

The Image of Wealthy Jewish Merchants in Elizabethan Drama and National Maritime Anxiety

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The Jewish narratives in Shakespearean drama can be seen as a reflective projection of the playwright's thoughts on the country's maritime industry. In the latter half of the 16th century, the government adopted an expansion policy in the economy, and the Elizabethan government established trade relations with Turkey, which secured the Mediterranean's irreplaceable position in English trade. As a result, English playwrights of the time started to focus on the Mediterranean trade circle to cater to England's trade policy. At the same time, as Jews played a crucial role in the Mediterranean trade circle during this period, these playwrights affirmed the positive role of the maritime industry by endowing Jews with wealthy merchant identities, which alleviated the anxiety of the public towards the maritime industry and catering to the state's trade expansion policy.

Keywords: Jewish narratives, Mediterranean, trade, expansion policy

In the 15th century, advancements in shipbuilding technology, improvements to the compass, and increased accuracy in map-making led to unprecedented development of Europe's maritime industry for over a century. Spain, Portugal, Italy, and the Low Countries were among the initial beneficiaries of this early global trade boom. However, England missed the opportunity in the first half of the 16th century due to frequent changes in religion and the throne. It was not until the reign of Queen Elizabeth I that the maritime industry was valued by the government and the people. Influenced by the trend of international trade and national foreign trade policies, literary works of this period began to write about overseas trade, exotic geography, and so on.

In recent years, European and American scholars have also begun to pay attention to the portrayal of overseas trade and foreign writing in early modern English literary works under the influence of early modern globalization. These studies mainly argue from three perspectives: first, they focus on the impact of expanding early global trade on British literature and culture, exploring the interaction between British trade, cross-national culture, and the New and Old Worlds from a new perspective (Singh, 2009); second, they take a closer look at the Mediterranean trade circle in the literary writing at that time, investigating the multi-cultural communication and collision phenomena in the Mediterranean space that are both substantial and culturally constructive, in order to reveal the new British-Mediterranean cultural interaction model under the influence of early modern globalization (Stanivakovic, 2007); third, they sort out the content of immigrants, cross-national trade, and especially the new disease vocabulary generated by trade in early modern drama texts and mercantilist works

from the perspectives of pathology and economics, thus displaying the economic profile of the country and the world at that time (Harris, 2004). It is not difficult to see that although academia has begun to pay attention to writings about early modern global trade in English literature, few scholars have explored it from a Jewish narrative perspective. In fact, the time when England strengthened overseas trade expansion coincides with the time when the European continent readmitted Jews to return. Therefore, studying the plays about Jewish trade during this period can help to discern the inherent connection between England's overseas trade policy and domestic social trends at that time.

The Image of Wealthy Jewish Merchants and Open Trade Policies

Englishmen for My Money is a story about three Portuguese-British girls who rebel against their Jewish father's wishes and courageously pursue their own happiness. Love, religion, and usury are all the motif of this play. However, in terms of its background setting, whether it is the description of the London Royal Exchange or the depiction of Pisaro's multinational business, overseas trade is an unavoidable and important topic. Recently, scholars have conducted in-depth discussions on the trade scene presented in this play mainly from the perspective of immigrant anxiety (Smith, 2001, p. 171; Harris, 2004, p. 76; Stewart, 2006, pp. 5-81; Bartolovich, 2008, pp. 137-156; Kermode, 2009, pp. 42-43) and Britain's national economic policies (Greenfeld, 1992, p. 37; Baldo, 2016, pp. 51-67) at that time. However, they have overlooked the background of the early modern globalization that swept across Britain at the time when the play was created. If we take the identities of the suitors chosen by Pisaro for his three daughters, who are wealthy merchants from Holland, France, and Italy, as a starting point, and examine the essence of the "Englishness" raised in this play, we can understand the intention of Houghton's creation of this play and glimpse into the attitudes of the British public towards the country's maritime industry at that time.

In the 16th century, the Netherlands (informally Holland), France, and Italy were among the most profitable countries in early modern global trade, apart from Portugal and Spain. In 1492, Columbus discovered the American continent, and two years later in June, representatives from Portugal and Spain signed the famous Treaty of Tordesillas, mediated by the Pope, to divide the new world. From then until 1529, when the Treaty of Saragossa was signed to clarify the ownership of the Pacific, the unknown continents discovered by navigation were divided into the spheres of influence of these two Iberian countries. The Spaniards looked down on business, they only cared about gold and silver. In the following half century, the precious metals mined from the American continent were continuously transported back to Spain, greatly strengthening its national power. As for the Portuguese, they replaced the Arabs in controlling world trade. After defeating the Arabs who controlled the Arabian Sea and the Malacca Strait, Portugal became the actual hegemon in the Indian Ocean. These Portuguese transported a large amount of goods previously shipped from Asia to the West via the old Silk Road back to Europe via the new route. As a result, they almost monopolized the most profitable East-West trade, especially the pepper trade. This marked the beginning of a completely new ocean trade and broke the traditional trade pattern in Europe.

The first to profit were the Low Countries, that is the Netherlands. Portugal was far from Northern Europe, and the main commodities exported from each region—spices and grain, respectively—would spoil after long-distance transportation. Therefore, the Low Countries, located in the middle, naturally became the transit

point for trade between the Iberian Peninsula and Northern Europe. At the same time, in order to counter the Hanseatic League's control of the Baltic Sea, the Dutch opened a shipping route that bypassed Skagen in the North Sea and entered the Baltic Sea, which soon surpassed the overland transportation route from Hamburg via Lubeck. By the 16th century, the Low Countries had become the dominant player in Baltic Sea trade.

France is another country which indirectly benefited from the rise of Spain's economic power. Spain, with valuable precious metals from the New World as a sustained and powerful economic support, gained the upper hand in the Italian Wars, which caused the other two main belligerents, France and the Ottoman Empire reached a military and financial agreements in 1536 to form the famous "the sacrilegious union of the lily and the crescent" alliance to counter it. After the end of the Italian Wars, the Ottoman Empire implemented a series of measures to revitalize the old trade routes, and the Mediterranean returned to prosperity. France took advantage of this alliance with Ottoman to establish commercial and cultural footholds in the eastern Mediterranean and the Near East. Based on the alliance treaty, Turkey provided France with many conveniences in trade, making the south of France the third most densely populated and prosperous area in the Mediterranean at that time. A large part of the goods in the Mediterranean were imported into the Rhone River basin via Marseille.

As for Italy, before the age of great geographical discoveries, it had already been a key trade hub connecting the Mediterranean, Central Europe, and the Nordic regions due to its geographical advantages. These three countries were also the main importers of England at the time. A description of this situation can be gleaned from a widely circulated pamphlet in England in 1581: "There is no man can be contented now with any other Gloues then is made in Fraunce or in Spayne, nor duffle, but is must bee of Flaunders die..... I haue heard within these xl. Yeares when there were not of these Haberdashers that selles French or Millen" (Stafford, 1581, p. 25). From this perspective, it seems that Pizarro was actually using the opportunity of selecting a son-in-law to strengthen his trade network. The correlation between the characters' identities and the external social context implies the current situation of London's overseas economic expansion. At the same time, it conveys two important messages to the audience: first, it is an irreversible fact that London, and even England, is engaged in overseas trade; second, there is a mutually beneficial relationship between Pisaro and the three foreign suitors.

The play also suggests that Pisaro had business dealings with these three regions. In Act 1 Scene 3, at the Exchange, another merchant named Twerson informs Shylock about his ships and mentions:

Towersons: The newes here is, that the English ships, the Fortune,
your ship, the aduenture and good lucke of London
coasting along by Italy Towards Turkey, were set vpon by to
Spanish-gallies, what became of them we know not, but
Doubt much by reason of the weather calmnesse. (Haughton, 1917, pp. 119-120)

After hearing this, Pisaro answered with anger:

Pisaro: what a bots made the dolts neere Italy,
Could they not keepe the coast of Barbary,
Or hauing past it, gone for Tripoly,
Beeing on the other side of Sicily,
As neere, as where they were vnto the Straights:
For by the Gloabe, both Tripolu and it,
Lie from the Straight some twentie fiue degrees;
And each degree makes three-score english miles? (Haughton, 1917, pp. 120-121)

The description of Pisaross ships being attacked by a Spanish fleet near the island of Sicily is not a fictional account but rather based on historical facts. In the 16th century, especially after the Italian Wars, the Mediterranean became the stage for the Ottoman Empire's rivalry with Spain. The Ottoman Empire supported North African pirates in attacking Spanish ships in the Western Mediterranean, while Spain supported the Knights Hospitaller in resisting the Muslim countries' invasion. The two main forces clashed primarily in the narrow sea area between Tunisia and the island of Sicily, which served as the boundary between the eastern and western Mediterranean. Therefore, this area became the most popular spot for pirate and privateer activities in the Mediterranean at that time. However, as Pisaro mentioned, if this area was so dangerous, why would ships still choose this route? The answer is simple. Because this route passed through Italy, the largest trade hub in the Mediterranean at that time. Most of the ships shuttling in the Mediterranean both bought and sold goods and intentionally stopped at commercial ports such as Livorno, Genoa, or Venice to exchange spices, leather, cotton, or coral for metal currency. Therefore, from this perspective, the play is likely to imply that it is because Pisaro had business dealings with Italian port merchants that his crew risked choosing this sailing route despite the danger. Similarly, although the play does not explicitly state that Pisaro had business dealings with the French, Marseille served as a transit station for maritime and river transportation at that time. A large amount of Mediterranean goods were transported from here along the Rhone River to Western Europe. At the time of the Franco-Ottoman Alliance, Pisaro, who was doing business with the Turks, may also need to contact French merchants.

And in another act, Pisaro's eldest daughter Laurentia, when mentioning her Dutch merchant suitor, said: "and when he hath no loue for-sooth, why the hee tells me Cloth is deare at Anwerpe, and the man of Amsterdam haue lately made a law, That noen but Dutch as hee, may trafficke there" (Houghton, 1917, pp. 932-935). Laurentia was puzzled by the fact that her Dutch merchant suitor, who was pursuing her, did not speak any heartfelt words, but instead talked about business topics that were unrelated to love. In fact, from an earlier conversation between Pisaro and another merchant in the Exchange, it was known that Pisario was in the business of clothing, buying clothes in London and then "shipping them directly to Stade" (Houghton, 1917, p. 468). In the 16th century, the Low Countries (especially Antwerp) and the Nordic region were the main sales markets for British woolen textiles and clothing. The Dutch merchant was hinting to Laurentia that their marriage would bring great benefits to her father's business in the Low Countries.

In the play, compared to the foreign merchants who can help Pisaro's overseas business, the three young Englishmen pawned "their liuings and their Lands" to Pisaro, and planned to marry Pisaro's daughters "to possesse their Patrimonies and their Landes againe" (Houghton, 1917, p. 98). Jonathan Baldo pointed out that in England, personal wealth is traditionally defined by land and largely transmitted and enlarged through marriage. Therefore, the plot of the play, in which the three English gentlemen eventually win the women and regain their ancestral property, shows the superiority of inherent tradition of stability over modern trade, which is characterized by liquidity (Baldo, 2016, p. 56). If Houghton's intention in writing the play was indeed to showcase the superiority of England's inherent tradition, then why did the three English gentlemen, who adhered to the traditional way of life in England and did not engage in any international trade, lose their ancestral property in the first place? Likewise, even if they regained their property through marriage, would they not repeat the same mistakes without any means of livelihood? Crystal Bartolovich pointed out that Houghton intentionally

emphasized the nobility of pure English through the mouths of Pisaro's three daughters, and constructed cultural superiority to counteract anxiety about objective market forces (Bartolovich, 2008, pp. 151-152). In the play, Pisaro's three daughters did indeed repeatedly ridicule the foreign merchants' accents and broken English, which became their main reason for refusing to marry them. This, on some level, reveals Houghton's intention to construct the superiority of English culture through language. However, from another perspective, it may be precisely because Houghton knew that Britain could not compete with Italy, France, and the Netherlands in trade and commerce that he had to seek advantages and identity in culture. If this angle is taken into consideration, it would be not difficult to see the shortcomings of the "Englishness" that Houghton intended to imply through the portray of the commercial advantages of the foreign suitors and the poor estate of the three Englishmen.

From other descriptions in the play, it can be inferred that London had already undergone the early stages of globalization and trade, with foreign faces seen throughout the trading markets and discussions amongst merchants revolving around international trade. Even foreign-born merchants of Jewish descent, like Pisario, had achieved some social status due to their wealth accumulated through overseas trade, and their daughters had no shortage of suitors. However, the three young British men did not blend into this trend, as they were not businessmen and had not invested in any overseas trade. Throughout the entire play, their efforts to change their own situation and regain social status were limited to pursuing marriage with the daughters of wealthy merchants. Therefore, through this arrangement, the author is likely suggesting to readers that it was precisely this characteristic of the British youth of being out of touch with the times and not moving forward in the face of social reform, that made Pisario quite contemptuous of them.

The reason why Houghton used the voice of a Jewish merchant to make such a satire against the British people is actually likely related to the "anti-openness, anti-trade" sentiment that swept through British society at the time. Shortly after Elizabeth's accession to the throne, she realized that a strong economic foundation was a prerequisite for an independent foreign policy. As a result, the government increased its openness, introduced advanced foreign science and technology to develop industry, supported adventurous merchants and companies, and expanded overseas markets. However, as foreign goods flooded in and foreign cultures infiltrated, the people began to feel anxious about the country's active participation in the maritime industry, and voices criticizing transnational trade gradually emerged within the country. Sarah Warneke identified 1570 as a watershed year, pointing out that from that year on, the British public's criticism of overseas travel and trade became increasingly prominent. The literary world also produced a large number of works that either showed the drawbacks of early global trade, such as John Lyly's "Midas" (1587), which satirized the troubles brought to the country by foreign vehicles and travelers, or depicted foreign lands as wicked and lascivious, such as Laurence Twine's "The Patterne of Painefull Adventures" (1594), as well as the popular English translation of "Myrrour of Knighthood" (1585). These works all revealed the authors' anxiety about the hidden drawbacks of British overseas economic expansion. Therefore, Houghton, through the creation of this script and using Pisario's voice, was likely trying to remind the contemporary that although overseas trade has its hazards, if one misses the opportunity, perhaps even the Jewish people who were once most despised can eventually surpass them.

Mediterranean Trade and National Maritime Concerns

In fact, most of the plays involving Jewish characters during this period expressed concern and support for the government's involvement in overseas business to some extent. This can be proven by analyzing the selection and portrayal of Jewish characters and the depiction of Mediterranean trade in these plays.

Before the 16th century, the emphasis on religious difference was a significant feature in English literary works involving Jews. Popular folk songs such as "The Jew's Daughter" and Chaucer's "The Prioress's Tale" in *The Canterbury Tales* all alluded to the bloody murder of Little St. Hugh of Lincoln in 1255 by Jews for religious reasons. However, with the British government's active involvement in overseas trade, Jewish characters in plays were often given a new identity as wealthy merchants, almost exclusively from Mediterranean coastal countries. Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* and Zariph in *The Travels of the Three English Brothers* were wealthy usurers in Venice, Barabas in *The Jew of Malta* was a wealthy merchant in Malta, Gerontus in *The Three Ladies of London* was a usurer from Levant, and Benwash in *A Christian Turned Turk* was a Jewish merchant from Tunisia. As mentioned earlier, Pisaro, although lived in England, concentrated his business activities in the Mediterranean region. From the depiction in these plays, it is evident that the playwrights of this period were to some extent concerned with Jewish merchants in the Mediterranean. In particular, Marlowe had a clear and accurate depiction of Mediterranean trade in *The Jew of Malta*.

The Jew of Malta begins with the protagonist Barabas entering the counting house, facing a large pile of gold, setting the stage for his wealth. The following monologue allows readers to glimpse further into the wealth of this Jewish merchant:

Barabas: So that of thus much that returne was made:
 And of the third part of the Persian ships,
 There was the venture summ'd and satisfied.
 As for those Samnitesm and the men of Uzz,
 That bought my Spanish Oyles, and Wine of Greece,
 Here have I purst their paltry silverlings. (Malow, 1995, p. 5)

This passage describes the wide range of Barabas overseas trade, spanning from Spain at the west end of the Mediterranean to the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in the east, with stops in Italy and Greece along the way.

In the following part Barabas declared that:

Barabas: They say we are a scatter'd Nation:
 I cannot tell, but we have scrambled up
 More wealth by farre then those that brag of faith.
 There's Kirriah Jairim, the great Jew of Greece,
 Obed in Bairseth, Nones in Portugall,
 My selfe in Malta, some in Italy,
 Many in France, and wealthy every one:
 I, wealthier farre then any Christian. (Malow, 1995, p. 14)

Barabbas mentioned the distribution points of the Jewish community, which overlapped with the major ports of the Mediterranean at that time. In the 16th century, northern Italy was the richest area in the Mediterranean, with a concentration of extensive economic activities and some of the highest population density cities. There were also some large cities in the eastern Mediterranean: the two largest were Constantinople and

Cairo. The southern part of France was the third most densely populated and prosperous region in the Mediterranean. These prosperous trading areas were also the Jewish settlements, and the Jewish wealthy merchants mentioned by Barabbas were “coincidentally” scattered in these locations.

From this it can be seen that when writing *The Jews of Malta*, Marlowe basically respected historical facts, both in the portrayal of the Jewish merchants represented by Barabbas and in the distribution of their ethnic groups. In the preface to the first volume of *The Complete Works of Marlowe*, Roma Gill also noted that “Marlowe seems to have known a lot about the island of Malta, its geography, and its recent history”, she said:

In the play’s first scene Barabbas, its protagonist, defines Malta’s precise location. Looking out from his counting-house, he can see the weathervanes and his ‘Halcions bill’, which are indicating a wind direction ‘East and by-South’. From this quarter the wind will bring his ‘Argosie from Alexandria’ safely ‘through our Mediterranean sea’, passing the island of Crete (‘by Candie shoare’) to harbor in ‘Malta Rhode’. (Gill, 1995, p. x)

It is clear that Marlowe was well aware that Alexandria was located southeast of Malta and that this port was an important transit point for the trade of goods between East and West at the time. He also knew that one had to pass through Crete in the Mediterranean on the way from Alexandria to Malta. Even in the most advanced maps of the time, such as *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* (1570), Malta was just a small dot. From the entire play, it can be seen that Marlowe seems to have a certain understanding of the political and economic situation in Malta at the time.

Lisa Hopkins points out that whether it is the setting of Jewish merchants being taxed and forced to convert in the play, or the description of the slave market and brothels on the island of Malta, they are consistent with the actual situation in Malta at the time (Hopkins, 1997, pp. 15-16). Gill attributes Marlowe’s knowledge of Malta to his identity as a spy and agent. After the Levant Company was established in 1581, Britain successfully resolved years of resentment with the Ottoman Empire, and Spain, a Catholic country, became Britain’s primary enemy. In order to counter it, Britain gradually established a spy network in the Mediterranean, and Marlowe’s information about Malta should have come from this (Gill, 1995, p. xv). Lisa also points out that Sir Edward Stanley, the uncle of Marlowe’s patron Ferdinando Stanley when he was writing *The Jew of Malta*, was the only British person who participated in the rescue of the besieged Maltese people led by Chevalier de Robels in the Great Siege of Malta in 1565 (Hopkins, 1997, p. 5). It seems that Marlowe did have the opportunity to obtain political and economic information about Malta through these channels.

The reason why these playwrights focused on Mediterranean trade and chose to portray the image of Jewish wealthy merchants in the Mediterranean may be precisely to cater to England’s foreign trade policy at that time. In the early years of Elizabeth I’s accession to the throne, due to missing the opportunities of the Age of Discovery, England’s foreign trade network was greatly restricted, and the overseas sales, especially woolen products, which is the largest contributor to government revenue, had to rely on the Netherlands for export. Therefore, the safety of this region was directly related to the stability of England and the government’s revenue. However, since the second half of the 16th century, frequent wars on the European continent, such as the religious wars from 1545-1555, the Dutch Revolt, and the war with Spain, directly led to a severe trade crisis in Antwerp, and all commercial operations were almost at a standstill.

Therefore, whether from the perspective of seeking new overseas markets or enhancing economic strength to ensure national security, England needs to expand its trade and seek trade partners. Since the 1560s, the

Elizabethan government has been committed to opening up foreign markets for England, and the government and Adventurers at the time first turned their attention to the North Sea and the Baltic Sea regions. However, this region had significant overlap with England in terms of primary traded products. The Atlantic trade circle was controlled by Spain, and Portugal had almost monopolized the new route from Cape of Good Hope to India. The English government also attempted to explore the possible routes to the East through the Northwest and Northeast, but all ended in failure. Therefore, the Elizabethan government focused its trade center on the Mediterranean. English merchant ships appeared again in the Mediterranean in 1573. Records only show that there were three English ships in Livorno, but the number increased to 16 in 1592-3, which demonstrates the level of English activity in the Mediterranean trade circle during this period. In order to reduce the cost of obtaining goods from the East and get rid of the influence and constraints of foreign intermediaries on English overseas trade, England crossed the Strait of Gibraltar and entered the Mediterranean directly to establish contact with Turkey. In 1580, England and Turkey signed the first foreign rights agreement, and the following year the Turkey Company was established. Eleven years later, the Levant Company was formed based on this company, which made Turkey no longer the endpoint of English commercial adventurers' expansion to the East, but a new starting point or transit station for their further advancement to the Far East. Until the end of the 16th century, English ships circumnavigated the Mediterranean to Muslim and Christian regions, and the footsteps of the English spread across the various land routes leading to Europe or the Indian Ocean.

As English merchants gradually entered the Mediterranean trade circle, Jewish merchants were also entering their most glorious period of activity in this sea area. After losing the last foothold in Western Europe, the Ottoman Turkey became the last refuge for Jews. Turkey was essentially a country specialized in military and agriculture, and it despised living a stable life, so almost all of the empire's trade was left to Jews, Armenians, and Greeks. As early as the 15th century, non-Muslims under the Ottoman Empire, including Jews, Armenians, Greeks, and Slavs, had established active bases in Venice, Ancona, and Lwow (Inalcik & Quataert, 1994, p. 208). By the mid-16th century, the position of Ottoman Jews in the business field had reached its peak, and they almost completely controlled the Ottoman Empire's foreign trade (Goodblatt, 1952, p. 47).

Compared to the Ottoman Empire, where Jews were widely spread, 16th-century England did not have openly identified Jews. Even though there was a Jewish community in London, and the authorities had no knowledge of it. So, in England, for the contemporaries, one of the few ways to learn about Jews was reading the Bible. Although the Puritans emphasized and promoted the reading of the Old Testament, it was difficult for people to connect the image of the Israelites in the Bible with contemporary Jews. For the people of England during this period, it was more accurate to say that Jews were a projection of Christian imagination of paganism, rather than a real ethnic group. In the Christian-dominated world, Jews were long deprived of their voice and always appeared in various narrative writings as a terrifying pagan other. However, as Elizabeth I's government shifted the overseas trading center to the Mediterranean, English merchants encountered Jews in the real world for the first time in nearly three centuries. The early wave of global trade brought about by the Age of Discovery made these former marginalized others suddenly become the commercial focus for the English merchant. If early global trade achieved the transformation of the role of Jews in the objective world, then literature, as a subjective tool for reflecting and embellishing history, reconstructed and reshaped the Jewish image in the imaginative world.

Conclusion

As an island nation surrounded by the sea, England had a unique geographical advantage in the early global trade sparked by the Age of Discovery. During this period, the English realized the importance of the ocean to England. As a result, ocean exploration and overseas trade became the key to the country's prosperity. The different classes of Elizabethan society may have had different beliefs and political stances, but they shared a common understanding of the inherent relationship between the ocean and the country's prosperity. Since the binary hostile relationship between Christianity-Judaism before the Discovery no longer applied to the context of transnational trade characterized by fluidity and compatibility, the playwrights of this period, faced with the increasingly close commercial contacts between the government and the Mediterranean world, decisively abandoned the bloody heathen image of Jews in their previous literary works. They focused on the Mediterranean trading circle to cater to Britain's trade policy. At the same time, they affirmed the positive role of the maritime industry by endowing Jews with wealthy merchant identities, in order to alleviate the anxiety of the people about the negative factors of the maritime industry. This portrayal, on the surface, recognized the identity of Jewish merchants, but in essence, it affirmed the ocean trade. It was ocean trade that allowed Jews to break away from their past identity as bloody heathens and successfully transform into merchants. Through this portrayal, these playwrights clearly conveyed the message that the maritime industry should, and has become, an important component of British cultural identity.

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