IUDAICA RUSSICA (ISSN 2657-8352), 2020, nr 1(4)

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DOI 10.31261/IR.2020.04.07

ANDRZEJ WICHER
Uniwersytet Łódzki
ORCID: 0000-0001-8568-2087

The anti-Jewish Prejudice in Christopher Marlowe's *Jew of Malta,* William Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* and Geoffrey Chaucer's *Prioress's Tale*

Formy anty-żydowskiego uprzedzenia w *Żydzie maltańskim* Krzysztofa Marlowe'a, *Kupcu weneckim* Williama Szekspira i *Opowieści Przeoryszy* Geoffreya Chaucera

Streszczenie: Autor stawia sobie za cel porównanie trzech utworów wyjętych z angielskiej literatury późno-średniowiecznej i renesansowej, których wspólnym mianownikiem jest skrajnie negatywne przedstawienie społeczności żydowskiej lub indywidualnych jej przedstawicieli. Utwory te świadczą o silnych uprzedzeniach anty-żydowskich w okresie, kiedy to, w zasadzie byśmy się takich uprzedzeń nie spodziewali, gdyż nie było wówczas, poczynając od wygnania Żydów w 1290, żadnej gminy żydowskiej na terenie Anglii. O ile u Chaucera Żydzi występują jedynie jako niezróżnicowany barbarzyński żywioł, zdolny do instynktownych anty-chrześcijańskich ataków, to podejście Marlowe'a, a szczególnie Szekspira, świadczy już o chęci zrozumienia psychologicznego mechanizmu żydowskiego myślenia i bierze pod uwagę zjawisko anty-żydowskich uprzedzeń, a nawet prześladowań. Zresztą nawet w przypadku Chaucera istnieje, omówiona w niniejszym artykule, możliwość, że autor dystansował się do nazbyt jedno-wymiarowego przedstawienia problemu żydowskiego, który zawarł w opowieści przypisanej dość dwuznacznej postaci, jaką jest Przeorysza. Dla punktu widzenia Marlowe'a istotny jest problem tzw. makiawelizmu, który wiąże on, w sposób arbitralny, z mentalnością żydowską, podczas gdy Szekspir widzi swojego żydowskiego bohatera, czy raczej anty-bohatera, głównie w kontekście zjawiska lichwy.

Słowa kluczowe: Żydzi w Europie, średniowiecze, renesans, chrześcijaństwo a judaizm, uprzedzenia rasowe i religijne, prześladowania, makiawelizm, lichwa.

Формы антиеврейских предрассудков в *Мальтийском еврее* Кристофера Марло, *Венецианском купце* Уильяма Шекспира и *Рассказе Второй монахини* Джеффри Чосера

Резюме: В статье сопоставлены три произведения английской литературы позднего средневековья и ренессанса, общим знаменателем которых является крайне негативное представление еврейской общины или отдельных ее представителей. Эти произведения свидетельствуют о сильных антиеврейских предрассудках в то время, когда, в принципе, никто бы их не ожидал, ибо не было тогда, начиная с изгнания евреев в 1290 году, на территории Англии никакой еврейской общины. В то время как у Чосера евреи встречаются лишь как недифференцированная варварская стихия, способная к антихристианским нападкам, подход Марло, и особенно Шекспира, уже представляет собой желание понять психологический

механизм еврейского мышления и учитывает существование антиеврейских предрассудков и даже преследований. Для точки зрения Марло существенна проблема так называемого макиавеллизма, который он связывает с еврейским менталитетом, в то время как Шекспир видит своего еврейского героя, или, скорее, антигероя, главным образом в контексте ростовщичества.
Ключевые слова: евреи в Европе, средние века, Ренессанс, христианство и иудаизм, расовые и религиозные предрассудки, преследования, макиавеллизм, ростовщичество

1

The present article attempts to compare the way the topic of the Jew and Jewishness is treated in three works of English Medieval and Renaissance literature: Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, and Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Prioress's Tale,* being part of *The Canterbury Tales*. I propose to deal with Marlowe's play first because the Jewish protagonist, Barabas, plays there the most central role, while Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* is not the title character, and the Jews in *The Prioress's Tale* are completely anonymous background characters.

Marlowe's Barabas is represented as, in many ways, a rather exotic, from an English point of view, figure. The island of Malta, or rather a group of islands, was in the hands (since 1530) of the Order of St John, a Catholic military order, known also as Knights Hospitaller, or Knights of Malta, whose headquarters was moved from the island of Rhodes (they were previously known as the Knights of Rhodes) when Rhodes was captured by the Turks in 1522. In 1565 took place the great Turkish siege of Malta, which ended in a Turkish defeat, as a result, Malta did not share the fate of Rhodes and remained in the Christian hands. Already in 1492 the local community of the Jews were expelled, which, however, is something that Marlowe's play knows nothing about, as we have there not only Barabas, but also some other Jews living in Malta. Daniel Vitkus expressly denies the possibility that Marlowe's Barabas was based on a historical Jewish merchant living in Malta in the 16th century:

> By placing a permanent community of resident Jews in his play, Marlowe was representing the centrality of the Jewish community in Mediterranean commerce, but he was not accurately depicting the contemporaneous situation in Malta itself, where there were no free Jews in permanent residence at the time[1].

Barabas, much as he hates Christianity, seems to speak Italian as his first language, and uses also, though less often, Latin,

[1] D. Vitkus, *Turks and Jews in "The Jew of Malta"*, in: G.A. Sullivan Jr., P. Cheney, A. Hadfield, *Early Modern English Drama. A Critical Companion*, Oxford University Press, New York–Oxford 2006, p. 67.

Spanish and French, which is visible in the phrases in those languages which the author put into his mouth quite often: *Corpo di Dio* (1.2.91), *Primus Motor* (1.2.165), *Hermoso plazer de los dineros* (2.1.64), *Spurca* (3.4.6), *Cazzo, diabole* (4.1.21), *coupe de gorge* (4.3.5), *catzerie* (4.3.13), *A vôtre commandemant, madame* (4.4.36), *Pardonnez-moi* (4.4.45). Barabas declares:

> Being young, I studied physic, and began
> To practice first upon the Italian (2.3.182–183)[2],

which clearly means that he specialised in poisoning and that his victims were usually Italians, even though "physic" means "medicine". On the other hand, it is exactly the Italians that in the 16th c. Europe were renowned as poisoners. This stereotype is also confirmed by Marlowe's play. Concerning a particularly potent poison with which he is going to exterminate a whole convent of nuns, Barabas says:

> It is a precious powder that I bought
> Of an Italian in Ancona once (3.4.69–70),

Of the same poison Barabas says the following:

> And with her let it work like Borgia's wine
> Wherof his sire, the Pope, was poisonèd! (3.4.99–100)

He refers in this way to the legend, without any historical foundation, according to which Pope Alexander VI died by having accidentally drunk the poison prepared by his son Cesare Borgia for somebody else. The Borgias were originally Spaniards, but they made their careers in Italy and with that country they are primarily associated.

Naturally, it can be easily assumed that Marlowe put into Barabas's mouth words and phrases from the foreign languages he knew himself, and Latin, French, Italian and Spanish were standard languages a well educated Englishman, such as Marlowe, could know. On the other hand, if Barabas is a Sephardi Jew, and he probably is, the Romance languages, and particularly Spanish, could indeed be perfectly familiar to him. Making Barabas frequently have recourse to them may emphasize his general outlandishness, his being a cultural and also moral outsider, a person from a different world that can be described, following Kipling in his poem *Manda-*

[2] The quotations from Marlowe's play follow D. Bevington, E. Rasmussen (eds.), *Christopher Marlowe. Doctor Faustus and Other Plays*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1998.

lay, as a place "where the best is like the worst" and "where there aren't no Ten Commandments". Kipling defines this area as lying "east of Suez"[3], whereas here it should rather be defined as "east of Gibraltar". Barabas's links with the Italian culture, and also the appearance of a figure called Machiavel in the Prologue of the play, strongly suggest a link between anti-Jewish and anti-Italian stereotypes. Both cultures were associated, from an English, and particularly Protestant English, point of view, with cynicism, materialism and immorality. This sounds a little paradoxical considering that Barabas belonged to the culture that gave us exactly the Ten Commandments and to the culture whose religious writings form a substantial part of the Christian Bible, that is, the Old Testament. Also the New Testament has been written by Jewish authors, with the possible exception of St Luke, even though its language is no longer Hebrew, but Greek.

Barabas's very name is an allusion to a very mysterious figure from the New Testament, who is basically a negative character, and a criminal, whom Pontius Pilate is constrained by the crowd to release instead of Jesus. But the Biblical Barabbas is treated by the Gospel authors with some circumspection, if not respect. St Matthew calls him "a notable prisoner" (Mat. 27.16)[4], St Mark says that he "made insurrection" and that he "committed murder in the insurrection" (Mark 15.7), while St Luke informs us that Barabbas was "cast into prison" because of "a certain sedition made in the city, and for murder" (Luke 23.19). This naturally opens up the possibility that, from a Jewish point of view, Barabbas was a "freedom fighter", a participant or even a leader of some minor anti-Roman insurrection, one of many that eventually led to the so called Great Revolt, also known as the First Jewish-Roman War (66–73 AD). The name Barrabbas means, in Aramaic, "son of the father" which sounds similar to the titles "Son of man" and "Son of God" used in the New Testament with reference to Jesus Christ, which reinforces the parallelism between these two characters. Marlowe's Barabas bears then a name that is associated with rebellion and also with being an antithetic figure in relation to Jesus Christ. Indeed, he reveals himself to be an Antichrist, "a beast rising up out of the sea" (Rev. 13.1), an inveterate enemy of Christ and Christians, but also, to some extent, someone who imitates Christ, of course in order to deceive and confuse the faithful.

[3] R. Kipling, *Mandalay*, https://www.poetryloverspage.com/poets/kipling/mandalay.html [1.04.2020].

[4] Quotations from the Bible follow R. Carroll, S. Prickett (eds.), *The Bible. Authorized King James Version with Apocrypha*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1998.

The portrait of Barabas in the play is thoroughly negative and confirms the worst anti-Jewish stereotypes, and yet it is not without a certain grandeur and sublimity. He has been genuinely wronged by the Christian authorities of Malta, who confiscate his possessions to pay the tribute required by the Turks, whose obvious intention is to annex Malta into the vast Turkish empire. Eventually, Malta refuses to pay the tribute, incurring the Turkish anger, but nobody thinks of restoring, even partly, the confiscated estate to Barabas. He may feel cheated, especially because he is not interested in prolonging the Christian rule over Malta. He helps the Muslims in conquering Malta, but very quickly, and for no obvious reasons, he turns against them, even though the Turks make him the governor of Malta, and organizes an attempt against the life of the Turkish commander. When his plot is exposed, he is put to death as the enemy of both warring sides, but it is clear that his anti-Turkish activity helps to achieve, probably against his intentions, a Christian victory. It must be stressed that also his animus against the Christians, even though understandable to some extent, is poorly founded. No doubt a large part of his possessions have been brutally appropriated by the government of Malta, but Barabas is still very rich owing to his having hidden another substantial part of his wealth in a safe place.

Barabas's monumental disloyalty, or monumental loyalty to himself and to his Jewishness, as we might be tempted to call it, goes beyond his material interests. He clearly wants to show that, as a Jew, he is completely neutral in the power games played by the Christian or Muslim military powers, in the sense that he can be helpful, but also very dangerous, to both sides. In conclusion, we may call Marlow's Barabas a kind of free electron of the Mediterranean power games, he enters into relations with the contending political powers but refuses to be bound by them, and those relations are short lasting. It is a policy that emphasizes his individuality and essential independence, but it is not shown as successful, and indeed could not be successful, in the long run. If his prototype is Joseph Nasi (1524 –1579), a Portuguese Sephardi Jew who made a great career and amassed enormous wealth in the Ottoman Empire[5], then we might accept this theory but only with the proviso that it should be acknowledged that Nasi, unlike Barabas, was a loyal subject of the Ottoman sultans, and represented a kind of Muslim – Jewish anti-Christian alliance. Barabas, on the

[5] Daniel Vitkus emphasizes the similarity between Barabas and Nasi: "These same elements are represented by Marlowe in the character of Barabas, a figure bearing many similarities to Joseph Nasi". D. Vitkus, *Turks and Jews*…, p. 70.

other hand, owing to his compulsive double-dealing, is close to forging a Christian – Muslim alliance directed against the Jews, or at least against one Jew, that is, himself. Barabas's philosophy of what might be called warlike neutrality is summarized in the statement made by himself in the play:

> And thus far roundly goes the business.
> Thus, loving neither, I will live with both
> Making a profit of my policy (5.2.110–112).

The problem is that Barabas cannot "live" in this way for long, his "loving neither" turns into "becoming a deadly enemy of both", which he can, even as rich man, hardly afford. In reality, the Jews who lived in the zone of the Christian – Muslim conflict avoided at all costs creating an impression that they were sitting on the fence. Like Joseph Nasi, they usually were loyal to the Muslim side which granted them a greater tolerance and safety.

2

The situation of Shakespeare's Shylock, from *The Merchant of Venice*, is very different from that of Barabas. Shylock[6] is first of all a money-lender, and a usurer, rather than a merchant, like Barabas, even though Barabas also confesses to having practised usury. The social position of Barabas seems safe until the outbreak of Christian-Muslim hostilities, while that of Shylock is generally very insecure. The public opinion, in the Middle Ages and later, was consistently against usury and accused usurers of acting against the laws of nature. As a result, a usurer, even if he were a Christian, in a common view, had no chance of achieving salvation:

> Usurers sin against nature in that they want money to grow out of money, in the same manner as a horse begets a horse, and a mule begets a mule. Apart from that, usurers are thieves because they sell the time that does not belong to them, and to sell somebody else's property without the owner's consent is theft. What is more, they sell only the expectation of money, that is time, they sell days and nights. As a result, they sell light and repose. It would not be just if light and eternal rest had been in store for them[7].

[6] Shylock is not a Jewish or Aramaic name, like Barabas, it is probably an English name superficially similar to some names from Old Testament.

[7] J. Le Goff, *Sakiewka i życie. Gospodarka i religia w średniowieczu*. [*The Purse and Life. Economy and Religion in the Middle Ages*], trans. H. Zaremska, MARABUT, Gdańsk 1995, p. 50 (the translation of this passage from Polish into English is mine — A.W.).

Usury was regarded not only as unnatural, but also very sinful, from a religious point of view, and leading to the ruin of the body politic:

> Canon law assimilated usury to theft, and the view of usury as theft influences Shakespeare's motif of stealing. Some held usury accountable as 'the very hell of evil' and 'the principal cause of all want and scarcity in any common weal'. Hence usury was often regarded as theft. More importantly, usury was held to be inimical to mercy because it overthrows the rule of charity and 'usury cutteth the throat of mercy'[8].

Dante placed usurers in the seventh circle of his Inferno, that is, almost as low as he could, even though the one usurer he mentions by name is not a Jew, but an Italian.

Jews were, nevertheless, a nation particularly often associated with usurious practices, even though members of other nations, and Christians, particularly Italians, but not only, also were guilty of them. Theoretically, Christians were forbidden, by the Church, to charge the interest, while Jews were allowed to do so, but only in relation to non-Jewish clients:

> Jews are forbidden from usury in dealing with fellow Jews, and this lending is to be considered *tzedakah* or charity. However, there are permissions to charge interest on loans to non-Jews[9].

This makes it possible to construe Shylock's manner of money lending, especially in the eyes of the early viewers of the play as a specifically anti-Christian activity. It is not certain, however, that usury is harmful to a given country's economy, or even the world economy:

> Competition, insecurity, and greed are woven into our economy because of interest. They can never be eliminated as long as the necessities of life are denominated in interest-money… interest also creates an endless pressure for perpetual economic growth. [sacred-economics.com]

Economic growth and enhanced performance of industry is not of course an unmixed blessing, but it is conducive to an economic power. So the activity of Shylock, and other money lenders, could quite easily be seen as part and parcel of the state's economic prosperity. And the state in question is this time not a small and infertile island of Malta, but the city state of Venice, one of the richest and most powerful European states of that time, in spite of

[8] J.O. Holmer, *The Merchant of Venice. Choice, Hazard and Consequence*, Macmillan, London 1995, p. 35.

[9] Usury — from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Usury [1.04.2020].

its relatively small territory. It is small wonder then that Shylock, unlike Barabas, does not take any part in the political games on which the future of the state he belonged to depended. In Venice, Shylock, even if he were as rich as Barabas, and he probably was not, could still have little influence, especially as an isolated figure, and, again in contradistinction to Barabas, we do not actually see Shylock having any contacts with the Jewish community of Venice. It has to be reiterated that the potentially beneficial aspects of Shylock's economic role are not given any attention in the play itself. We should not be surprised, seeing that even the more obviously positive aspects of Barabas's commercial activity, extending over the whole Mediterranean, are never taken into account, much as this activity could mean for the rather economically insignificant, though strategically important, island of Malta.

The list of what Shylock and Barabas have in common is quite a long one[10], but perhaps the most significant item on this list is that they both have an attractive young daughter. In the case of Barabas it is Abigail, in the case of Shylock her name is Jessica. Both Barabas and Shylock seem to have a special affection for their daughters, but they both feel that the daughters were disloyal to them. Abigail, used by her father as a spy, seeing his cruelty and the way he gets rid of the Christian men who were her suitors, and one of whom she loved, decides to become a Christian nun. Jessica, on the other hand, feels unhappy about her father's stinginess and tyrannical ways, so she elopes, having first taken, or rather stolen, a substantial sum from her father's chest, with her Christian lover Lorenzo, whom she eventually marries, having become a Christian herself. Abigail is a tragic figure, her father punishes her disloyalty simply by killing her, she is poisoned together with the other nuns. Jessica, however, is rather a romantic, though morally dubious, character, her elopement is successful, her father rages against her, and this rage hardens his feeling towards the Christians, but eventually he is forced to promise her the whole of his wealth the moment he dies. It is obvious enough that Abigail is much easier to sympathise with than Jessica.

The fact that Lorenzo, a Venetian nobleman, marries a converted Jewess seems to indicate that the social gap between Christians and Jews could be, in certain circumstances, bridged, while

[10] Jonathan Bate summarizes this matter in the following way: "Marlowe's Barabas and Shakespeare's Shylock are both Jews who are usurers, are treacherous, are tricked out of their money and their daughter, are roundly defeated but remain figures of some sympathy because the Christians are no better than they are". J. Bate, *The Genius of Shakespeare*, Oxford University Press, Oxford–New York 1998, pp. 126–127.

in *The Jew of Malta* there seems to be no such possibility. Unlike in Marlowe, we can see no anti-Italian prejudice in Shakespeare. The action of *The Merchant of Venice* takes place mainly among the Italians, and they are shown as a diversified, but on the whole likeable, group of people.

About Shylock himself we may say that he is both a tragic and a comic figure. His insistence on having "a pound of flesh" from his insolvent debtor's body shows him to be cruel, ruthless and vengeful, but his putting his trust in his daughter, who hates him and is prepared to unite with his enemies, makes him into an object of ridicule, or of pity. The way Shylock's hopes are frustrated in the trial scene, his misplaced enthusiasm for Portia[11], disguised as a lawyer, make him even more pitiable, even though he never ceases to be a highly unpleasant and inimical character. Even Shylock's great and impassioned soliloquy including the words:

> I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?… If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? (3.1.55–62)[12]

fails to turn him into a character an ordinary reader might easily sympathise with. Shylock's speech includes also the words "And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge" (3.1.62–63), and it is obvious enough that the logic of revenge is exactly the one that Shylock accepts and understands and has no intention of going beyond it. Shakespeare, being a more versatile artist than Marlowe, provides us with an insight into the Jew's mind, and lets him defend himself, but all this, I am afraid, does not make Shylock morally superior to Barabas.

The relationship between Barabas and Shylock interested many critics. Harold Bloom says the following on the problem:

> Barabas is exuberant, but he is a monster, not a man. Shakespeare's obsessed Shylock is compulsive enough in his hatred of Antonio so that he would have performed monstrously, but for Portia, yet Shylock is no monster but an overwhelming persuasion of a possible human being[13].

[11] Portia is of course a character of crucial importance for this play, without her, no conflict or problem can be resolved, without her, *The Merchant of Venice* could have only been a tragedy rather than a, very problematic, comedy. And she is very important both as a passive figure, a reward for a hero to gain, and as an active character who steps in to settle what seems impossible to settle. As Charles Boyce asserts: „Portia is a fine example of the frank and fearless young women who appear in many of [Shakespeare's] plays", Ch.Boyce, *Shakespeare. A to Z*, A Roundtable Press Book, New York 1990, p. 512.

[12] The quotations from William Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* follow D. Bevington (ed.), William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, Bantam Books, New York–Toronto–London–Sydney–Auckland 1988.

[13] H. Bloom, *Shakespeare, The Invention of the Human*, Riverhead Books, New York 1999, p. 182.

Bloom concludes that the anti-Semitism of *The Merchant of Venice* is much more dangerous than that of *The Jew of Malta*, exactly because Marlowe's Jew is a caricature and a cartoon, while Shakespeare's Jew is a realistic, or at least a seemingly realistic, though at the same time profoundly repulsive, character. The enormous authority and popularity of Shakespeare as a literary genius has naturally given more weight to the fallacious idea that Shylock could be representative of the Jewish people at large:

> "I'll show you the Jew" Shakespeare says in reply to Marlowe, and so, alas, he has, to the everlasting harm of the actual Jewish people. This is hardly to say that Shylock is a valid representation of a Jew, let alone the Jew, but it does acknowledge the scandalous authority of Shakespeare in world culture, an authority that just this once is more of a sorrow than it is a benefit[14].

Bloom tries additionally to defend Marlowe's play, or even to exonerate it from the charge of anti-Semitism, by claiming that "Its Christians and Muslims come off far worse than Barabas, since they would be just as wicked if they could but lack Barabas's genius for evil"[15], but it seems that Bloom apparently fails to notice that a very similar argument can be made, in fact has been made, with reference to Shakespeare's play. I mean the interpretation of *The Merchant of Venice* in René Girard's book *A Theater of Envy: William Shakespeare*, where the author talks about the profound symmetry and equivalence of the relationship between the Christians and Shylock[16], suggesting that those Christians are shown as only superficially and seemingly better than Shylock. In particular, Girard insists on Antonio being Shylock's double[17], which, I think, creates the possibility that the title of the play "The Merchant of Venice" is deliberately ambiguous and may refer to both Antonio and Shylock[18]. Girard's argument has been aptly summarised by Joanna Chojka: "For the only truth of this world is exactly revenge and reprisal which, owing to the theatrical skills of Venetian citizens, acquire the veneer of mercy"[19]. But it has to be conceded that Bloom's own interpretation of Shakespeare's play, though far from Girard's forcefulness and clarity, is heading towards similar

[14] Ibidem, p. 181.

[15] Ibidem.

[16] See R. Girard, *Szekspir. Teatr zazdrości*, trans. B. Mikołajewska, Wydawnictwo KR, Warszawa 1996, p. 309.

[17] See ibidem, p. 319.

[18] The possibility of confusing Antonio with Shylock, however remote it might seem, is admirably foregrounded by Portia's famous question „Which is the merchant here, and which the Jew?" (4.1.172).

[19] J. Chojka, *Prawdziwa natura chrześcijańskiej miłości*, in: J. Fabiszak, M. Gibińska, E. Nawrocka (eds.), *Czytanie Szekspira*, Wydawnictwo słowo / obraz terytoria, Gdańsk 2004, p. 103. The translation from the Polish is mine — A.W.

conclusions. He is indeed very close, for example, to seeing Shylock and Antonia as each other's doubles: "Critics frequently mark the sadness that is common to Antonio and to Shylock, an involuntary link between good haters of each other"[20].

It has to be emphasised, however, that the Christian society of Venice is indeed merciful in that they spare Shylock's life. So, unlike Barabas, he does not die, even though he ends up greatly impoverished and he is blackmailed into converting to Christianity, which means for him not only a loss of his cultural and religious identity, but also, probably, the impossibility to carry out his job, as a Christian he is not going to allowed to continue as a moneylender. On this point Bloom is quite categorical:

> Antonio… offers Shylock a choice between a pauper's execution and a Christian's survival as a retired moneylender, since a converted Shylock by definition cannot engage in a purely Jewish business[21].

This verdict could, I suppose, be questioned because, even though the Catholic Church in those times strictly condemned usury, the practise of usury among Christians, and especially in Italy, was common enough and there were some ways to disguise it so as not to offend the Church authorities too much:

> The spread of irregular deposits in the closing centuries of the Middle Ages and in the modern age was helped by a variety of factors: these deposits offered the possibility to skirt the usury ban by presenting interest either as a gain deriving from the joint participation in a business venture or as a discretionary offer made by the debtor, as was common practice amongst the Florentine *banchi* of the 15th century […][22].

But of course it would have been very difficult for Shylock, as a recent Christian convert, a person with a criminal record, and of course still, in many ways, a Jew, to become admitted to Christian circles or institutions practicing a covert form of usury, or lending money at interest.

3

Finally, let me devote some words to Chaucer's *Prioress's Tale*, a tale with a clearly anti-Semitic content. This tale, in a sense,

[20] H. Bloom, *Shakespeare*…, p. 183.

[21] Ibidem, pp. 183–184.

[22] http://www.giuseppefelloni.it/rassegnastampa/The_Primacy of Italian finance from the Middle Ages to early modern times.pdf [1.04.2020].

completes the forms of anti-Semitic thinking discussed here. Marlowe's Barabas symbolizes the Jew as an international political and economic manipulator that can adversely influence the struggle between Islam and Christianity, in fact from both a Christian and Muslim point of view. Shakespeare's Shylock represents the Jew as a force that can be a factor of chaos and bloody conflict on the domestic front, while Chaucer's Jews, in *The Prioress's Tale*, have no agenda. They are shown as an undistinguished mass with no face, and no individuality, a mass that can instinctively react, if given a chance, against their Christian neighbours.

It is probably not an accident that this narrative is put into the mouth of the Prioress, who, among the pilgrims going to Canterbury is undoubtedly the most elegant and refined, she is also shown as wearing a brooch with a Latin quotation (from Virgil) "Amor vincit omnia" ("love conquers all"). The Prioress shows no love or understanding for her Jewish fellow beings, but her tale does actually concern the triumph of religious love, if by "religion" we understand Christianity thought of as the only true religion, over the malice of the Church's enemies. It is also a tale about a miraculous triumph over the laws of nature, since the young boy, who is the protagonist of this tale, goes on singing, in Latin, a devotional song dedicated to the Blessed Virgin in spite of having his throat cut by the "cursed" Jews, who give vent to their murderous instincts being unable to tolerate the sound of that song. We may suppose that the boy, from their point view, behaves provocatively because he insists on singing aloud, and enthusiastically, a Christian song when going across a Jewish quarter. We are not told where exactly the action of this story happens, some unspecified "greet citee in Asye" (a great city in Asia) [VII (B) 488][23] is mentioned, but the plot has probably been inspired by the alleged murder of the "Little Saint Hugh of Lincoln", which happened in 1255, that is, still before the expulsion of the Jews from England in 1290, and Lincoln, like Canterbury, was, and still is, as a widely known bishop's seat, one of the most important centres of Christianity in England.

In spite of being a nun, and a prominent one, the Prioress is not presented, in *The Canterbury Tales*, as a person renowned for charity, her neighbourly feelings seem to be focused on little dogs and mice, of which she is very fond. She is also shown as a stickler for hygiene, who "leet no morsel from hir lippes falle" [I (A) 127]. All this might be interpreted as allusions to her religious bigotry,

[23] The quotations from Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* follow A.C. Cawley (ed.) G. Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, J.M. Dent & Sons, E.P. Dutton & Co. Inc., London–New York 1976.

which is often motivated in the same way as the zeal for hygiene, that is, by fear of becoming contaminated with foreign or extraneous elements. Also her concentration on animals, rather than on people, may be seen as showing her unwillingness to be confronted with the potentially offensive otherness of a human being from a different social class, or a different nation. Paradoxically enough, the otherness of animals, even though theoretically greater, is less problematic than that of fellow humans. The Prioress is cosmopolitan enough to speak French, but "After the scole of Stratford atte Bowe // For Frensh of Parys was to hire unknowe" [I (A) 125–126]. So her erudition is false, based on some native, that is, provincial, customs, just as her French is in reality a local, insular, variety of that language, presumably of little use on the continent. From this point of view, the Prioress's anti-Semitic tale may be part and parcel of the author's consistently indirect criticism of the behaviour of that lady who, while being rather parochial, in many senses of the word, falsely claims to set the standard for great elegance.

On the other hand, it is naturally not impossible that Chaucer shared, partly or, entirely, the anti-Jewish sentiments of his Prioress. As a critic says: "When reading 'The Prioress's Tale' in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, or Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* for that matter, one cannot help but be struck by the force of anti-Jewish sentiments expressed by their respective authors"[24] (Zago, 36). Or as we learn from Derek Pearsall standard edition of *The Canterbury Tales*, it is tempting to blame the anti-Semitism of *The Prioress's Tale* entirely on the Prioress herself, but this may be simply a result of the modern age's difficulty "for those who admire Chaucer to acknowledge that he might have shared the Prioress's uncomplex view of the Jews" whereas "Legends and miracles of this kind require the existence of an 'opposition', an inhuman enemy, whether Roman, Saracen or Jew, that provides opportunity for martyrdom"[25].

4

In conclusion, let me say that the existence of such texts as the three discussed above, written by artists of the very first rank, may point to the existence of what might be called the Matter of Israel in the English Late Medieval and Renaissance literature. None of those writers, I mean Geoffrey Chaucer, Christopher Marlowe,

[24] E. Zago, *Reflections on Chaucer's "The Prioress's Tale"*. https://ir.uiowa.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1661&context=mff [1.04.2020].

[25] D. Pearsall (ed.), G. Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, Routledge, London and New York 1985, p. 250.

and William Shakespeare, had much chance to have had regular contact with a real Jew in their lifetime. They all lived in the times, extending from 1290 (the expulsion of the Jews by King Edward I) to 1657 (Oliver Cromwell's edict permitting the Jews to return to England), where England was virtually a country without Jews, even though some could have lived there, for example as medical doctors employed by prominent personalities, such as Queen Elisabeth's private physician Roderigo Lopez (1517–1594), a Sephardic Jew from Portugal, executed as a traitor, poisoner, who allegedly wanted to kill the queen herself, and as a Spanish spy in 1594, in spite of his protestations of innocence. Naturally, Marlowe, and particularly Chaucer, who, unlike Shakespeare, were well-travelled, could have met Jews on the continent. In spite of this, they all show strong, even though mostly negative, feelings about the Jews and their role in the European, that is, from their point of view, Christian, society.

Marlowe and Shakespeare show their Jewish characters as butts of mockery and unfair treatment, who, however, owing to their wealth, can think of a revenge, even though it is only Barabas, the protagonist of *The Jew of Malta*, that actually carries out such revenge. The general tendency is to individualize, and, in a sense, humanize, the character of the Jew, especially if we compare Shakespeare and Marlowe with Chaucer, but he remains a negative character, whose demonic features have been intensified owing to the association, historically unfounded, between the Renaissance Jews and Machiavelism. It has to be emphasised that exception should be made, both in Shakespeare and Marlowe, for young Jewesses. Both Abigail, the daughter of Barabas, and Jessica, the daughter of Shylock, are shown in a positive light, but it has to be remembered that they, in one sense or another, betray their fathers and their Jewishness. In the 17th century, the English attitude towards the Jews became more positive. In Puritan thinking, England started to function as a new Holy Land, and the English as a new Chosen Nation. The readmission of the Jews into England in 1657 was accompanied by hopes to convert them to Protestant Christianity, but, fortunately, no forceful conversion followed. This does not of course mean that anti-Semitic tendencies in the 17th c. England, and later, were not present either.