only to the poet's lines, yet I find myself seething at his portrait of a Jew, unable to pretend this is simply another Shakespearean character through whom he is exploring greed or whatever…there is no evidence anywhere else that Shakespeare was distressed by anti-Jewish feeling. The portrayal of Shylock offends for being a lie about the Jewish character. I seek no pound of flesh but, like Shylock, I'm unforgiving, unforgiving of the play's contribution to the world's astigmatic view and murderous hatred of the Jew.

Similarly, Paul J.C.M. Franssen explains how Wesker's disappointment with the Communist regimes that did not aid Israel during the war had a double impact on him. First, Wesker was disillusioned with Socialism in general; so much as he was disillusioned about the

disintegration of the East End Jewry who gave up on their socialist ideals in order to assimilate in the dominant capitalist English culture. Wesker was also bitter because Jews in London's poor East End did not move to *"Aliya"* (Israel) but moved instead to London's rich North-West. Second, the incidents of the war and the virtual defeat of Israel awoke fears that intimidated every Zionist's aspirations in the Middle East. So Franssen writes that Wesker's

> growing disillusionment with the left sprang from his experience of Communism in Eastern Europe, and from the Middle East wars, in which the capitalist West backed Israel. The play [The Merchant] also reflects Wesker's quarrels with radical colleague John McGrath over cultural politics. The Merchant does not mark Wesker's farewell to politics, therefore, but a reorientation of his politics away from radical socialism. (245)

Wesker, in addition, says that he began thinking of "an alternative," while he was "watching the Jonathan Miller production of The Merchant of Venice in 1973. When Portia announces that Shylock cannot have his pound of flesh because it means spilling Antonio's blood which is not mentioned in the contract, Wesker is struck with an insight that "the real Shylock would not have torn his hair out and raged against not being allowed to cut his pound of flesh, but would have said "Thank God!" It was, in fact, that moment of inspiration to write The Merchant with the idea that Shylock would thank God for saving the life of Antonio and to explain how he became involved in such bond.

Both Shylock and Antonio are old "in their middle sixties" (1). Antonio is amazed at Shylock's large collection of books and Shylock boasts of his patience for having been able to hide this large collection of rare books for ten years and save them from being confiscated and burned by the religious decree from the Roman Catholic Church which considered them blasphemous apocrypha:

> The Talmud and kindred Hebrew literature? Blasphemy! They said, 'burn them!' And there they burned, on the Campo dei Fiori in Rome, decreed by Julius the Third of blessed origin, Augustus the 12th, 1553, and followed swiftly by our very own and honored council of Ten in Venice. The day of the burning of the books. Except mine, which I hid, all of them, even my secular works. When fever strikes them you can't trust those warriors of God. With anything of learning? Never! That's what they really hated, not the books of the Jews but the books of men. I mean—MEN! Their spites, you see, the books revealed to them their thin minds. (2)

It is remarkable how Shylock refers to the Jewish religious books, the Talmud, for instance, as the objectified embodiment of hatred by the Roman "warriors of God." Through approaching The Merchant from a new historicist perspective, one finds that this literary text is negotiating a real historical fact that has to do with such banned books at the time. Historical accounts refer to the fact that Jewish books of Roman Jews were actually burned in the 1500s as Heinrich Graetz writes in *History of the Jews, Vol.IV (in six volumes):From the Rise of the Kabbala (1270 C.E.) to the Permanent Settlement of the Marranos in Holland (1618 C.E.)*

> Julius III was obliged to approve and sign the decree laid before him by the inquisitor general (August 12th, 1553)…The officers of the inquisition invaded the houses of the Roman Jews, confiscated the copies of the Talmud and compilations made from it, and burnt them with special malice on the Jewish New Year's Day (September 9th). (565)

Shylock, nonetheless, affirms the universality of these books as the products of human creativity regardless of their ethnic background, he negates the sacrilegious attribution that stigmatized their writers for just being Jews. This is in fact, an attempt to destereotype Shylock who seems to be attempting to invert the myth by negating the wickedness and returning it unto others who now seem "thin-minded" as Shylock calls them.

Shylock, in addition says that he is a "hoarder of other men's genius" (3) and that nothing else he treasures beside the books except his daughter Jessica. Thus, Wesker's Shylock is unlike his namesake in Shakespeare's play who treasures money above his own life and the life of his daughter as he tells Tubal "I would my daughter were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear! Would she were hearsed at my foot, and the ducats in her coffin" (III.I 47-48).

Furthermore, while in Shakespeare's play Antonio openly expresses his hatred for Shylock by insulting him in public and spitting on him, Wesker's Antonio belittles his own worth in the presence of the erudite and bibliophile Shylock whom he regards as a "a lawyer, a doctor, a diplomat, a teacher—anything but a merchant" (4). Antonio tells Shylock that his large collection of books and his universal knowledge remind him of what he is and what he has done; "Nothing! A merchant! A purchaser of this to sell there. A buyer up and a seller off" (3). Antonio, moreover, tells Shylock that with all his knowledge he "could save the world," (4) and Shylock replies by referring to the old Jewish scholars who had assumed the role of world saviors as they were

> Constantly invited to run educational establishments here and there, and never certain whether they were running into a

> massacre. From the massacre of Rouen, they fled into the massacre of London; from the massacre of London into the massacre of York, and from the massacre of York no one fled! (4-5)

From a new historicist perspective The Merchant negotiate William Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice as well as it negotiates the historical facts pertaining the real situation of the Venetian Jews at that time.

When Antonio asks Shylock if he is religious or not, he tells him that he cannot choose but to be religious because "It's the condition of being Jewish, like pimples with adolescence, who can help it…what can I do? I'm chosen I *must* be religious" (5-6). Antonio, in return, says; "I love you more and more, Shylock. You have a sanity I could not live without now. I'm spoiled chosen also" (6). Thus, Shylock is a saintly savior of the world and Antonio is the chosen and saved. This is *per se* the Messianic role that Jews yearn for assuming. This is also to the core of the didactic purpose of Wesker's The Merchant: the real Shylock he wished Shakespeare had presented was a philanthropic bibliophile.

Likewise, Antonio is warmly invited to spend the night at Shylock's house in the Jewish Ghetto, in spite of the fact that it was illegal for Christians to stay in it after midnight. It is not only that Wesker emphasizes Antonio's admiration of Shylock's wisdom, but he also proves the strength of their friendship and love of each so that they defy the laws of Venetian legal system which segregates them. It is also the same logic that entices them to mock that law by signing a "mock contract" that is inapplicable unless it leads to the murder of Antonio. In addition, this shows how The Merchant is in a constant negotiation with the Shakespearean version of the story. In *Shakespeare and the Modern Dramatist* Michael Scott writes:

> Wesker historicizes the action of the play within renaissance Italy. Unlike Shakespeare's play, however, Wesker's drama draws an accurate historical picture of Jewish existence in the Venetian Ghetto Nuovo, where the windows faced inward on themselves rather than outwards to the Christians—the outer ones being blocked up—and where the Jews, discriminated against by the Venetians, were locked up at night and opened up in the morning. (52)

First, Shylock reminds Antonio of the Venetian law that prohibits the Christians from staying in the Jewish quarter after midnight, "Antonio my friend, it's late. In ten minutes they lock the gates of the Ghetto and all the good Christians should be outside" (6). Then, Shylock reminds Antonio of the corruption of the Venetian system that could be bribed, "it's not permitted, but with money—" (7). Finally, he confidently and defiantly tells Antonio to stay with tender promises of hospitality and care from the

members of his household; "Stay. You know my house, lively, full of people in and out all the time. My daughter, Jessica, will look after you" (7).

This attitude, however, is the polar opposite of that held by Shakespeare's Shylock who venomously vows revenge against Antonio for the explicit reason of financial loss. It seems that Shakespeare's Jew is solely motivated by financial gain and loss that it is far more important for him than his or others' lives and beliefs:

> Shylock. I hate him for he is a Christian، But more, for that in low
> simplicity He lends money gratis and brings down the rate of usance
> here with us in Venice. If I can catch him once upon the hip I will feed
> fat the ancient grudge I bear him. (12)

Wesker's Shylock, by means of contrast, is a very generous man whose household extends hospitality to all visitors. There are, for instance, scholars for whom Shylock pays the expenses of pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Antonio says so about Shylock's long-awaited-for scholar Abtalion da Modena, "on his very own pilgrimage from Lisbon to holy Jerusalem, financed by his very own pupil here, Shylock Kolner, in return for his very own wisdom" (7).

Shylock's house in Wesker's The Merchant is of a generous and hospitable nature in contrast to the house of Shylock in Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice, which is described by his daughter as "hell" (24). Shakespeare's Jessica is ashamed of her miserly father, and wishes to elope from his household; and to convert to Christianity in order to end her "strife." Jessica, therefore, says that she is Shylock's daughter who is naturally related to him by blood not by "his manners" (24). It is remarkable how Shylock is stereotypically presented in a satirical manner—so much as appealing to the taste of the Elizabethan audience as artistically possible—as a vicious miser who maltreats his own daughter and chides her for the extravagance of eating, sleeping and wearing clothes under his roof. In *The Jew and Shylock* D. M. Cohen elaborates that Shylock is a stereotypical Jew whose character is "dominated by the traits usual to Elizabethan comic villains. He is a hellish creature, a discontented soul whose vilifying of others marks him as the embodiment of malevolence and misanthropy" (60). So, when Shylock speaks, "[he] is a sarcastic character both in the literal sense of flesh-rending and in the modern sense of sneering" (60). Therefore, Shylock's miserly manners and his wickedness are intended to raise the sarcastic laughter of the Elizabethan audience when they hear him saying, "What, Jessica! –thou shalt not gormandise, As thou

has dost with me:— What, Jessica! –and sleep and snore, and rend apparel out" (26).

Wesker's Shylock, by means of contrast, is proud of his daughter as he says that she is "cleverer than her illiterate old father," who "gave her all the tutors [he] couldn't have" (7). Likewise, Jessica is at odds with her father not because of his wicked manners but because of his domineering attitude. Defiantly, Jessica defends her freedom as she tells her father; "you're so full of tight restricting little codes" (34). Jessica is not ignorant or ill-treated by her father, she is nonetheless defiant and he is domineering. Jessica says, "Look how my father swells with pride at his daughter's intellect. He's given me teachers to nourish and exercise my mind, while he continues to exercise control" (36). Jessica, however, is aware of her father's generous nature and finds it excessively demanding as she complains to her aunt Rivka, "We shall be six to eat at midday. Yesterday it was eight, the day before seven, and tomorrow, no doubt, more again" (8). She also takes pride in her father's erudite inquisitiveness, though she thinks of it as a mere snobbery, "My father is an intellectual snob. Every passing scholar or Rabbi, or eminent physician has to dine at his table. Some men fawn before crowns, he before degrees" (8).

Part and parcel of the stereotypical characterization of the Jew in Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice is equating his Jewishness to devilishness. Stephen Greenblatt writes that Satan is the "Enemy whom the Jews incarnate and whom the good Antonio is obliged as a Christian to hate with all his heart and soul" (66). Shylock, the stereotypical villain Jew is the embodiment of "the limitless unreasonable, inexplicable hatred that for Christians marked the essential affiliation of the Jews with the father of all evil" (67). Therefore, the ultimate solution to the Jew's evil is through his coerced conversion into Christianity: regardless of his innate good or evil nature. It is, in fact, not the struggle between good and evil, but rather the struggle between religious creeds that must end with victory for the Christians who dominate the Elizabethan cultural discourse. Stephen Greenblatt, therefore, explicates how Shylock defends his share in common humanity that does not differentiate between Jews, Christians, or any other religious affiliation, so he begins affirming his identity by saying, "I am a Jew." These affirmative words, Greenblatt writes, are "at once Antonio's "reason," the explanation for his behavior toward Shylock" (66). On one hand, Shylock's affirmation of his Jewish Identity, which is immediately followed by affirmation of his share in humanity, comes as defensive measure against the dominant Euro-Christian cultural discourse that regards him as something else other than a human being: the devil. Furthermore, this affirmation, as Greenblatt also explains serves in the opposite direction to increase suspicion that the Jew is not human as he was thought of within the context of the dominant culture, "To insist that Jews are human only

makes sense in the context of suspicion that they might not be, that they might be something else" (66).

On the other hand, Shylock's defense of his humanity connotes another meaning, which is that of the irreconcilability of the two worlds of the Christians and the Jews. In fact, The Merchant of Venice depicts the world as being divided into two conflicting camps of faithful and merciful Christians and obnoxious and murderous Jews. Therefore, the idea in Shylock's defense is not "fellowship," Greenblatt presumes; instead, "enmity, as he freely concedes, but it is political enmity, not the dream of absolute, indelible, ineradicable otherness" (67). Moreover, Shylock's affirmations are those of his Jewishness, his humanity, and his determined animosity towards the Christian society.

By means of contrast, Wesker's play is not merely a corrective rewriting of Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice, but also an iconoclastic deconstruction of the Elizabethan hegemonic cultural discourse that had long established and stabilized the stereotypical image of the Jew as the embodiment of evil. In other words, Wesker's The Merchant attempts a deconstructive approach of the dominant Euro-Christian discourse that demolishes the other cultural discourses as Lois Tyson explains in *Critical Theory Today*:

> Indeed we might say that in bringing to the foreground the suppressed historical narratives of marginalized groups—such as women, people of color, the poor, the working class, gay men and lesbians, prisoners, the inhabitants of mental institutions, and so on—new historicism has deconstructed the white, male, Anglo-European historical narrative to reveal its disturbing hidden text: the experiences of those peoples it has oppressed in order to maintain the dominance that allowed it to control what most [people] know about history. (287)

In Wesker's play, The Merchant, the Christian Lorenzo mocks the Jew's humanity. However, Wesker's Shylock does not defend his share in humanity just like Shakespeare's Shylock does. In fact, Wesker applies wry mockery to Shylock's humanity through Lorenzo's attack. Thus, Instead of having a Jew pleading for the recognition of his share in humanity, there is the Jew Shylock who confidently cries that his humanity is his absolute right:

> Lorenzo. Has not a Jew organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?
> Shylock. (*enraged*). Oh no!
> Lorenzo. Is not the Jew 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?
> Shylock. No, no.
> Lorenzo. If you prick him. Does he not bleed?
> Shylock. No, no, No! I will not have it. (*Outraged but controlled.*) I do not apologies for my humanity. Plead for me no special pleas.
> I will not have my humanity mocked and apologized for. If I am unexceptionally like any man then I need no exceptional portraiture. I merit no special pleas, no special cautions, no special gratitude. My humanity is my right, not your bestowed and gracious privilege. (76-77)

From the perspective of new historicism, historical events are not to be dealt with as facts to be documented, but as literary discourses to be read and reinterpreted within the course of the development of human civilization. This is, of course, related to the idea of reciprocity and interactivity among various texts, whether historical or literary. In *The Jewing of Shylock: Wesker's The Merchant*, Efraim Sicher refers to Wesker's The Merchant as a literary "interplay" with Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice that deconstructs the dominant idea of the Elizabethan villain Shylock and reconstructs it according to an alternative perception which allows for the expression of the subaltern hidden discourse:

> *The Merchant* goes beyond the use of Jewish milieu, or Jewish speech, or Jewish Immigrant experience, and addresses from a Jewish point of view the situation of the Jew in history and—through the interplay with Shakespeare—in literature. Wesker does not so much rewrite or reinterpret Shakespeare as answer him. […]Moreover, Wesker places Shylock inside the Jewish Ghetto of Venice in the year 1563. This is the heyday of Jewish intellectual life in Venice and the play presents Jewishness as something alive and lived, a wonderful cultural heritage of the moral stature equal, if not superior, to Christianity; at the same time the Jew's lot is that of a despised inferiority, he is restricted to the ghetto walls and to money lending, bled dry by the Venetian tax-collector and compelled to purchase civic rights by a contract whose renewal is uncertain. (60)

Likewise, Cecil Roth in *The Background of Shylock* differentiates between three "nations" of Jews who were allowed to live in Venice as refugees and were treated differently. Among those were the "*Ponentines*" from Spain and Portugal, the "*Levantines*" from Turkey, and the "*Nazione*

Toedsca" from Germany. According to Roth the most privileged nation were the Jews from Germany. They were permitted restricted residence within the *Ghetto Nuovo* and on conditions of paying annual fees for the state of Venice. For instance, Tubal in Wesker's The Merchant says:

> Trade is trade and they know it also, and we pay! An annual tribute of twenty thousand ducats; another twenty thousand for renting these squalid walls; fifteen thousand more to the Navy Board—for God knows what; another hundred for the upkeep of the canals, which stink! And on top of all that, ten thousand more in time of war which, since our beloved and righteous republic seems constantly fighting with someone or other entrusts that sum too as a regular payment…Only fourteen hundred souls, remember. We're no more than that, trapped in an oppressive circus with three water wells and a proclivity for fires. (16)

Historical evidence based on investigation of notaries that date back to that period show that these Jews were permitted to stay in a certain quarter of the city Venice upon conditions of working as money lenders and for paying annual rent. Cecil Roth, furthermore, presumes that Shylock as Shakespeare imagined him would have belonged to that nation. According to Roth, there is a very simple proof that Shylock was a moneylender by profession:

> The proof is very simple. He was by profession a moneylender—the whole of Shakespeare's story, indeed, turns upon this fact…The so-called "Germans," on the other hand, were tolerated in Venice solely on condition of maintaining the essential money-lending establishments in which the tender conscience of the Serenissima would not allow any Christian to engage. (150)

It is Antonio in The Merchant who reminds Shylock of the necessity of signing a contract as the law of Venice demands it, and it is Shylock who opposes the idea: "A bond? Between friends? What nonsense are you talking, Antonio?" (23). Then, Antonio reminds Shylock that the Venetian law demands "no dealings maybe made with Jews unless covered by a legal bond." He also warns him that he would be penalized if he does not obey the law verbatim. However, Shylock is fully resilient not to obey that law as he says, "that law was made for enemies, not friends" (23). Michael Scott writes in *Shakespeare and the Modern Dramatist: Demythologizing Shylock* that Shylock's idealism in The Merchant surpasses the legal and social restrictions of the Venetian society, so that "love, ironically the essential quality of the Christian code, is the attribute which Shylock possesses par excellence for his friend. But Antony demands a pragmatism based on

reciprocity of friendship but one bound with the knowledge of the Jewish predicament" (55).

This friendly causerie comes in sheer contrast with Shylock's venomous vows of revenge against Antonio mainly for the grudge he bears him for financial loss in The Merchant of Venice. Shylock says that Antonio "lends money gratis and brings down the rate of usance here with us in Venice," then Shylock openly expresses his vengefulness as he says, "If I can catch him once upon the hip, I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him…cursed be my tribe, if I forgive him" (1.3.48-53). Those vows and the predetermined will to revenge deem the consequent offer of a "merry bond" (1.3. 167) a suspicious one:

Shylock. This kindness will I show.
Go with me to the notary, seal me there
Your single bond; and, in 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 an equal pound
Of your fair flesh, to be cut off and taken
In what part of your body pleaseth me (1.3. 136-145)

It is significant that Antonio in Arnold Wesker's The Merchant gives a brief glimpse of the political scene and the economic situation of Venice amid other contemporary political and economic entities. Antonio says, "The French markets are gone, the English are building faster and better ships and there are fools talking about dangerous protectionist policies. We are a nervous Empire." Shylock, nonetheless, does not accept to sign a contract with his friend Antonio because his heart, as he says, "needs to know [he] can trust and be trusted" (24). Shylock says that he follows his heart then mentions the Deuteronic code, "Thou shall not lend upon usury to thy brother. Unto a foreigner thou mayest lend upon usury, but unto thy brother not" (24). This shows how Shylock considers Antonio not only his friend but also his brother. Shylock, furthermore, tells Antonio to disregard the unjust Venetian law that segregates between Jews and Christians. It is this philanthropic attitude that Wesker aims at emphasizing in destereotyping the misanthropic image of Shylock. Therefore, Shylock tells Antonio, "let us not quite bend the law but interpret it as men neither Christian nor Jew. I love you, therefore you are my brother. And since you are my brother, my law says I may not lend upon usury to you, but must uphold you. Take the ducats" (24).

Antonio, nevertheless, cannot accept Shylock's philanthropic offer because he knows that if he does that it will jeopardize his friend's existence in Venice—the city that treats him as a member of an alien occupational denizen community who are only welcomed on the condition of fulfilling

their job as state-legalized usurers to fill the coffers of Venice. Antonio, however, feels "compelled" to press his point in order to protect Shylock, so he faces him with facts:

> You are a Jew, Shylock. Not only is your race a minority, it is despised. Your existence here in Venice, your pleasures, your very freedom to be sardonic or bitter is a privilege not a right. Your life, the lives of your people depend upon contract and *your* respect for the laws behind contract, just as your contract with the city councilors *they* must respect…The Law Shylock, the Law! For you and your people, the bond-in-law must be honored. (25)

Disillusioned by Antonio's argument, and "not losing his good humor," Shylock says that he will defy the Venetian state by writing a "nonsense" bond in order to "mock the law." The two friends, then, seem convinced with that mocking bond and they engage in merry chatter that shows them as over-grown children not foes:

> Antonio. They mock our friendship—
> Shylock.—We mock their laws.
> Antonio (*pinching himself*). Do I have a pound of flesh? I don't even have a pound of flesh.
> Shylock (*pinching him)*. Here, and here, and here, one two, three pounds of flesh!
> *He's tickling him. Antonio responds. Like children they're goosing each other and giggling.* (26)

In the court room scene, Antonio defends his friend and speaks for the Jewish community whose restricted existence in the Venetian ghetto was conditionally dependant on their fulfillment of the contractual relationship between them and the state of Rome. Antonio firmly states that the economy of the state cannot turn except for the existence of the Jewish moneylenders:

> The usurer is a Jew, and the Jew the people's favorite villain. Convenient! Easy! But the Jew pursues what he hates to pursue in order to relieve us of the sin. Usury must exist in our city, for we have many poor and our economy can't turn without it. Do we condemn the Jew for doing what our system has required him to do? (75)

Historians' investigation of Venetian notaries refer to the fact that the Venetian state permitted the existence of Jewish moneylenders as a necessity to help the poor at low interest, especially after the hardships caused by wars and the Black Death. There was a need to curb the high illegal interest rates that were driving merchants out of the city. Benjamin

Ravid states in *The Legal Status of the Jews in Venice to 1509* that "the general disruption caused by the Black Death and the heavy expenses and shortage of money resulting from the third war against Genoa (1350-55) led the Venetian government to reconsider its policy in the credit field" (172). In (1382), the city council issued a legislation allowing any person, regardless their nationality and religion, to engage in money lending at a maximum rate of "10% per year on pledges and 12% on notes in the city itself." Nevertheless, Ravid writes, "although this legislation did not refer specifically to Jewish moneylenders, Mueller ascertained on the basis of an investigation of surviving notorial records that all moneylenders who accepted this invitation appear to have been Jews" (174). It is noteworthy that the Jews at the beginning accepted this invitation by the Venetian councilors to play the role of money lenders at a low interest rate in order to help the poor, but they were later found lending money only to the rich. Ravid explains that Jews in Venice lent "large sums of money to wealthier individuals at 10% on notes than smaller sums to the poor at 8 % on pledges" (177). However, in 1503 after decades of turbulent relations between the state of Rome and Jews a charter was issued in order to regulate their presence:

> They could stay, dwell, leave and return as often as they wished, and also have storage vaults for the pledges to be sold at the auctions of the Soparconsoli, and in case of war, they could live and keep their pledges in Venice without any hindrance. However, should they or their agents lend money to anyone in Venice, they were not to charge interest until the loan was recorded in the books of the banks of Mestre, and they were not to incur any penalty for this activity. (196)

Later in 1516, the government of Venice enclosed the Jews living in the city into a ghetto and forced them to pay large sums of money in order to be permitted to remain there for limited number of years.

The nature of this contractual relationship ruled interaction between Jews and Christians for centuries and both sides were under obligation of the strict laws of Venice. In *"Why I Fleshed Out Shylock,"* The Guardian, 29 August 1981, Wesker marvels at The Merchant's setting in "*Venice, 1563. The Ghetto Nuovo*"(1) as he describes it as "an exciting, lively place." He further writes,

> Research showed that no dealings could be entered into with a Jew without contract. This becomes one of the pillars later on in the play. Antonio needs to borrow three thousand ducats to lend his godson. Shylock would prefer to give him money, but Antonio points out that the laws of Venice do not permit this. (Liii)

Although The Merchant revolves around the familiar plot of the bond between Shylock and Antonio, it deals with it iconoclastically. Therefore, the Jewish Shylock is a philanthropic and bibliophile friend of the Christian Antonio. Antonio shows great respect and admiration towards Shylock, and their friendship is based on loyalty and love. This is in fact the iconoclastic didactic element in Wesker's play that aims at presenting atypical Judo-Christian relationship that is based on mutual love and respect. Wesker, therefore, states that his play is not "about bonds of usury but about bonds of friendship and the state laws which could threaten that friendship" (Liii). In *Understanding Arnold Wesker* Robert Wilcher comments on Wesker's artistic adaptation of the Shakespearean plot and considers The Merchant a "wholly independent work of art,"(111) in which the playwright reconstructs the plot and recreates the characters with one concern to "validate his reinterpretation of the story of the bond between the Christian merchant and the Jewish loan-banker that he had to exercise considerable artistic discipline in achieving "the balance between the documentary material and the plot."" (111-112)

Likewise, Paul J. C. M. Franssen sheds light on Wesker's reimaging of Shylock in *"But Never Mind About Politics': Arnold Wesker's The Merchant And Its Critics."* Franssen begins with differentiating between the notions of adaptation and appropriation and concludes that Wesker's play is an appropriation of Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice because he had an "ideological axe" in hand while he reconstructed his predecessor's play. Franssen, furthermore, elaborates that appropriation connotes "a dialogue or struggle with the ideology implicit in the original text." In other words, Wesker reimaging of Shylock and his representation of the bond story aims at sending an ideological corrective message about the real status of the Jews in the Renaissance Venice:

> Wesker's chief concern, as he himself sees it, is with correcting the negative stereotype of the Jew in Shakespeare's comedy, by redrawing Shylock as a more sympathetic character, who is actually Antonio's friend (Dornan 1994: 100). The notorious bond for a pound of Antonio's flesh starts out as a mere joke between friends; but then Shylock is driven to claim its fulfillment because he realizes, as does Antonio, that failure to do so would set a dangerous precedent that could be used against the Jews on future occasions. The real culprit, as far as Wesker is concerned, is the inhuman legal system that prevailed in historical, sixteenth-century Venice, which would not allow ordinary human relationships between Jews and Christians. From this perspective, Wesker's chief quarrel is with

> Shakespeare, who misrepresented the historical context and drew on anti-Semitic stereotypes […]. (244)

Wesker's The Merchant is concerned with the interrelationship between political system, tolerance and culture. The religious, as well as, ethnic tolerance that governs the relationship between Shylock and Antonio and their shared interest in culture and knowledge seem pointless and nullified by the domineering Venetian political system. Therefore, the two friends decide to defy that system by mockery as they sign a contract with an impossible forfeiture. However, their mockery fires back and they face the hardship of choosing whether or not to sacrifice their friendship for the sake of keeping justice according to the laws of Venice. Eventually, all parties are forced to comply with the law although they are fully aware of its absurdity. Antonio, for instance, refers to the fact that the Venetian law is "not to do with justice," (70) and he also says that justice in Venice is double-standard as it is designed to sever the interest of the rich patricians; "as for Venice's sense of justice, it's to retain for her Patricians the best opportunities for long-distance trade" (40). It is noteworthy that it is not only Antonio who expresses his dissatisfaction with the injustice of Venetian law but also Tubal, Shylock's Jewish partner, who regretfully describes the Jews legal status in Venice:

> TUBAL.—Trade is trade and they knew it also, and we pay! An annual tribute of twenty thousand ducats; another twenty thousand for renting these squalid walls; fifteen thousand more to the Navy Board—for God knows what; another hundred for the upkeep of the canals which stink! And, on top of all that, ten thousand more in time of war which, since our beloved and righteous republic seems constantly fighting with someone or other ensures that sum too as a regular payment. Why, sometimes there're barely pennies in the Ghetto. For days we're all borrowing off each other, till new funds flow in. only fourteen hundred souls, remember. We're no more than that, trapped in an oppressive circus with three water wells and a proclivity for fires. (15-16)

However, the harshest disillusioning reprimand comes from Shylock's sister Rivka, who faces him with the facts of their jeopardized status as foreign denizens in Venice. Rivka tells her brother to stop being such a utopian perfectionist in a world governed by laws of financial gain and loss. Rivka reminds Shylock that his kinsfolk in the Jewish ghetto will not agree to such a bond that mocks the law that allows them to stay in Venice and safeguards their welfare. She also tells him the state of Venice will not allow for such mockery against its law because it means the collapse of its entire economic and political entity. So, in spite of Shylock's

eventual angry dismissal of his sister, she gives him a message of warning, a disillusioning blow, as she asks him to stop pretending that he is not a foreigner who is liable to the same hardships and subjugated by the same laws as the rest of kinsfolk:

> RIVKA. […] Don't think I've not understood you; suffocating in this little yard, waiting for your own very scholar to arrive. It made me ache to watch you, looking for moral problems to sharpen your mind, for disputations—as if there weren't enough troubles inside these peeling walls. But you can't pretend you're educated, just as you can't pretend you're not an alien or that this Ghetto has no walls. Pretend, pretend, pretend! All your life! Wanting to be what you're not. Imagining the world as you want. And now, again, as always, against all reason, this mad pretence that Antonio's ships will come in safe. (*Pause*.) You've mocked their law. (57)

Same as in Shakespeare's play, Shylock does not execute the forfeiture of the bond thanks to Portia's brilliant realization of the fact that the bond entitles Shylock to cut a pound of Antonio's flesh without blood shedding. However, in Wesker's The Merchant when Portia announces to the court that the "contract is not bidding because—impossible," Shylock becomes "stunned" with relief and filled with happiness so that he "moves first to embrace Antonio."(78) Shylock, furthermore, thanks God that he has "been delivered from murder" (79) of his friend. Still, in spite of Shylock's jubilation for being saved out from this legal dilemma, the Doge says, "the people of Venice would not understand it if the law exacted no punishment at all for such a bond" (80). The Doge also says that there was an old Venetian law which "condemns to death and confiscation of his goods the alien who plots against the life of a citizen of Venice" (79). Portia "raging at the departed Doge" says, "I would not carry a sword in one hand and scales in the other…Is my sword held high to defend the justice my left hand weights? Or is it poised threateningly to enforce my left hand obduracy?"(81)

Finally defeated by the domineering political and economic power of the Venetian capital, Shylock is now a more disillusioned person as he says "we have need for the law," but he also adds sardonically, "what need do we have of books? Distressing, disturbing things…take my books. Take everything. I do not want the law departed from, not one letter departed from" (81). However, before Shylock leaves court he announces that his final destination would be to Jerusalem. In fact, he firmly states that now is the time to make that journey to Jerusalem. Join those other older men on the quayside, waiting to make a pilgrimage to be buried there" (82).

It is noteworthy that The Merchant presents the familiar subplot of the love fling between Lorenzo and Jessica. Still, while Jessica elopes with Lorenzo, she does not convert to Christianity as her namesake does in Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice. Jessica assuredly tells Lorenzo that her "rhythms still belong to the Ghetto," and that she "can't slip so quickly from one God to God like a whore." (65) Portia, in addition, sees through the estrangement between Lorenzo and Jessica so she says that their marriage will not happen. Portia foresees Jessica's departure to Jerusalem along with her father:

> PORTIA. I will look after Jessica. My marriage is a parent's will, not hers, though. Mine can't be held back, hers, I will see, never takes place.
> ANTONIO. But *which* place will she take? There's no father's house to return to.
> POTRIA. But there is Jerusalem, where he can be followed. (83)

So, unlike Shylock in The Merchant of Venice who is coerced by the City judge to convert into Christianity or else he loses his life, Shylock in The Merchant takes the decision to go to Zion. Instead of liquidating the *persona non gratia* by converting the Jew into Christianity, which is an extremely appealing solution to the heightened sentiments of the English audience during the Elizabethan age, Shylock is offered the solution that appeals to the sentiments of Zionists in the backwash of the 1973 war.

Wesker kept his diaries during the time he wrote The Merchant, and he acknowledges the fact that the Middle East war was on his mind. Wesker, as Paul J.C.M. Franssen explains in *"But Never Mind About Politics': Arnold Wesker's The Merchant And Its Critics,"* had reconciled his radical political views with his Jewishness as he wrote this play:

> In addition to his disillusionment with the practice of socialism, a longstanding theme in his plays, Wesker has acknowledged that another experience that went into the making of The Merchant was what he perceived as a resurgence of anti-Semitism in the wake of the Middle East war of 1973 and the resulting oil crisis, when, as he saw it, nearly the entire world forsook Israel (Skloot 1978: 42). Also the diary that he kept while writing the play shows how the Middle East crisis and the threat to Jews everywhere were on his mind during this period (Wesker 1997: 7–8). If we examine the political realities behind Wesker's feelings, however, it will become clear that those nations that did support Israel tended to be the Western capitalist ones, whereas the Eastern Bloc supported the Arab cause. What Wesker must have found hard to accept was that Jews on the

> whole had more to gain by capitalist societies than by socialist ones […]. (254-255)

Arnold Wesker's play The Merchant and the contextual historical conditions that produced it are constitutive of each other. This play has shaped and was shaped by conflicting cultural discourses circulating at its point of origin. Paul J.C.M. Franssen explicates that The Merchant is a "play about modern Britain as much as about Renaissance Venice" (252). The disappearance of Shylock in The Merchant of Venice comes as a desired solution of the "Jewish Question" and in matching with the agendas of most European nations," as Stephen Greenblatt explains in *Shakespeare's Freedom*. It was a disappearance, he adds that was "facilitated by an orgy of mass murder, by intermarriage and religious conversion, and by assimilation and citizenship […]" (55). The disappearance of Shylock in The Merchant, by means of contrast, is a willed Zionist immigration to a Zionist polity that was engaged in war at the time of writing and in the historical and political aftermath of the incident of the Holocaust about which Wesker writes in *"Why I Fleshed Out Shylock,"* The Guardian, 29 August 1981 that it is "the ball and chain to all attempts at reason," and from which ensue "only a few positions to take and each of them is bound to be unnatural." Likewise, in *His Own and Golden City: An Interview with Arnold Wesker*, Simon Trussler quotes Wesker speaking about his political affiliation, "I became a member of the Zionist Youth Movement, and I developed through that rather than through any political movement" (194). So when Shylock in The Merchant says "now is the time to make that journey to Jerusalem […] to be buried there," (82) he expresses the political discourse of Anglo-Jewish of Wesker's modern time. It was the time when Wesker wrote in ……that no one could persuade him that "the Holocaust is irrelevant to his responses". It is also 1973, the year of the Middle East War, when he "ceased finally to be a forgiver as J.C.M. Franssen writes in *"But Never Mind About Politics': Arnold Wesker's The Merchant And Its Critics,"* " After 1973, Wesker seems to have found it increasingly hard to reconcile his Jewishness and his Zionist sympathies with his political radicalism. I believe that this unresolved tension within Wesker is at the heart of this play" (255).

الملخص

هدم صورة شايلوك النمطية فى مسرحية التاجر لأرنولد ويسكر

أحمد الكحكي

وجد الكاتب المسرحى الإنجليزى اليهودى أرنولد ويسكر نفسه فى مأزق وجدانى كبير بعد حرب عام ١٩٧٣ بين اسرائيل و العرب حثَمَ عليه إعلان عدم تقبله الإستمرار فى تقديم شخصية شايلوك المرابى اليهودى و تكرار صورته النمطية ككاره للمجتمع المسيحى و سافك لدمائه. كما أعلن ويسكر عن رفضه لدوام تناولها بهذا الشكل فى قاعات الدراسة و على المسارح. و من هذا المنطلق جاءت كتابته لمسرحية "التاجر" التى تعيد تقديم قصة العقد بين المرابى اليهودى شايلوك و تاجر البندقية المسيحى أنطونيو و لكن من منظور مغاير تماماً لما كتبه وليم شكسبير فى وقته، فالعلاقة بين المسيحى و اليهودى هى علاقة صداقة وطيدة قائمة على الحب و الإحترام المتبادل بل و خرق قانون البندقية تحدياً من أجل إثبات صدق تلك العلاقة. و على الرغم من أن القصة تنتهى بإنتصار الجانب المسيحى المتمثل فى مجلس مدينة البندقية و قاضيها و إنسحاب اليهودى مثلما فعل فى مسرحية شكسبير "تاجر البندقية"، إلا أن شايلوك اليهودى فى مسرحية أرنولد ويسكر يعلن فى نهايتها عن إعتزامه الإرتحال إلى فلسطين كما سيفعل ذلك مثله كل من ضاقت بهم الأرض من اليهود أمثاله. يعمل هذا البحث على دراسة علاقة النص القديم لقصة المرابى اليهودى بصورته النمطية عند وليم شكسبير و النص الجديد لذات القصة عند أرنولد ويسكر فى ضوء أحد مفاهيم المدرسة التاريخية الجديدة و هو مفهوم الحوار بين الخطابات الثقافية الذى يتيح للخطابات الغير مهيمنة فيما مضى فرصة التعبير عن نفسها مما يتيح لنا رؤية الماضى من منظور مغاير لما فُرضته علينا خطابات ثقافية عملت فى زمانها على إقصاء الآخر و حصره ذهنياً فى صور نمطية. إلا أن مسرحية "التاجر" لا تقف عند حد هدم النمط و لكن تذهب من خلال الهيمنة على الخطاب بشكل جديد إلى إعادة بناء شخصية اليهودى كرجل مُحب لأصحابه يتحدى القانون من أجل ما يؤمن به من قيم الصداقة كما أن ثروته الحقيقية هى مكتبته التى تحوى كتباً نادرة أعتبرتها الكنيسة وقتها كتباً مُحرمة و عندما تضيق به السبل يعلن أنه سيتخذ من فلسطين وجهة له و لكل بنى جلدته.

Works Cited

Primary Sources

Wesker, Arnold The Merchant. London: Methuen London Ltd. 1977.

---------- *"Why I Fleshed Out Shylock,"* The Guardian, 29 August 1981

Secondary Sources

Graetz, Heinrich *History of the Jews, Vol.IV (in six volumes):From the Rise of the Kabbala (1270 C.E.) to the Permanent Settlement of the Marranos in Holland (1618 C.E.).* Philadelphia: Cosimo Classics, 2013.

J.C.M. Franssen *"But Never Mind About Politics': Arnold Wesker's The Merchant And Its Critics*" Journal of Adaptation in Film & Performance . Nov2010, Vol. 3 Issue 3, p245-258.

Leeming, Glenda Introduction. The Merchant. London: Methuen London Ltd. 1977.

Modder, Montagu Frank, The Jew in the Literature of England. USA: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1939.

Scott, Michael Shakespeare and the Modern Dramatist. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989.

Sicher, Ephriam Beyond Marginality: Anglo-Jewish literature After the Holocaust.

New York: State University of New York Press, 1985.
Stephen Greenblatt Shakespeare's Freedom. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2010.
Tyson, Lois Critical Theory Today. New York: Routledge, 2006.
Wilcher, Robert Understanding Arnold Wesker. USA: The University of South Carolina Press, 1991.

Online Sources

Cohen, D. M. *The Jew and Shylock* Shakespeare Quarterly, Vol.31, No. 1 (Spring, 1980), pp. 53-63., Folger Shakespeare Library in association with George Washington University. [http://www.jstor.org/stable/2869369]
Kustow, Michael *Arnold Wesker's Messianic Ideal* European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe, Vol. 7, No.1 (Winter 1973), pp. 46-48 Berghahn Books. [http://www.jstor.org/stable/41444242]
Ravid, Benjamin. "The Legal Status of the Jews in Venice to 1509." Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research 54 (1987): 169-202. [http://www.jstor.org/stable/3622584]
Roth, Cecil *The Background of Shylock* The Review of the English Studies, Vol.9, No. 34 (Apr., 1933). Pp. 148-156, Oxford University Press, [http://www.jstore.org/stable/2902983]
Sicher, Efraim *"The Existentialism of Jewish-Christian Relations After the Holocaust—Arnold Wesker's "The Merchant"* Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies, Division C: Jewish Thought And Literature pp.185-192. [http://www.jstor.org/stable/23529231]
---------- *The Jewing of Shylock: Wesker's The Merchant*, Modern Language Studies, Vol.21, No. 2 (Spring, 1991), pp. 57-69. [http://www.jstor.org/stable/3198471]
Wesker, Arnold, Trussler Simon, and Morris Kelly. "His Very Own and Golden City: An Interview with Arnold Wesker." The Tulane Drama Review 11.2 (1966): 192-202. Web. [http://www.jstor.org/stable/1125198]
Billington, Michael *"Arnold Wesker: Food for Thought,"* The Guardian Online. Online 21 May 2012. [https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/may/21/arnold-wesker-food-for-thought]
Billington, Michael *"The Party's Over: A Revival of Arnold Wesker's Neglected Play about the Failure of the Socialist Dream Couldn't be More Timely,"* The Guardian Online, 9 April, 2005, Online,15 May 2015. [https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2005/apr/09/theatre]
Cooke, Rachel "*I've Never Understood My Reputation for Grumpiness*" The Guardian Online, 22 May, 2011. [https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2011/may/22/arnold-wesker-interview]
Weinbraub, Judith *What Made Arnold Wesker Rewrite Shakespeare, The NewYork Times, Nov.13, 1977* [http://www.nytimes.com/1977/11/13/archives/what-made-arnold-wesker-rewrite-shakespeare-rewriting-shakespeare.html?_r=0]