

1º Congreso Internacional de Ciencias Humanas - Humanidades entre pasado y futuro. Escuela de Humanidades, Universidad Nacional de San Martín, Gral. San Martín, 2019.

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Cita:

Brittes, Andrea y Cárdenas, Florencia (2019). *The Merchant of Venice: Victims within the play*. 1º Congreso Internacional de Ciencias Humanas - Humanidades entre pasado y futuro. Escuela de Humanidades, Universidad Nacional de San Martín, Gral. San Martín.

Dirección estable:

<https://www.aacademica.org/1.congreso.internacional.de.ciencias.humanas/1539>

ARK: <https://n2t.net/ark:/13683/eRUe/mgt>



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The Merchant of Venice: Victims within the play

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Resumen

Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* is considered a problem play, since there are moral dilemmas left unresolved. Nonetheless, if a thorough analysis is carried out, it can be claimed that several characters suffer from different situations that, despite not ending in death, resemble those endured by victims in tragedies. Shylock, Antonio and Portia undergo some sort of grievance or pain – not only physical, but also psychological and moral – which determines their roles in the play and their positions in the world within it. Shakespeare's careful choice of victims challenges the established rules of Elizabethan society by giving voice to a woman, a Jew and a veiled homosexual – that is to say, to *the Other* – and making them prominent characters, regardless of their being controversial at the time. The aim of this analysis will be, on the one hand, to provide an analysis of the above mentioned characters as victims in the play and, on the other hand, to exemplify the ways in which these characters embody their otherness and consequently question the Elizabethan status quo through language and agency. This will be done with the aid of authors such as Theresa Kemp, Valerie Traub and Harold Bloom, among others.

Palabras clave: Shakespeare; Otherness; Problem; Victims; Patriarchy; Anti-Semitism.

The Merchant of Venice: Victims within the play

In Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* some of the characters can be seen to suffer some sort of grievance or pain – not only physical, but also psychological and moral– which determines their roles in the play and their positions in the world within it. The quintessential example is Shylock who is depicted as somebody who has been the subject of most intolerable injuries coming from different Christian characters. On the other hand, Antonio is victim to another kind of ache, related to his feelings for Bassanio and his unhappiness. Shakespeare's attempt to challenge the choice of victims in the Elizabethan society can also be seen in his including Portia as a victim constrained by a patriarchal society which regards women as naturally inferior to men (Traub, 2009, p. 129). In this light, Portia's rejection of her father's will suggests a previous imposition of the male dominant ideology. Thus, this analysis, with the aid of viewpoints of scholars such as Bloom, Traub and Kemp, will aim at providing evidence that, since this is a problem play, there is more than one victim in it; Shylock and Portia are overpowered by powerful entities of the law and the patriarchy, whereas Antonio is constrained by his homoerotic desires towards Bassanio. Moreover, the analysis will explore how Shakespeare resorts to otherness so as to challenge the Elizabethan social order through the inclusion of the above-mentioned controversial characters, who are given persuasive discourses despite playing the role of victims.

Firstly, it will be argued that Shylock is the real victim of the play, and the one who loses the most. His "race and faith seem to condemn him to the role of villain" (Dutton & Howard, 2003, p. 365), the villain that Venice, as an exclusive society, depends on, for it "needs something excluded and unaesthetic to define it" (Auden, 2010, p. 149). He is looked down on as a result of his profession as a moneylender who lives thanks to his loans, but, "what but Christian persecution forced him to live by these means?" (Campbell, 2005, p. 52). Consequently, he undergoes humiliation and exclusion:

Shylock: You call me disbeliever, cut-throat dog,

And spit upon my Jewish gabardine,

And all for use of that which is mine own. (Shakespeare, 1.3. 103-105)

Antonio does not show signs of regret for his past grievances, but somewhat threatens Shylock by saying, "I am as like (...) To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too" (Shakespeare, 1.3.122-123). Not only is he the "focus for all religious intolerance" (Wynne-Davies, 2003, p. 372); Shylock is also the victim of "(...) his daughter's elopement, his legal outwitting by Portia, the choice between loss of his goods and loss of his religion" (Turner, 1999, pp. 78-

79). Shylock, instead of being sympathized with, only receives mockery and laughter¹, which, as he suspects that Antonio is the causer of his misery, leads him to express wholeheartedly what he feels. He thus unveils the double standards of Christian morality and becomes a villain in an explicit way:

He hath disgraced me and hindered me half a million, laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies—and what's his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? [...] If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villainy you teach me I will execute—and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction. (Shakespeare, 3.1.43-57)²

Shylock is given the final blow when Antonio, wanting to add insult to justice (Hole 26), states that he should provide for his daughter and her Christian husband, and also that he should convert to Christianity. As Shylock very well states, “You take my life / When you do take the means whereby I live” (Shakespeare, 4.1.372-372). In this way, Antonio deprives him of his identity and, practically, his chances of survival.³

Antonio, in his hatred for Shylock, is clearly devoid of mercy and pity, and is mainly responsible for Shylock's doom, as described above. Notwithstanding that, it could also be argued that he is another victim in the play. As described by Asimov (1970, p. 501), he “has a male friend to whom he is devoted with a self-sacrificial intensity that is almost unbelievable,” and he states from the very beginning that his spirits are unwell: “In sooth I know not why I am so sad” (Shakespeare, 1.1.17). As it is made clearer later in the play, Portia is a rival for Bassanio's affection and, consequently, it can be argued that Bassanio's impossibility to love him in return is the real cause of his sadness. Still, he is willing to help Bassanio financially (even when he knows that the money will be destined to Portia's courting) because Antonio's need to oblige goes beyond friendship; his homoerotic love is

¹“The boys of Venice run after him, mocking, and Solanio himself thinks it is all terribly funny, and so, no doubt, did the Elizabethan audience.” (Asimov, 1970, p. 525)

²Farren's comments on Shylock's words are worth mentioning here: “This is certainly a touching speech, - exhibiting the feelings of an old man tossed about the loss of his wealth, and the loss of the Being who ought to have been the prop of his age – the injuries being rendered doubly acute from the fact of the *daughter* being the *thief*. (...) This is weak human nature, when it has lost the mastery of passion, and cannot ‘sway it to the mood of what it likes or loathes’ (2005, p. 43).

³ As described by Bloom (1998, pp. 183-184), as a result of Antonio's offer to Shylock of the “choice between a pauper's execution and a Christian's survival as a retired moneylender”, Shylock will not be able to engage in the profession again.

evidenced in his speech: "My purse, my *person*, my extremest means / Lie all unlocked to your occasions" (Shakespeare, 1.1.137-138). Thus is Antonio another victim; he might not have suffered as deeply as Shylock but "though the sadness be mutual, the causes are different; Antonio, whatever his relations with Bassanio may have been, must lose him to Portia, while Shylock evidently has long mourned his wife Leah" (Bloom, 1998, p. 183). Both of them are left alone, while the rest of the characters in the play successfully find a companion.

As men are victims to the Venetian law and the homoerotic desire, women in *The Merchant of Venice* are victims to the patriarchal society's law, despite their wealth or rank (Traub, 2001, p. 130). Portia's character is curbed by her father's desires, and sets her own aside. He asserts his power over her from beyond the grave (Kemp, 2010, p. 85), leaving terms for the proper selection of a suitable husband through the Three Caskets game. This entails the impossibility of Portia's choice, so she complains that "I may / neither choose who I would, nor refuse who I dislike, so / is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a / dead father" (Shakespeare, 1.2. 20-23). Shakespeare's clever use of the word *will* as the legal document and as her father's wishes reasserts women's position of inferiority veiling the idea of weakness and the need for male protection. Women's identity is subsumed under that of her male protector so everything possessed by her, identity and wealth, is transferred from the father to the husband (Traub, 2001, p. 130). After two failed suitors, Bassanio's correct choice of casket derives in their marriage. Portia's happiness for Bassanio's good judgment in selecting the casket suggests that she was able to outwit her father's terms.

To conclude, victims in *The Merchant of Venice* mainly take the form of social outcasts. Shakespeare's careful choice of victims challenges the established rules of the Elizabethan society by including in the play women, a Jew and a veiled homosexual as prominent characters. They all assume their role as victims differently; on the one hand, Shylock functions as the prototypical villain or scapegoat that embodies *otherness*, which is opposed to social conventions; consequently, he must be seen as an outcast. Nevertheless, his manipulation of language and speech evokes feelings of sympathy towards him, as he reveals how Christian society injures him. Antonio, on the other hand, is the unhappy victim of unrequited love, as his homoerotic feelings towards Bassanio go beyond friendship. Last but not least, Portia who is limited by her father's will is the victim of submission to what is expected of women: obedience, chastity, silence and piety (Traub, 2001, p. 130). *The Merchant of Venice* is a play that deconstructs otherness by empowering them with language and actions but at the same time it highlights the weakness of the outcast so that feelings of compassion and sensitivity are aroused when the audience is faced with the play.

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