**‘Certainly the *Muslim* is the very devil** **incarnation’: Islamophobia and *The* *Merchant of Venice***

**Abstract**

In this paper, we examine Shakespeare’s sixteenth-century play, *The Merchant of Venice*. Anti-Semitism is a key theme in this play. The well-known central character, Shylock, is a Jewish man ridiculed and victimised because of his identity. Much literary research has been done on the anti-Semitism of the play, and many social studies have compared anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, but scarcely any research brings a Shakespearean play from the sixteenth century into the context of twenty-first century Islamophobia. There are a number of similarities between the manner in which Shylock is ostracised and the current victimisation that Muslim communities are facing in the UK. With this in mind, we explore contextual and thematic elements of this play and argue that it is possible to apply the way Shylock is unfairly victimised on stage because of his identity as a Jew to the treatment of some Muslims today. In particular, the treatment he faces shares stark similarities with the types, impacts and consequences of Islamophobic hate crime today.

**Key Words:** Islamophobia; Anti-Semitism; Shakespeare; Hate Crime; Muslims; Jews; Merchant of Venice

**Understanding Islamophobic Hate Crimes**

There is no universal definition of a hate crime, although we have a myriad of interpretations and examples of terms that have been used to define what might constitute one. In the United Kingdom, a hate crime is any criminal offence perceived, by the victim or any other person, to be motivated by a hostility or prejudice based on a person’s actual or perceived race or ethnicity, religion or belief, disability, sexual orientation, or transgender identity. This equates to any illegal act which intentionally selects a victim because of those prejudices against the victim.[[1]](#footnote-1) This type of crime can also be committed against a person or property and the victim does not have to be a member of the group at which the hostility is targeted. Indeed, the notion that an offender must be motivated by hate for there to be a hate crime is problematic. Perry argues that a hate crime involves ‘acts of violence and intimidation, usually directed towards already stigmatized and marginalized groups’ and that through it, offenders pursue a level of control and power.[[2]](#footnote-2) Chakraborti and Garland note how Perry’s definition extends to all ‘members and groups’ who are victimised and marginalised and thus ‘recognizes that hate crime is not a static problem but one that is historically and culturally contingent, the experience of which needs to be seen as a dynamic process, involving context, structure and agency’.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The UK Government has defined anti-Semitism as ‘a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews.[[4]](#footnote-4) Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities’. Whilst incidents of anti-Semitism have also often correlated with international and regional events, the term Islamophobia has come under increasing scrutiny after the rise in anti-Muslim hate crimes, particularly post 9/11 and more recently following events such as the Paris attacks in 2015. Indeed, the UK Government has also linked anti-Semitism and Islamophobia in the new hate crime action plan.[[5]](#footnote-5) Both types of crime have increased after specific incidents and have led to a rise in hostility and reported hate crimes committed against communities.[[6]](#footnote-6) Whilst there is no universal interpretation or definition of Islamophobia, the debate about what the term means is often stoked up by people’s fears about Muslims. The fact that hate crime is not simply motivated by hate increases the complexity of what constitutes Islamophobia.

The Runnymede Trust has described Islamophobia as unfounded hostility towards Muslims, resulting in fear and dislike of Muslims. Marginalisation of Muslim communities appears to be rooted in the narrative that Islam is a barbaric faith and that Islam and the West are involved in a clash of civilisations[[7]](#footnote-7). This belief often creates a space whereby Muslims are targeted and vilified. Islamophobic views are shaped by a ‘closed set’ of narrow views on Islam and Muslims, which has helped contribute to the ‘othering’ of Muslim communities through discriminative practices. The Forum against Islamophobia and Racism argue that Islamophobia constitutes fear and hostility against Muslim communities.[[8]](#footnote-8) However, they confine Islamophobia to physical attacks such as abuse and targeted violence against Muslim communities or buildings.[[9]](#footnote-9)

It should be noted that Islamophobia did not only come into existence post 9/11. Muslims as a group have suffered from marginalisation and faced high risk of being victims of racially motivated crimes prior to this, including after the Cold War.[[10]](#footnote-10) However, recent events tend to show a sharp increase in reprisal attacks against Muslims. For example, McGhee found an increase in racist attacks reported to the police because of the way Muslims looked.[[11]](#footnote-11) Allen and Nielsen report that following the events of 9/11, Muslims were frequently abused and harassed because of their visible identities.[[12]](#footnote-12) They also found that the visual identifiable characteristic of a hijab meant that Muslim women are more likely to be targeted than Muslim men.

In this paper, we argue that William Shakespeare’s sixteenth-century play, *The Merchant of Venice*, can be used to elucidate equivalent examples of what we would currently term Islamophobic hostility. In this essay, the playfunctions both as an artistic representation of anti-Semitism and a representatively anti-Semitic artifact. We will note how the central character, Shylock, who is a Jewish man, is ridiculed and victimised because of his identity. If we were to replace Shylock with a modern-day Muslim character, there would be a number of similarities between the way in which Shakespeare’s character is unjustifiably ostracised and the current victimisation that Muslim communities are facing in the UK. In fact, in 2016, Australian theatre director John Bell stated that he would like to see a Muslim version of Shylock on the stage in order to further ‘reflect modern-day discrimination’.[[13]](#footnote-13) Our paper makes an important contribution in helping us understand how an important sixteenth-century play which is performed in theatres and movies globally and is part of many educational curricula, can be used to understand what constitutes anti-Semitism, and in turn, what constitutes Islamophobia today. We do this by noting the role or relevance of a number of contextual and thematic elements related to the play. While the thematic elements of the play emphasise Jewishness, we also take Kenneth Gross’s lead that social contexts continue to shape and alter further readings of the play’s thematic resonances. In fact, Gross points out that a context of anti-Semitism can allow the play to become a kind of anti-anti-Semitic text.[[14]](#footnote-14) In this essay, then, the social context of modern-day Islamophobia leads us to a discussion of the thematic depiction and significance of faith-related hate crime in the play.

We will highlight four key areas that emerge from the play: 1) the emphasis placed on Shylock and Muslims’ perceived lack of integration; 2) the depiction of Shylock and Muslims as extremists; 3) the normalisation of ridiculing Shylock and Muslims; and 4) the fact and way that Shylock and Muslims suffer hate crimes. These discussions show that Shakespeare not only offers a salutary illustration of how an environment that nurtures hate crime works, but also illustrates the wider consequences that a culture of hatred can produce.

***Shylock and Muslims need to Integrate***

Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice* around 1596, with the first edition appearing in 1600.The (1600) frontispiece specifies ‘as it hath been divers[e] times acted’, suggesting its popularity. It was also performed for King James I in 1605; he ordered another performance of it a couple of days later.[[15]](#footnote-15) There are, of course, contexts external to the stage that affected both the writing and reception processes during Shakespeare’s time. These contexts characterise Jews as lacking nationalism and go as far as accusing them of treachery. Queen Elizabeth I’s physician-in-chief, Roderigo Lopez, is a prime example. Lopez was a New Christian as his father, physician to Portuguese king João III, was born a Jew but underwent a forced baptism in 1497.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Forced conversions and baptisms are thought to have begun as early as the fourth and fifth centuries when Christianity was spreading as an established religion of the Roman Empire. The practice became particularly frequent from the sixteenth century, when Jews around Europe, particularly in Spain, Portugal and Italy, were taken from their ghettos in order to be converted.[[17]](#footnote-17) For instance, in the fifteenth century, three-quarters of Spanish Jews were converted.[[18]](#footnote-18) Indeed, in Venice, though not in London, there existed Jewish ghettos with an oft-imposed night curfew.[[19]](#footnote-19) There were not many Jews in England: after their expulsion from the Kingdom in the late thirteenth century, the number of Jews was negligibly small and almost all would be conversos. Yet there were still stereotypes and associations with evil and greed. It is thought that Lopez ‘secretly adhered to Judaism’, though he outwardly conformed to the Church, including baptising all five of his children.[[20]](#footnote-20) In 1581, he was appointed physician to the Queen and her household, but in 1594, was convicted of trying to kill her – high treason – and hanged. The *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* goes as far as saying that ‘Shakespeare responded by writing and staging *The Merchant of Venice* with its murderous Jewish character, Shylock, who hates all Christians’.[[21]](#footnote-21) What is certain is that Shakespeare’s audience would have known about Lopez’s story.

Aside from the direct impact on how Jews were viewed at the time in England, as unpatriotic and disloyal, it is also worth noting that Shylock’s forced conversion at the end of the play should come as little surprise given the existence of forced baptisms and feigned adherence to the Church. Indeed, even after Shylock is forced to convert – ‘He presently become a Christian’ (4.1.383) – he is asked whether he is ‘contented’.[[22]](#footnote-22) But even then, despite becoming a Christian ‘presently’, or immediately, he is referred to as a Jew: ‘Art thou contented, Jew?’ (4.1.389). Much like the characters around Shakespeare’s Othello – the Muslim Moor who converts to Christianity – are unable to look beyond his allegedly savage-like nature, Shylock remains a Jew even after conversion. Indeed, Lopez reverts to a Jew in common consciousness when he allegedly tries to kill the Queen. Part of the problem may also be the fact that Lopez had taken such a prestigious job.

While some Jews were indeed wealthy, it is vital to note that outside of any fictional world, they were ‘central to the economic life of many European countries, not least Venice’.[[23]](#footnote-23) Shylock might even be a legitimate businessman: though he is exercised about Antonio undercutting his business, we do not know whether he is always a loan shark. In fact, Shylock is also agitated whenever he is dubbed a ‘usurer’ (3.1.43), partly because it is an offence. The insinuation, though, is that Shylock’s people are taking over: not only contravening societal norms by lending with interest but controlling the region’s economy on their own terms.

In the same respect, debates around Islam and Muslims have often been based on notions of ‘creeping’ Shariah. Against the current backdrop of Brexit, the threat of creeping Shariah has provoked a backlash against Muslims who are sometimes deemed to be taking over the country and stealing jobs. This current discourse has played upon people’s fears of the ‘other’, which has heightened the sense of anxiety, fear and hatred towards Muslims. As Lopez and Shylock are in part ostracised for being wealthy, Muslims have faced similar patterns of prejudice. Such notions are embedded within the discourse of integration and the rhetoric that Muslims and foreigners are ‘taking our jobs’.

This differentiation between white British citizens and British-Muslim citizens has led to questions about the wider role of Muslims in society and the extent of their British nationalism. Stories concerning gender segregation, sexual grooming, plans to Islamise school curricula and choices of clothing have led to a steady flow of stories that portray Muslims as folk devils and the ‘enemy within’: living in the UK on their own terms. These subliminal messages are used in certain sections of the media to provide a narrative that creeping Shariah will lead to the Islamisation of Britain. Such views are underpinned by the far-right who also use such incidents to justify the view that immigrants are taking over. For example, the organisation Show Racism the Red Card, which monitors and tackles negative and racist attitudes, found that young people are more likely to feel abusive towards Muslims and immigrants because they view them as taking their jobs. Specifically, the study found that more than a quarter (28%) of 6,000 questioned pupils believed that jobs were being taken by foreign workers and more than a third (35%) agreed or partly agreed with the statement ‘Muslims are taking over England’ (Schools, 2015).

Shylock’s utterance about Antonio, ‘He hates our sacred nation’ (1.3.44), is therefore intended to be ironic, since the social and fictional contexts suggest that it is Jews, like Lopez and Shylock, who hate the nation, be it England or Italy. The statement is also an indication that Shylock does not consider himself a native, but rather, his allegiance is to his own Jewish lineage: the ‘great nation’ of Genesis (12.2). Shylock’s striking admission about Antonio –an aside to the audience – ‘I hate him for he is a Christian’ (1.3.38), is a suggestion that the addition of creedal religious allegiance to national allegiance upsets the latter.

This seeming lack of allegiance can present a barrier to the acceptance of Shylock in his society. The character’s integration is consistently put into question. Only when he considers giving an interest-free loan is he perceived to be integrating; not because of the action itself, but because he has completed an action that fits with Christian mannerisms.[[24]](#footnote-24) Shylock uses ‘kind’, perhaps one of the more complicated terms in the play, when he agrees to loan: ‘This is kind I offer’ (1.3.138). Here, the meaning is not limited to ‘kindness’ – as in the two lines that follow – but the pun on ‘kind’ also implies ‘type’. The term indicates the ‘inherent’ nature of a person, as well as ‘a group of people united by shared beliefs’ (Oxford English Dictionary, 2016). The pun confirms that Shylock’s less welcome traits are a part of his Jewish nature, itself a ‘type’, and that with this action, he has done something expected of Christians.

Bosniak (2000) has identified four distinct categories of citizenship and integration: citizenship as legal status, citizenship as rights, citizenship as political activity, and citizenship as identity/solidarity. For British Muslims, their role and status as citizens is often used side by side with questions about allegiance and national identity. The interrelationship between religious, ethnic and national identity has also shaped questions about the role of Muslims and their social identity. These include questions about religious conservatism, national and international allegiances and the notion of the Islamic Ummah.[[25]](#footnote-25) There is an assumption that Muslims show allegiance to the global Ummah in the first instance, before their own country. Hopkins and Kahani Hopkins (2009) believe that this forms part of the new ‘cultural units’ that exist within social grouping and which is inherent in all types of individuals and communities. They refer to the way in which the cognitive representation of a person and their self leads to group membership. This form of essentialism also lends itself to multiple identities which are used to form a British Muslim identity.

A clear issue, though, is that if Muslims are deemed part of the global Ummah, then the actions of extremists implicate Muslims as part of the wider problem. They also risk being construed as belonging to a universal brotherhood that promotes political and fundamental religious beliefs. This defines Muslims as part of an Islamic political order that does not recognise national allegiance. Such views are part of the foundation claiming that Islam and the West are incompatible.

But aside from questions of allegiance, discussions of integration are not always focused on ideology. *The Merchant of Venice* alerts us to this, as concerns with integration in the play are largely concerned with seemingly nominal issues. When Jessica, Shylock’s daughter, converts to Christianity, the comic servant Launcelot comments that it will ‘raise the price of pork’ (3.5.32). This is intended as a comic moment, but it is also a comment on the common concern of social integration: pre-conversion Jessica is defined by her dietary restrictions.

Much like the play’s constant references to Jewish dietary restrictions, Muslims have faced questions about halal slaughter, the Muslim equivalent to kosher. Concerns about halal meat have shown in a steady flow of news stories. For example, Pizza Express were recently criticised for using halal chicken without notifying customers. The objection to halal slaughter is based on the perception that it involves inhumane methods of killing the animal. The debate on halal slaughter continues to portray Muslims as the ‘other’. In the case of pork, Norway’s integration Minister urged Muslims in Norway to adapt to the country’s culture, stating: ‘Here we eat pork, drink alcohol and show our face’.[[26]](#footnote-26) Her comments proceed a wider sentiment across Europe that Muslims have not integrated into society because of dietary habits and restrictions.

Indeed, Shylock’s integration is also called into question most clearly when he is invited to eat with the Christians. He replies: ‘I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you, and so following, but I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you’ (1.3.28-32). Stephen Greenblatt (2010) notes that there is no textual confirmation that Shylock is talking to Antonio, so his response could be interpreted as a stark aside to the audience. In that case, the attack on audience members is even more direct, particularly because of the clear use of pronouns: the juxtaposition of the pronouns ‘I’ and ‘you’ further confirms a binary opposition and othering. In the current context, Shylock’s response would suggest that he is happy with daily, largely economic dealings: going to the supermarket, doing business, engaging in conversation or small-talk, nodding to people in the park, being one of the commuting community, and so on. But his refusal to eat, drink, or pray with fellow citizens is the point at which his integration fails. This emphasis on food, drink, and prayer is significant.

Indeed, Muslims are often viewed as outsiders because of food (non-halal meat, pork), drink (alcohol), as well as prayer habits (five times a day). Drinking alcohol has often been referred to as an affirmation of integration and research suggests that not drinking in social contexts calls into question notions of normality and Britishness.[[27]](#footnote-27) When it comes to prayer, in 2009, a national ban in Switzerland was issued on the construction of mosque minarets in a referendum that passed with a clear majority. In France, the Government issued a ban on praying in Paris streets which French Muslims did when mosques were full. In 2013, British television station Channel 4 took the decision to broadcast the Muslim call to prayer during Ramadan. For Muslims, the call to prayer is a time of critical reflection, and a means of getting closer to God spiritually. However, the reaction included headlines such as ‘Ramadan a ding-dong’ and ‘Holy month bigger than the Jubilee’, beginning a process of scaremongering and sensationalized headlines that portrayed Muslim affairs in a negative light. The programme received 2,011 complaints about its 4Ramadan season with 1,658 specifically about the broadcast of the daily call to prayer. In its annual report, Channel 4 stated that: ‘The level of Islamophobia we encountered with the 4Ramadan season was unexpected, though much of it came from communities that were either very polarised or very un-diverse’.[[28]](#footnote-28)

As Shylock is ostracised for arguments about his perceived lack of integration, Muslims today have also faced a comparable backlash. Following terrorist incidents in particular, British Muslims face questions about their loyalty, religious values, identity and status. UK policy has often moved towards a need to address the causes of terrorism and improving community cohesion. According to the new Casey review on multiculturalism, there remains a lack of integration from Muslim communities. Casey found issues around social integration and a wide divide between communities.[[29]](#footnote-29) The complications around cohesion and multiculturalism can lead to a fractured society in which Muslims have to balance issues of integration and diversity.

***Shylock and Muslims are both Extremists***

To Shakespeare and his contemporaries, the term ‘integration’ did not have the same connotations as it does today. Some lexical choices, though, present stimulating comparisons. The most obvious of these, perhaps, is included at the start of the play’s subtitle on the frontispiece of the first quarto (1600): ‘With the **extreme** cruelty of Shylock the Jew’.[[30]](#footnote-30) Shylock’s extremity is, on the face of it, in reference to his violence. Shakespeare also associated the term ‘extreme’ with violence, as in *Timon of Athens* in which the statesman Alcibades asserts that ‘To kill, I grant, is sin’s extremest gust’ (3.6.54).[[31]](#footnote-31) Shakespeare most often uses the word negatively, as exemplified in ‘Sonnet 129’: ‘lust / Is perjured, murd’rous, bloody, full of blame, / Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust’ (ll. 2-4).[[32]](#footnote-32)

Similarly to Shylock, Muslims have been labelled as ‘extremists’ who need to be monitored. While Shylock’s extremity functions as an intensifier for his specific cruelties, the term ‘extremism’ has now become nebulous, with many different interpretations and definitions.[[33]](#footnote-33) It has also been over-represented and misused. In the UK, tackling this threat from extremism has led to a wave of counter-terrorism policies and anti-terrorism legislations. There is a polarized debate about what the term extremism means amongst academics, policy makers and politicians. Critics argue that the word is far too broad and converged with problematic associations to terms such as ‘violent extremism’; ‘fundamentalism’; ‘radicalisation’; ‘jihad’; ‘Islamism’ and ‘terrorism’.[[34]](#footnote-34) The British Government has defined extremism in a way that links directly to British values: a‘vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs’.[[35]](#footnote-35)

A study conducted between 2001 and 2008 examined almost a thousand newspaper articles and found that the majority of news coverage about Muslims post 9/11 was negative.[[36]](#footnote-36) Using statistical analysis of stories and language they found that at least two thirds of newspaper articles were focused on extremism. These stories had used specific words to depict Muslims in an overtly negative fashion and were a product of a wider anti-Muslim prejudice found across British newspapers. The common nouns used in relation to British Muslims were ‘extremist’, ‘Islamist’, ‘suicide bomber’ and ‘militant’; the common adjectives included ‘radical’, ‘fanatical’ and ‘fundamentalist’. The research also found that 36% of stories about British Muslims between those periods were exclusively about terrorism, while more recently, they had been focused around religious and cultural barriers between Islam and British culture and around the implementation of Shariah law. Extremism is a vague concept and one that by implication has the potential to marginalise and stigmatise a specific community.

Stereotypes about Jews in the centuries leading to Shakespeare’s play included their depiction as violent extremists and murderers. For instance, in the fourteenth century, Jews were accused of causing the calamitous Black Death through poisoning wells, leading to their persecution around Europe. Systematic accusations of well-poisoning continued into Shakespeare’s time without solid evidence. Shakespeare’s contemporary playwright, Christopher Marlowe, wrote *The Jew of Malta* (1592), in which his Jewish character Barbaras says satirically: ‘Sometimes I go about and poison wells’ (Marlowe, 2008), though it is perhaps worth noting that the comparative realism of Shakespeare’s Shylock has made critics consider Shylock a more damaging representation.[[37]](#footnote-37) Generally, the more seemingly religious would have been the most prone to accusations, perhaps a result of key Protestant theologian Martin Luther’s pitiless treatise, *On the Jews and Their Lies* (1543).[[38]](#footnote-38) Luther (1483-1546) wrote a number of anti-Semitic tracts, some calling for Jews to be killed and others calling for them to be exiled.

<<Figure 1>>

A Jew poisoning a well, from Pierre Boaistuau, *Certaine secrete wonders of nature* (1569), p. 26 verso, STC 10787 (Folger Shakespeare Library).

Recently, Muslims have faced potentially discriminative practices and been viewed through the prism of security and terrorism laws. In many cases, those deemed to be outwardly religious are more likely to be viewed as dangerous. This could include showing outward signs of being more religious; these have often been used as potential markers of terrorists. For example, in 2015, a ten-year-old Muslim boy was referred to the Prevent scheme on suspicion of extremism after he complained about not having a prayer room.[[39]](#footnote-39) 415 children, aged 10 and under, have been referred to deradicalisation programmes in England and Wales over the last four years.[[40]](#footnote-40) Also, the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015, identifies broad ranging criteria that may indicate someone’s vulnerability to terrorism, but the guidance is ambiguous. The result is that outward assumptions take more prevalence. For instance, recently reported students have often been visibly identifiable as Muslims.[[41]](#footnote-41) In 2014, Birmingham was part of the ‘Trojan Horse’ affair, which began with an anonymised letter that claimed hard line ‘Islamists’ were plotting to take over a number of faith schools. However, in two recent cases, both teachers have had their bans overturned.[[42]](#footnote-42) There is some connection to be made with Shakespeare’s play, in which Shylock’s daughter, Jessica, converts to Christianity. In a way, the comedy invites the audience to celebrate this child being ‘saved’ (3.5.17) from her ‘extremist’ household.

***Making Fun of Shylock and Muslims***

With equivalent contexts like Lopez and the works of Luther in mind, Shylock’s ‘extreme cruelty’ is used as a justification for the events of the play, which in turn, is described on the first page title as a ‘comical history’.[[43]](#footnote-43) Indeed, the play is classed as one of the Bard’s comedies, so the audience might be expected to ridicule Shylock. Their ridicule is directly and specifically related to his Jewishness. In fact, in the Quarto (1600) and Folio (1623) editions, the character is often not named Shylock before his speeches, but simply ‘Jew’.

Speech prefixes are variegated: some pages have ‘*Shy.*’, some ‘*Iew.*’, and some have a mixture (see Figure 2). Some scholars have argued that these changes in speech prefix are motivated: for example, it is ‘Shylock’ when he addressing his friend Tubalt, but ‘Jew’ when he is vowing to take revenge.[[44]](#footnote-44) It has also been suggested that Shakespeare wrote ‘Jew’ throughout but that it has been edited,[[45]](#footnote-45) and there is no evidence that Shakespeare confirmed them as they are in the Folio edition.[[46]](#footnote-46) One theory also suggests that Shakespeare’s manuscript actually used ‘*Iew.,*’ or ‘*Iewe*.,*’* throughout, but that the compositor ran out of the italic, capital *I* types, so used ‘Shy.,’ or ‘Shyl.,’ instead (Kennedy, 1998). What is clear, though, is that ‘Jew’ is used before Shylock’s speeches, even if not uniformly. Indeed, Shylock is likely not intended to be just a Jew, but as Harold Bloom notes, ‘*the* Jew’.[[47]](#footnote-47)

<<Figure 2>>

Here, Shylock’s speech prefixes are both ‘*Jew’* and ‘*Shylock*’. From the First Quarto(1600), p. B2 vers, STC 22296 (Folger Shakespeare Library).

According to Baroness Sayeeda Warsi, Islamophobia has ‘passed the dinner table test’ (BBC News, 2011). In other words, it has become more socially acceptable and uncontroversial. One way in which this sense of pervading intolerance is depicted is through the normalisation of ridiculing Muslims. There have been several high-profile instances: the videos of Geert Wilders (*Fitna*, 2008) and Sam Becile (*Innocence of Muslims*, 2012), both ridicule Muslims because of their beliefs. These videos are part of a wider narrative of stereotyping Muslims as extremists as well as sexual predators. Weaver found that Islamophobic jokes circulated significantly on the Internet. Through a discourse analysis of both anti-Muslim and anti-Semitic jokes, Weaver outlined the connections between humorous and serious racism. He also found that online humour expresses two logics of racism: social inclusion and social exclusion. He argues that stereotypes are used to create ‘acceptable’ levels of bigotry shrouded in jokes:

Joking is a culturally and historically specific activity…In this sense, ‘joke’ is used as a descriptive and analytic rather than a normative term. To identify a ‘joke’ does not endow it with positive characteristics. Rather it identifies a structural incongruity that provokes laughter in certain contexts.[[48]](#footnote-48)

Weaver also identified a number of U.S. websites from the far-right and sampled 101 anti-Muslim jokes and 272 anti-Semitic jokes to compare the stereotypes. He found that anti-Muslim jokes were part of a wider cultural racism and particularly associated Muslims with 9/11 and suicide bombing.[[49]](#footnote-49) Further examples involve satire: the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo published two cartoons of three-year-old Aylan al-Kurdi’s corpse on a Turkish beach. One depicted what appears to be Jesus next to the drowned boy with the caption: ‘Proof that Europe is Christian. Christians walk on water - Muslim children sink.’ The use of such cartoons and linking them to religion for satirical purposes was deemed grotesquely offensive and is part of an increasingly normative anti-Muslim culture. It shares similarities with the normalised ridicule of Jews through the centuries, including Shakespeare’s play.

***Shylock and Muslims who suffer Hate Crimes***

When it comes to hate crime, there are two important points to be raised. First, quite simply, the character of Shylock is the subject of hate crime. Second, there is not much direct verbal or physical abuse directed at him on stage during the play; instead, he recalls it. Essentially, Shakespeare’s play provides an unexpectedly precise confirmation about the key features of a hate crime. Namely, a hate crime can have a lasting effect, and importantly, a hate crime is not only a tangible phenomenon, but an overriding atmosphere or feeling of being discriminated against. In this light, Shylock confirms that he recalls being the subject of verbal abuse, as well as the physical abuse of being spat at and kicked:

You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog,

And spit upon my Jewish gaberdine,

And all for use of that which is mine own. …

You, that did void your rheum upon my beard

And foot me as you spurn a stranger cur

Over your threshold, …

Say this: ‘Fair sir, you spat on me on Wednesday last,

You spurned me such a day; another time,

You called me dog …

(1.3.107-109, 113-115, 121-123)

The verbal abuse includes being called a ‘misbeliever’ and ‘dog’. The starker physical abuse is being spat at. The phrase ‘void your rheum upon my beard’ means to ‘evacuate or clear bodily mucus’; in other words, ‘spit phlegm’.[[50]](#footnote-50) Antonio has spit on Shylock’s ‘Jewish gaberdine’, with which Shakespeare likely meant to describe ‘a garment worn by Jews’, as well as on his ‘beard’. Both the garment and beard are related to Shylock’s religion specifically and are outward signs of his Jewishness.[[51]](#footnote-51) He is also kicked, as shown in ‘foot me as you spurn a stranger’. The term ‘stranger’ here links to the otherness that Shylock feels, and was also used to refer to foreigners, immigrants, and refugees. The verb ‘spurn’ is particularly striking, as unlike ‘foot’ which implies simple kicking, ‘spurn’, mentioned twice in this speech, means kicking ‘something disliked or despised … esp. in a scornful or disdainful manner’.[[52]](#footnote-52) There is also a consistency to these hate crimes, confirmed by phrases like ‘another time’. When Shylock mentions ‘Wednesday last’, he could be saying something like ‘the other day’, indicating possible regularity, but he could also be showing that he remembers the day vividly. The very fact he is recalling these events further confirms Shylock’s feeling of victimisation.

Much as Shylock is victimised because of his visibility as a Jewish man, it is the visibility of Muslim identity that most often triggers anti-Muslim attacks (Zempi, 2014). In this context, two of the main visible indicators are the same as Shylock’s, namely an Islamic cultural dress, or a beard. Studies have found that people are convinced that it is their distinctive Muslim appearance that makes them a target of anti-Muslim hate. A female participant in a Tell MAMA (Measuring Anti-Muslim Attacks) study stated that: ‘I reverted to Islam three years ago when I was 40 years old, and within a week I started wearing the hijab and abaya. Prior to wearing the hijab and abaya, I’ve experienced no problems at all’. Similarly, Tell MAMA found male participants argued that being a visible Muslim acted as a trigger for provocation. One the male participants in that study stated: ‘I am identifiable as a Muslim because I have the full beard, I wear a turban and I also wear the Islamic clothes’, adding ‘I feel that is why I am targeted’.[[53]](#footnote-53) Even actress Lindsay Lohan felt that she was profiled at an airport for the first time, the first time she travelled while wearing a headscarf.[[54]](#footnote-54)

In Shakespeare’s play, it is also worrying that Antonio’s response to Shylock is simply that he would do it again: ‘I am as like to call thee so again, / To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too’ (1.3.125-126). In part, the result is further retaliation from Shylock. His harsh contract with Antonio appears to be a result of cumulative frustration from previous events that the audience have not witnessed. This retaliation is a key conclusion of Shylock’s most famous speech:

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, subjectto 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? (3.1.53-60)

This powerful, pathos-inducing speech explains the basic ludicrousness of discrimination. But even the moment when Shylock most clearly grasps our sympathy, his conclusion transforms into a justification of revenge on the basis of just reprisal. It could be argued that Shylock sees little need for further explanation since he is reiterating the Old Testament belief in ‘an eye for an eye’, a contrast with the New Testament’s ‘turn the other cheek’, the latter presenting direct contrast to the conclusion of his speech:

And if you wrong us shall we notrevenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. 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 youteachme I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction. (3.1.60-66)

Moreover, the general lexical choices when characters refer to Shylock are also negative throughout the play, such as ‘this cruel devil’ and the assertion that ‘Certainly the Jew is the very devil incarnation’ (4.1.213; 2.2.24). The term ‘devil’ is also used to describe the Moroccan suitor to Portia, about whom she says: ‘If he have the condition of a saint and the complexion of a devil, I had rather he should shrive me than wive me’ (1.2.124-126). Portia’s inability to see past skin colour is telling. It confirms that there are general sentiments of racism present when anybody different comes into Venice. Indeed, the Moroccan is immediately judged on his skin colour, or ‘complexion’ (2.1.1), in the very first line of the second Act. The lexical similarity confirms similarity in the treatment of these two ‘others’ on the stage.

Indeed, in addition to the significance of ‘trigger’ events and the visibility of Muslim identity, a process of racialisation also takes place, whereby this identity is defined on the basis of the individual's race rather than their religion exclusively.[[55]](#footnote-55) Awan and Zempi state that: ‘anti-Muslim hate crime is understood as a “new” form of racism, which can be attributed to Islamophobic, anti-Muslim attitudes as well as to racist sentiments’.[[56]](#footnote-56)

Like Antonio, much of the media is unapologetic about its anti-Muslim content. The use of Islamophobia and negative stories about Muslims in popular culture and media has attracted publicity. For example, research on US films has found that Arab Muslims are often depicted as being ‘evil’ characters. These movies have often been used in narratives about the war on terror.[[57]](#footnote-57) According to Hanes and Machin , ‘trigger’ attacks can also be influenced by media coverage of these attacks, which can lead to a driver of hate crimes against a particular group in society.[[58]](#footnote-58)

In the case of the Woolwich terror attack, as the events of the day began to unfold, the BBC’s political correspondent, Nick Robinson, was criticised for describing the attackers as having a ‘Muslim appearance’ in the BBC news bulletin. The BBC received 43 complaints. A study into the impact of the media and Muslims in the UK found that the BBC had often illustrated a bias, distortion and negativity in the way they reported stories concerning Muslims.[[59]](#footnote-59) Indeed, serious questions were raised as to what it means to say that someone is of a ‘Muslim appearance’. Is it someone, like Shylock, who has a beard? Or is it, like the Moroccan suitor, someone of a darker complexion?

The Press Complaints Commission also received over 83 complaints about print media coverage of the Woolwich incident. Much of that criticism, was based on the images, pictures and headlines used. Clearly, the print media, played an important role in the dissemination of the news and in setting the news agenda of the day. It provided a platform by which social, political, world affairs and other policy-related issues were interwoven into a wider public debate about society. Coverage of this type of news story can play a role in the construction of behaviours and opinions.

The Leveson Inquiry was set up by the British government to try to create better government oversight and press regulation. One of the key findings that emerged from the Inquiry was the demonisation of Muslims in the press which had often stereotyped them as being extremists and terrorists. .[[60]](#footnote-60) The Inquiry did make a number of recommendations that included tighter monitoring of internet sites and blogs where there was evidence of anti-Muslim prejudice emerging. However, at the time of writing, these recommendations have not yet been implemented.

***Conclusion***

Taras argues that Islamophobia has become a term that is misunderstood and lacking in clarity, adding that it entails ‘the spread of hostile public attitudes towards Muslims’, adding that ‘the spread of Islamophobia is based on a conviction that the faith is posing a threat’.[[61]](#footnote-61) Importantly, this sense of securitisation and fear is about how visual representations of Islam have become synonymous with people who fear the pervading sense of history, which certainly includes anti-Semitism as the most obvious and continuous crime.

We are entitled to ask the simple question of whether anti-Semitism would ‘sell’ during Shakespeare’s time. During the playwright’s lifetime, *The Merchant of Venice* was sold very widely compared to many of his other plays.[[62]](#footnote-62) Allegations against the Queen’s physician – not unlike 9/11’s effect on Hollywood – presented Shakespeare with what McAdam describes as ‘an irresistible “commercial” opportunity’.[[63]](#footnote-63) Given the establishment of devoted acting companies, the construction of purpose-built and public theatres, and the upsurge in printing, Shakespeare and his contemporary playwrights and theatre tycoons were in a glamorous business. Shakespeare’s references to Jews, and indeed the Orient, involve an underlying economic implication. Bringing exotic objects and characters from other cultures into plotlines and narratives – which also meant feeding stereotypes – was in some ways an economic approach from a writer and company conscious about ratings and profit.

It is perhaps a case in point that Shylock does not get to explain himself as much as we would like: of the twenty scenes in the play, he is only present in five.[[64]](#footnote-64) In fact, we may forget that the very title of the play, *Merchant of Venice*,is a reference to the Christian merchant of Venice: Antonio, not Shylock. It is beyond doubt that the play, despite its complexity, includes undeniable and stark elements of anti-Semitism. Renowned literary critic Harold Bloom once noted in the *New York Times*: ‘I am hurt when I contemplate the real harm Shakespeare has done to the Jews for some four centuries now’.[[65]](#footnote-65) And in Nazi Germany between 1933 and 1939, it was performed over fifty times, twenty of these in 1933, Adolf Hitler’s first year as Chancellor.[[66]](#footnote-66) If a creative writer produced something similar today, they would be criticised and likely prosecuted. But if both Shylock on the stage and Muslims today are presented as extremists who are not loyal and refusing to integrate, who can be justifiably ridiculed, and who are the subjects of hate crime, then how different is the unjustifiable anti-Semitism that Shakespeare’s famous character suffers from the increasingly normalised Islamophobic rhetoric surrounding us today?

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