

## Paper

# “When Shall We Laugh?”: *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE* AS A FESTIVE COMEDY, PART 1

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### Abstract

*The Merchant of Venice* has been interpreted differently by the trends of ages and the tastes of audiences. In fact, there are contradicting interpretations of the play; sometimes Shylock is virtuous and the Venetians are the villains, sometimes Shylock is the villain and the Venetians are virtuous.

I'd like to suggest analyzing *The Merchant of Venice* using Bakhtin's idea of carnival because *The Merchant of Venice* is full of carnivalistic elements.

Shakespeare seems to give carnivalistic elements to both characters and acts he thinks valuable consciously or unconsciously. From such symbolic information, the contemporaries of Shakespeare understood which people or what acts were celebrated or mocked.

Moreover, the carnivalistic elements play an important role in giving the feeling of unity in the play. From the point of view of carnival, the characters are divided into two groups: Carnival and Lent. Elizabethans must have enjoyed *The Merchant of Venice* as a consistent story because they noticed the popular story of “Battle between Carnival and Lent” in the play.

## INTRODUCTION

I first saw *The Merchant of Venice* about ten years ago in Tokyo. At the very end of the play, after Gratiano had left the stage, a spotlight came on making a shadow of the church tower on the vacant stage. At the top of the tower, there was a Haken Kreuz instead of a cross. It is true to say that the value of a masterpiece shouldn't be determined by the reputation of a certain period but that of the long period, but I thought this interpretation differed greatly from the original. Since World War II, there has been a taboo on describing Shylock as a Jew that is defeated, and then laughed at, because people can't forget the Holocaust. In fact, it is impossible to perform the play in this way, if it is done, the director and the performers will be criticized as racists because racism caused the tragedy of the Jewish nation. Today, racism is one of the most prevalent

problems in the world. Yet, we should notice that this kind of problem is prevalent in our own time.

Many authors begin their introductions of *The Merchant of Venice* with the information that it has been interpreted differently by the trends of ages and the tastes of audiences. First, Shylock was performed as a villain who was defeated, then as a Jew that was persecuted by Christians, and sometimes as a brave Jew who protested against them.<sup>1</sup> Why has this play opened to such various interpretations?

One of the reasons is the author gives Shylock humane aspects, and at the same time the Venetians many faults. As a result of this, there arise problems of the final treatment of characters and the moral qualities of them. With respect to their morality, Shylock and the Venetians are so blurred that the villain and the good can be interchangeable. In fact, there are contradicting interpretations of the play; sometimes Shylock is virtuous and the Venetians are the villains, sometimes Shylock is the villain and the Venetians are virtuous.

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Another reason is a lack of unity of the two plots which *The Merchant of Venice* consists of. One is the flesh-bond story of Antonio and Shylock in Venice, and the other is the courtship story of Bassanio and Portia in Belmont. Midgeley thinks if we regard the former as the main plot, the play becomes “a study of the personality of the Jew” and the latter as the main plot, it becomes a romantic comedy. He says the reason we have various interpretations of the play is because it is hard to decide which plot is the main plot and to unite the two plots.<sup>2</sup> Nevo considers this play to be “split, sundered, schizoid” because “the main plot- Portia's and Bassanio's-is subordinated to the plot which is causally dependent upon it.”<sup>3</sup> Midgeley regards the play as a romantic comedy because of the existence of Act 5. He suggests an interpretation that unifies the two plots. According to Midgeley, both Antonio and Shylock are aliens in their society. Shylock is rejected by Venice because he is a Jew on the other hand Antonio is rejected by his Venetian friends because he is a homosexual. He says we should notice that their alienation and the process of their exclusion from the society is the framework of the play, and that “the parallel between Shylock and Antonio” gives us a feeling of unity.<sup>4</sup> However can the parallel really make the audience feel the unity of the plots?

In fact, as these two problems are closely related to each other, if we can solve one of them, the other will be automatically solved. To solve these two problems, various approaches have been tried only to find that it is impossible to interpret the play from one point of view. As this play has some economic themes, it seems effective to analyze it from the vantage point of the economic conflict between Shylock and Antonio, but the conflict is completely different from the historical facts of either England or Venice at that time. For instance, there were few Jews in England, so in many cases English merchants worked as usurers. In Venice, the government had purged all of the Jewish usurers before Shakespeare had written the play.<sup>5</sup>

To break the deadlock, I'd like to suggest analyzing *The Merchant of Venice* using Bakhtin's idea of carnival. Bakhtin mentions Shakespeare several times as a good example of “carnivalistic” literature, and recommends that we should analyze Shakespeare with his idea of carnival :

The analysis we have applied to Rabelais would also help us to discover the essential carnival element in the organization of Shakespeare's drama. This does not merely concern the secondary, clownish motives of his plays. The logic of crowning and uncrowning, in direct and in indirect form, organizes the serious elements also. And first of all this “belief in the possibility of complete exit from the present order of this life” determines Shakespeare's fearless, sober (yet not cynical) realism and absence of dogmatism. This pathos of radical changes and renewals is the essence of Shakespeare's world consciousness. It made him see the great epoch-making changes taking place around him and yet recognize their limitations. Shakespeare's drama has many outward aspects : images of the material bodily lower stratum, of ambivalent obscenities, and of popular banquet scenes.<sup>6</sup>

If we examine *The Merchant of Venice* from the point of view of carnival, we will discover that this play is filled with the atmosphere and elements of carnival Elizabethans were familiar with.<sup>7</sup> According to Bakhtin, the way of carnival life was essential for the people of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Moreover, as this has been ignored for a long time, it is one of the most difficult things for us to understand. And there was no explanation left by the people of Renaissance of the sense of carnival, because carnival way of life was so common or self-evident to the people that they weren't conscious of it.<sup>8</sup> If we can understand the meaning of carnival life, it will help a great deal, not only in solving the moral problems of the characters, but also in recognizing *The Merchant of Venice* as an integrated play.

I'd like to suggest that carnivalistic and anti-carnivalistic images play a symbolic role in *The Merchant of Venice* and they help to integrate the two plots at a symbolic level. For instance, Rhodes analyzes Falstaff considering the relationship between the moral level that includes political words, and a symbolic level that includes grotesque bodily words. He thinks Falstaff rises from the moral level to the symbolic level as the story goes on, and he achieves a symbolic function to integrate the difference between

comedy and history, and festival and politics.<sup>9</sup> And the images help the audience to understand the story. For example, the images of Falstaff change as the relation between him and Hal changes. In *The First Part of King Henry the Fourth*, Falstaff and Hal are good friends and the images of Falstaff are carnivalistic, but in *The Second Part*, Hal wants to separate from Falstaff and his images turn into those which mean Lent. I'd like to show the images of carnival and anti-carnival in *The Merchant of Venice* play the same role as those in *The First Part and The Second Part of King Henry the Fourth*.

In Chapter I, I will show that *The Merchant of Venice* is a kind of festive comedy consulting Bakhtin's idea of carnival. It is true that this play "is not shaped by festivity in the relatively direct way,"<sup>10</sup> therefore images of carnival are not presented explicitly, but we can discover many carnivalistic elements throughout the play. We will see that it is useful for the characters and their behavior to be interpreted from the point of view of carnival. Firstly, I'd like to introduce Bakhtin's idea of carnival. Secondly, we will examine the masques in *The Merchant of Venice* because masques are a kind of carnival and the only carnivalistic element explicitly presented in the play. Thirdly, we will investigate the elements and the plots influenced by the carnival sense of the world.

In Chapter II, if we examine the characters of *The Merchant of Venice* from the point of view of carnival, it may be seen that their behavior that seems problematic from the point of view of people of today is actually normal in the world of carnival. In addition, we will also notice that some characters have more carnivalistic elements than others. The people in Belmont and Venice are generally very carnivalistic, and they are rewarded through the play, but the grade of carnival is different even among them. By analyzing Bassanio and Portia, Lorenzo and Jessica, and the episode of the rings, I'd like to show that the more the images of carnival characters have, the more they are rewarded. Then we will investigate the reasons for such treatment of characters. The conflict between Shylock and Antonio is very serious, but from the point of a carnivalistic view, they are very similar in the way of being rich in anti-carnivalistic images. This means both of them are rejected from the society where the carnivalistic images are praised at a

symbolic level. From the carnivalistic images of the characters; Elizabethans immediately noticed the conflict between the people that belonged to Carnival and those that belonged to Lent in this play. They identified the play with "Battle between Carnival and Lent" and they were pleased to see the triumph of Carnival.

## CHAPTER I

### CARNIVAL SENSE IN *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE*

#### Bakhtin's idea of carnival

I'd like to look at Bakhtin's idea of carnival with which he analyzes Rabelais and Dostoevsky. This approach is discussed in his two books, *Rabelais and His World*, and *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. In *Rabelais*, he says former studies of Rabelais' works can neither understand nor evaluate Rabelais correctly because they ignore the importance of the culture of folk humor in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Understanding of the folk humor culture is essential in understanding Rabelais, but the distance of years hinders modern readers from understanding it.<sup>11</sup> Bakhtin calls it "carnival sense of the world" because he thinks the carnival that exists today preserves the atmosphere of the culture very well. Moreover he insists that not only Rabelais but also other writers of the Renaissance including Shakespeare should be read with the view of carnival in mind.

According to Bakhtin, the idea of carnival is indispensable in understanding Renaissance literature because people of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance lived two lives: one was the official life, and the other the non-official life. They were usually subjected to hierarchical order that was very strict, serious and full of terror. Yet, for about three months of the year, they lived the carnival life that was free, full of disorder, and laughter. He thinks the lives of the people at that time were very terrifying, so laughter was necessary to overcome the terror. Bakhtin says that we can see the spirit of carnival everywhere in that period. For instance, in the field of literature, it was customary for people to make parodies of serious canons including the Bible. Especially, in the Renaissance, laughter that emerged from the depths of folk culture "played essential roles in creation of such masterpieces of world literature as Boccaccio's *Decameron*, the novels of Rabelais and

Cervantes, Shakespeare's dramas and comedies and others."<sup>12</sup> Contemporaries of Rabelais and Shakespeare understood the atmosphere of carnival but people have forgotten it with the passage of time. Bakhtin says this is why we should understand the carnival sense of that time.

First of all, before we examine Bakhtin's idea of carnival, we should identify the term, "carnival." He defines the meaning of the word and gives the reason he chooses it :

We give here a broadened meaning to the word "carnavalesque". As a special phenomenon, carnival has survived up to our time...it still preserved certain fundamental traits in quite clear, though reduced, form...This permits us to use precisely the epithet "carnavalesque" in that broad sense of the word. We interpret it not only as carnival per se in its limited form but also as the varied popular-festive life of the Middle Age and the Renaissance.<sup>13</sup>

In this paper, words related to carnival, "carnavalesque," "carnivalistic," and "carnival" will be used in this sense.

Let's examine what "carnival" really means according to Bakhtin. He tries to explain carnival sense in *Rabelais* several times, but the explanation is so broad and complicated to sum up and too attached to Rabelais that we will consult the other book. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin gives us an outline of the idea by dividing it into four categories and using grades of carnivalesque that increase step by step. The first carnival category is "free and familiar contact among people." The key concept of it is, "people who in life are separated by impenetrable hierarchical barriers enter into free familiar contact on the carnival square."<sup>14</sup> There, people speak and behave freely. For instance, the language, hawking and abuse of marketplace are included in this category. The second category is "eccentricity." In the first category, Bakhtin says people become free and equal in carnival. In addition, it is also the place for working out "new mode of interrelationship between individuals... The behavior, gesture, and discourse of a person are...thus from vantage point of non-carnival life become eccentric and inappropriate."<sup>15</sup> In this

category, people behave, as they like, so sometimes their behavior can be viewed as out of line from the point of view of the official life. The third category is "carnivalistic mesalliances." In this category, "A free and familiar attitude spread over everything : over all values, thought, phenomena, and things... Carnivals brings together, unifies, weds, and combines the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low...the wise with the stupid."<sup>16</sup> In other words, the carnival image "strives to encompass and unite within itself both poles of becoming or both members of antithesis."<sup>17</sup> People in carnival supposed to live, to some extent, "life upside down," "life turned inside out," or "on the reverse side of the world." The fourth category is the ultimate level of carnivalesque : "profanation : carnivalistic blasphemies, a whole system of carnivalistic debasing and bringing down to earth." This means : "the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract ; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity."<sup>18</sup> In *Rabelais*, Bakhtin calls the category "degradation" that is the essential principle of "grotesque realism."<sup>19</sup> This category includes parodies on sacred texts and sayings.

#### **Masques in *The Merchant of Venice***

We will examine the masques for which all of the characters in Venice except for Antonio and Shylock are preparing for.<sup>20</sup> According to Bakhtin, masques have a lot to do with carnival. During the preparation, the Venetians talk about feasts that have also a lot to do with carnival. In fact, this preparation lasts from the beginning of the story to Act 3, which helps the stage to be in a mood of festival. In *Dostoevsky*, Bakhtin regards masques as a weak type of carnival :

As early as the Renaissance a festive court masquerade culture begins to develop, having absorbed into itself a whole series of carnivalistic forms and symbols (mostly of an externally decorative sort). Later there begins to develop a broader line of festivities and entertainment (no longer limited to the court) which we might call the masquerade line of development ; it preserved in itself a bit of license and some faint reflection of the carnival sense of the world. Many carnival forms were completely cut off

from their folk base and left the public square to enter this chamber masquerade line.<sup>21</sup>

We know what Venetian masques are really like from the conversation in Shylock's house. According to Peter Burke, "The place of carnival was the open air in the city center...Carnival may be seen as a huge play in which the main streets and squares became stages, the city became a theater without walls...In fact there was no sharp distinction between actors and spectators."<sup>22</sup> We can be sure the masques of Venice are typical of those that were performed at carnival in European countries :

What! are there masques? Hear you me, Jessica :  
Lock up my doors ; and when you hear the drum,  
And the vile squealing of the wry-neck'd fife,  
Clamber not you up to the casements then,  
Nor thrust your head into the public street  
To gaze on Christian fools with varnish'd faces,  
But stop my house's ears, I mean my casements ;  
Let not the sound of shallow foppery enter  
My sober house.<sup>23</sup>

(2. 5. 28–35)

According to Shylock's description, the people who take part in the masques walk around the streets wearing fool's costumes with their faces painted and beating drums. Burke also says : "People wore masks, some with long noses, or entire fancy dress" in carnival.<sup>24</sup> It is understandable for Shylock to warn Jessica to close the door and windows because "the maskers were often licensed to burst into private houses."<sup>25</sup> Imagine Act 5, scene 6, the Venetians gather in front of Shylock's house with their faces heavily painted in their costumes of masques. Some of them had to wear the polka dotted clothes of fools and Lorenzo disguised Jessica as a torchbearer. Even though the Elizabethan stage was very simple, the audiences had to be able to ascertain the festival mood from this scene.

If we carefully examine the play, we will notice that the stage is filled with the elements of the festival, except for scenes concerning Antonio and Shylock. For instance, the signs of "feast" and "festivals" that are connected with carnival are strewn throughout Act 1. The play starts with the melancholy of Antonio, and

then a money matter arises between Antonio and Bassanio in the foreground, so it is difficult to see that other characters are busy preparing for masques in the background. The Venetians real purpose is to release Jessica from her father's house on festival night. They plan to organize a group of masques to use the disorder of the festival in order to achieve that purpose. It can be seen that the Venetians are afire with the plan and always thinking about the masques in their lines. When Bassanio meets Salerio and Solanio, they talk about their feast just after greeting : "Good signiors both, when shall we laugh?" (1.1. 66). And when they say good-bye, Lorenzo confirms the meeting place for their feast: "but at dinner-time, I pray you, have in mind where we must meet" (1.1. 70–73). In *Rabelais*, Bakhtin devotes one whole chapter to banquet images of Rabelais saying : "Feasting is part of every folk merriment. Not a single comic scene can do without it."<sup>26</sup> Burke also says : "There were three major themes in Carnival, real and symbolic : food, sex and violence. Food was the most obvious." Preparing the masques, the Venetians mention feasts : "we are stay'd for at Bassanio's feast" (2.6.48), and Basanio says to his servant: "Return in haste, for I do feast to-night" (2.2.163). We can understand what Bassanio's feast is like from his lines to Gratiano : "I would entrust you rather to put on / your boldest suit of mirth, for we have friends / that purpose merriment" (2.2.192–194). They look forward to his feast to make much ado.

### **Carnivalistic elements of *The Merchant of Venice***

As mentioned above, the story begins with the mood of festival and it continues to Jessica's escape in Act 2 scene 6. The carnivalistic festival is evident on the stage in front of the audience. Besides this, many other elements, not only in the lines but also in the behavior of the players indicate the relation to carnival. We will examine such images in the play consulting Bakhtin's study.

In Act 3 scene 1, Solanio and Salerio talk about what happens to Shylock after his daughter has run away from him. In this drama, they play the roles of narrators. Sometimes they explain the story, span the gap in our knowledge of the story, and teach us how to look at characters. Even though he is confused or outraged and his gestures are exaggerated, the

behavior of Shylock is very eccentric. Such eccentric behavior belongs to the second category of four categories Bakhtin defines. In this category, people behave, as they like, so sometimes their behavior can be viewed as out of line from the point of view of the official life.

Sol : I never heard a passion so confus'd,  
 So strange, outrageous, and so variable,  
 As the dog Jew did utter in the streets :  
 My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter!  
 Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats!  
 Justice! the law! my ducats, and my daughter!  
 A sealed bag, two sealed bags of ducats,  
 Of double ducats, stol'n from me by my daughter!  
 And jewels! two stones, two rich and precious  
 stones,  
 Stol'n by my daughter! Justice! find the girl!  
 She hath the stones upon her, and the ducats.'  
 Sal : Why, all the boys in Venice follow him,  
 Crying, his stones, his daughter, and his ducats.  
 (2. 8. 12-24)

Here, Shylock behaves as if he is in carnival. As mentioned above, Burke says that : "the place of carnival was the open air in the city center," and that : "people sang and danced in the streets," and that a procession was one of three elements of carnival.<sup>27</sup> Shylock is also seen to "utter in the streets" and he heads a procession followed by a lot of boys crying out.

The court scene is also filled with images of carnival. Shylock and the Venetians, especially Bassanio and Gratiano, burst out into a storm of abuse there. This un-parliamentary language gives the stage a carnivalistic atmosphere. These abuses belong to the second category. In *Rabelais*, Bakhtin calls them the languages in marketplace and devotes one chapter investigating them in *Gargantua*. In the court scene, first Shylock praises Portia : "A Daniel come to judgment! Yea, a Daniel! / O wise young judge, how I do honour thee!" (4. 1. 220-221), "O noble judge! O excellent young man!" (4. 1. 242), and "Most learned judge! A sentence! come, prepare!" (4. 1. 300). On the other hand, after Portia defeats Shylock, Gratiano insults him by repeating what he said before : O upright judge! Mark, Jew : O learned judge (4. 1. 309-10), and "A Daniel, still say I ; a second Daniel! I thank

thee, Jew, for teaching me that word" (4. 1. 336-7). Such exchanges of asperities are not proper in a solemn court of justice. Normally a man like Gratiano would be ejected from a real court. The court of this play is more like a marketplace than a court. Besides this, the judge is a woman disguised as a man. This situation is not suitable for a serious or real court but for a court in carnival.

All of the women characters of this play, Portia, Nerissa, and Jessica are at times disguised as men. We can categorize their cross-dressing to the third category. Cross-dressing was one of the typical oxymoronic combinations in carnival. "Carnival costume allowed men and women to reverse roles."<sup>28</sup> Portia and Jessica play the roles of tricksters in this play. First, they are captured in their father's house, but once they are liberated, they, then, pass across the border, beyond the difference of the sexes. We will discuss them in detail later.

The fourth category of carnival sense of the world is degradation. Bakhtin shows a case where people "bring the conversation down to a strongly emphasized bodily level of food, drink, digestion, and sexual life."<sup>29</sup> We find this type of degradation in Act 1 scene 2, where Portia talks with Nerissa about her suitors. They are all noble men from famous families in Europe and Africa, but Portia brings them down to bodily level. Regarding the Neapolitan prince, "that's a colt indeed... I am much afraid my lady his mother played false with smith" (1. 2. 39-43). His mother is brought down to the level of her sexual life. Falconbridge, the young baron from England and the duke of Saxony's nephew are also criticized at bodily level. Portia criticizes Falconbridge because he is suited oddly and the young German because he is a drunkard.

Another scene of degradation can be found, this time, with regard to God. In fact, it is a very typical feature of carnival. Bakhtin states that there were parodies of almost all the sacred books including the Bible in the Renaissance.<sup>30</sup> In Act 3 scene 5, Lancelot talks to Jessica about religious matters. He says Jessica is damned because her father is a Jew. However, if she is a bastard, she can be saved ; but in this case, her mother's sin comes upon her. He insists, therefore, her damnation is inevitable. She quickly rebuts him that she will achieve salvation because Lorenzo will make her a Christian. He answers that if

Christians increase, the price of pork will increase. The religious talk should be serious, but Lancelot is always making a burlesque of religious matters.<sup>31</sup> Only a fool whose character is carnivalistic is allowed to have such conversation.

People in carnival lived in the world upside down, as Burke says : "the festival... was opposed to the everyday, a time of waste precisely because the everyday was the time of careful saving,"<sup>32</sup> The waste of money that belongs to Bakhtin's third category is nothing to be blamed in carnival. Bassanio is an impoverished aristocrat, but he doesn't cease his extravagant ways of spending money. His lavish use of money drained him of not only his wealth but also put him into debt with Antonio : "Tis not unknown to you, Antonio, / How much I have disabled mine estate, / By something showing a more swelling port / Than my faint means would grant continuance" (1.1.122–125). He admits he wastes money, but he doesn't seem to regret it because he asks Antonio for a loan again, and his new plan is to make up the debt with a loan. However, he is never accused of lavish spending in this play,<sup>33</sup> and Jessica also spends the money that she steals from her father, but only Shylock is shocked by it, and his anger is expressed comically as we examined. Why aren't they accused of wasting money? It is because such an attitude to waste is very similar to that of carnival. Maybe it could also have something to do with the characters themselves, but if they are supposed to be in carnival, they cannot be accused. In carnival, waste is not to be looked down on, but rather to be praised.

### **Carnivalistic structures of *The Merchant of Venice***

We have examined the lines, sentences, and the behavior of the players that are influenced by carnival sense of the world in *The Merchant of Venice*. Here we will examine the carnivalistic structures of the play because we can see some plots and the relation of characters of the play that are similar to the ceremonial process of carnival.

Bakhtin sums up features of the ancient Menippean satires that are influenced by the carnivalistic sense. One of them is "a three-planed construction," that is, Olympus, earth, and the nether world and this construction influenced medieval mystery plays.<sup>34</sup> There are three worlds in this play, too : Belmont is a

world of fairy tales, dreams, or heaven. Venice is the real world, and the house of Shylock is the nether world because both Jessica and Lancelot call it "hell."

It will be suggested here that the ups and downs of Shylock's status during the play are very similar to "the mock crowning and subsequent decrowning of the carnival king."<sup>35</sup> According to Bakhtin, people of the Middle Ages and Renaissance chose a "carnival king" that was a king only during the carnival. Bakhtin says that this ritual is necessary to the carnival type of festival because it involves the basic concept of carnival, that is, "the pathos of shifts and changes, of death and renewal."<sup>36</sup> Moreover, a carnival king was usually chosen from slaves, fools or those who were outcast from society or at the bottom of society.<sup>37</sup> At the end of the carnival, the mock king was inevitably dethroned.

Venetian society also had such people who suffered from discrimination, for instance, slaves: "You have among you many a purchas'd slave, / Which, like your asses and your dogs and mules, / You use in abject and in slavish parts, / Because you bought them" (4.1.90–93). In this play, Jews are other members of the Venetian society who are discriminated against. We can understand how much they are discriminated against, from Shylock's lines :

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, shall we not revenge?  
(3.1.52–60)

In these lines, Shylock protests that Jews are human beings as the Venetians are. As Greenblatt says, these lines also show how large the difference is between Jews and the Venetians.<sup>38</sup> Even though Shylock is at the bottom of society, he happens to have a chance to kill Antonio. In addition, since his right is completely legal, even the Duke of Venice can't stop him : "twenty merchants, / The duke himself, and the magnificoes / Of greatest port, have all persuaded with him; / But

none can drive him from the envious plea / Of forfeiture, of justice, and his bond" (3.2.278–282). It can be said that the Duke is the most powerful person in the society. At least during the period from the bankruptcy of Antonio to the court scene, the life of Antonio depends on Shylock's will. We can say that Shylock has more power than the Duke over Antonio's life. However, his power over Antonio is temporary. Eventually, he is defeated and leaves the court. Ruth Nevo urges us to notice these lines: "it will be noticed that he, as it were, dismembers himself."<sup>39</sup> The images of the rending of Shylock's body remind us of "a carnival dismemberment of the protagonist of the comic play."<sup>40</sup> For instance, the typical course the carnival dummy of winter in our time is to be mocked, beaten, torn to pieces and burned.

Bakhtin nominates the devil as an example of a carnivalistic character.<sup>41</sup> Devils weren't terrible, but rather comical. In medieval England, the devil in mysteries was a comic character because he was eventually defeated, so audiences didn't have to be afraid of him. Shylock also has characteristics of the devil of medieval mysteries. Lancelot calls him the devil: "... I should be ruled by the fiend, who, (saving your reverence) is the devil himself. Certainly, the Jew is the very devil incarnal" (2.2.24–26). Salanio also calls him the devil: "Let me say 'amen' betimes, lest the devil cross my prayer, for here he comes in the likeness of a Jew" (3.1.19–20). Moreover Jessica calls her house hell. These images of Shylock could have reminded the contemporary audiences of the devil in mysteries.

The images of the devil and a mock king surround Shylock. The contemporary audiences noticed them easily, and this may have caused them to regard him as a character that had to be defeated in the end. Therefore, even in the scene when he was ready to cut the flesh from Antonio, they probably knew that Antonio would be saved and that Shylock was supposed to be defeated eventually.

As we have seen above, *The Merchant of Venice* is very rich in carnivalistic elements in lines, costumes, behavior of the characters and structures. I'd like to suggest that the contemporary audience had to immediately notice the elements that worked at a symbolic level, and regarded that this play was a festive comedy, so all of the characters are supposed

to behave as they do in carnival, as Barber suggests: "there is always a sense of solidarity about pleasure, a common embracing the merry-makers in the play and the audience, who have gone on holiday in going to a comedy."<sup>42</sup>

## NOTE

- 1 Jay L. Halio, Introduction to *The Merchant of Venice*, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1994), 58–83.
- 2 Graham Midgley, "The Merchant of Venice: A Reconsideration." *Essays in Criticism* (Mr F. W. Bateson, 1960); rpt. in *A Casebook: The Merchant of Venice*, ed. John Wilders (New York: St. Macmillan, 1969), 193
- 3 Ruth Nevo, *Shakespeare's Comedy of Love* (London: Methuen, 1980), 122.
- 4 Midgley, 204-205.
- 5 Walter Cohen, "The Merchant of Venice and the Possibility of Historical Criticism." *English Literary History*, 49 (1982) 765–89; rpt. in *New Casebooks: The Merchant of Venice*, ed. Martin Coyle (New York: St. Martin's Press), 47–50.
- 6 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 275.
- 7 Barber points out *The Merchant of Venice* is a kind of a festive comedy, too: "Initially there is a rapid, festive movement by which gay youth gets something for nothing, Lorenzo going masquing to win Jessica gilded with ducats, and Bassanio sailing off like Jason to win the golden fleece in Belmont". C.L. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1959), 168.
- 8 Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 62.
- 9 Neil Rhodes, *Elizabethan Grotesque* (1980), 121–122.
- 10 Barber continues: "The play's large structure is developed from traditions which are properly theatrical; it is not a theatrical adaptation of a social ritual. And yet analogies to social occasions and rituals prove to be useful in understanding the symbolic action...Shakespeare...developing a style of comedy that makes a festive form for feeling and awareness out of all the theatrical elements." Barber, 166.



- 11 Rhodes, 2–3, 101–102.
- 12 Ibid., 72.
- 13 Ibid., 217–218.
- 14 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. C. Emerson (University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 123.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid., 176.
- 18 Ibid., 123.
- 19 Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 18–19. In works of Rabelais and other Renaissance writers, there are many "images of the material bodily principle," and Bakhtin calls such peculiar types of images that are the heritage of folk culture "grotesque realism." It is an aesthetic concept that differs sharply from that of following ages.
- 20 The second known record was performance at the court of James I on Shrove Sunday 1605. The fact gave the influence of carnival to the stage: "Some have suggested that *The Merchant of Venice* is in fact set during Shrovetide and Lenten month that follows. Certainly the masquing discussed by Lorenzo, Graziano, and the others in Act 2 suggests the period of carnival." Halio, 59.
- 21 Bakhtin, *Dostoevsky*, 130–131.
- 22 Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London: Temple Smith, 1978 ; revised and rpt. Hampshire: Ashgate, 1999), 182.
- 23 All references are to John Russell Brown ed., *The Merchant of Venice* (London and New York: Methuen, 1955).
- 24 Burke, 183.
- 25 Ibid., 182.
- 26 Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 279.
- 27 According to Burke, three elements are "a procession," "some kind of competition," and "the performance of a play of some kind." Burke, 183–184.
- 28 Burke, 190 ; Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 411.
- 29 Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 20.
- 30 Ibid., 86–88.
- 31 Cohen, 60.
- 32 Burke, 178.
- 33 Gross says borrowing money was nothing to be ashamed at that time: "Nor would the Elizabethans have found anything incongruous in the idea of an aristocrat or near-aristocrat living on borrowed money." John Gross, *Shylock: Four Hundred Years in the Life of a Legend* (Chatto and Windus, 1992; New York: Touchstone, 1994), 52.
- 34 Bakhtin, *Dostoevsky*, 116.
- 35 Ibid., 124.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Stephen Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 43.
- 39 Nevo, 132.
- 40 Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 202.
- 41 Ibid., 41.
- 42 Barber, 9.