

**ARNOLD WESKER'S THE MERCHANT: RE-READING OF
SHAKESPEARE'S *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE***

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ABSTRACT

In the contemporary British drama, it is a common practice for playwrights to challenge Shakespeare in the course of their careers. Wesker is one of these playwrights who rewrote Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. Being a Jew, Wesker does not accept relationships between Antonio and Shylock in Shakespeare's play. They are living in a Christian society where money-lending is considered as a sinful act. What is important in this belief system is that one must earn money by producing something. Although they need to sign a bond according to the law, in Shakespeare's play they do not sign a contract but the money-lender, Shylock, demands a pound of flesh from Antonio if he cannot pay three thousand ducats in due time. Through this contract he aims to take revenge from Antonio who belongs to a Christian community and mistreats him due to his position in the society. Wesker is against the way Jews were presented in Shakespeare's play. He wrote *The Merchant* to show that it is not fair to show Jews in this way. Wesker thinks that the Jews did not deserve Shakespeare's treatment as he did not know the life in Venice at that time. Once again Wesker tries to stress the impossibility of establishing universal peace as long as racial and religious discrimination continue to exist in the world.

Key words: Arnold Wesker, contemporary English Theatre, *The Merchant*, Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*

**ARNOLD WESKER'İN *MERCHANT*'I: SHAKESPEARE'İN
VENEDİK TACİRİ OYUNUNUN YENİDEN ELE ALINMASI**

ÖZET

Çağdaş İngiliz Tiyatrosunda oyun yazarlarının çoğu yazarlık süreçlerinde Shakespeare'e meydan okuma yolunu seçmişlerdir. Shakespeare'in *Venedik Taciri* oyununu yeniden ele alan Arnold Wesker da bu oyun yazarlarındandır. Kendisi de yahudi olan Arnold Wesker Shakespeare'in oyunundaki Antonio ve Shylock arasındaki ilişkide insana özgü bir şeylerin olmadığına işaret eder. Oyunun karakterleri, borç para vermenin yasak ve günah olduğu Hıristiyan bir toplumda yaşarlar. Bu inanç sisteminin egemen olduğu toplumda kabul gören anlayış, bir şeyler üretmek yoluyla para kazanılmasıdır. Bu kişiler arasındaki ticaret kanunları yoluyla düzenlenmeli ve her iki tarafın imzalayacağı bir anlaşma olmalıdır. Shakespeare'in oyununda taraflar herhangi bir anlaşma imzalamaya gitmez, bunun yerine borç para veren Shylock, borcunu zamanında ödememesi durumunda Antonio'nun vücudunun istediği bir yerinden bir miktar eti kesip alacaktır. Wesker ise Shakespeare'in oyununda Yahudilerin bu şekilde anılmasına karşı çıkar. *Merchant* oyununu, Yahudilerin Shakespeare'in *Venedik Taciri*'nde resmedildiği gibi olmadığını göstermek için yazar. Aynı zamanda Wesker, bu dönemde *Venedik*'te yaşamayan Shakespeare'in Yahudileri bu şekilde ele almasını onaylamaz.

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Arnold Wesker's The Merchant: Re-Reading Of Shakespeare's The Merchant Of Venice

Bunu yapmakla Wesker ırk ve din ayrımcılığının sürdüğü sürece evrensel bir barıştan söz edilemeyeceğinin altını çiziyor.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Arnold Wesker, Çağdaş İngiliz Tiyatrosu, The Merchant, Shakespeare, Venedik Taciri

It will not be wrong to claim that Arnold Wesker is one of the most influential contemporary British playwrights in England. His trilogy- *Chicken Soup with Barley* (1958), *Roots* (1959) and *I'm Talking about Jerusalem* alone can explain his influence in Modern British drama. Being a member of a Jewish family in England, Wesker experienced the hardship during the problematic years of World War II and produced plays focusing on an ideal way of life for contemporary British society. It is possible to see the reflections of his experiences and ideas in his plays. In addition, Wesker is a playwright who tends to write from his own experience, and as a Jew himself, he set about presenting the experience of living in a Jewish community as he knew it, though his own experience was of course centuries later than Shylock's (Innes, 1992).

According to Wesker, Shakespeare's play, *The Merchant of Venice* carries inhuman aspects regarding the position of the Jews in Venice. With *The Merchant of Venice* "Shakespeare casts a dark shadow in the light of twentieth-century history" (Innes, 1992, p. 120). As Kott (in Altındağ, 2004, p. 4) points out, "the contemporary playwrights need to challenge Shakespeare". As one of the important contemporary playwrights, Wesker decides to rewrite *The Merchant of Venice* with a new perspective. His aim is to reinterpret Shakespeare's work "in the light of modern issues and ideas to reveal the entrapment of the individual" (Altındağ, 2004, p. IV). In Shakespeare's play inhuman aspects were depicted in the relationships between Antonio and Shylock. In the original play Antonio wants to help his close friend, Bassanio, as he needs three thousand ducats in order to be attracted by beautiful and wise Portia, who is the daughter of a wealthy businessman. Since Antonio invested all his money in the goods carried by the ships at sea at the moment, he decided to borrow this amount of money from a Jewish money-lender, Shylock. Shylock hates Antonio because he always mistreats him. In addition, Antonio spat on Shylock and kicked and called him a dog few days ago. With this deal Shylock thinks of taking revenge on Antonio. In this money lending affair he doesn't take any interest from the money he lends but he will get a pound of Antonio's flesh. Shylock expresses his feelings and thoughts about Antonio as follows:

What should I say to you? Shall I not say
Hath a dog money? It is possible
A cur can lend three thousand ducats?

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Fair sir, you spat on me Wednesday last;
You spurn'd me on such a day; another time
You call'd me dog; and for these courtesies
I will lend you thus such money (*The Merchant of Venice*, 1,3, p.430).

Again in *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock continues to express the mistreatments he is exposed to in Ghetto Nuovo as 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 with
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? (*The
Merchant of Venice*, 3, 1, p.438).

Shylock's remarks above are very important as they are the answers to those who make racial and religious discriminations and throw the world into the conflicts and chaos. Although Shylock seems to be right in these remarks, he has burning desire to take revenge on Christians and Antonio. After these remarks he asks "If you wrong us, shall we not revenge?" (p .438). Shylock is aware that taking revenge is not acceptable but he puts blame on the Christians he lives with. He continues to express his feelings and thoughts by saying: "If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that... The villainy you teach me I shall execute" (p. 438). Being rather dissatisfied with Shakespeare's representation of Shylock, Wesker rewrites it to have a better insight into the Jewish money-lender (Altındağ, 2004). Further Altındağ (2004) suggests that "the Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* is reluctant to integrate with the Christian community he lives in but he emphasizes that Shylock is willing to integrate with the community he lives in but his attempts to do so are rejected by the Venetian law due to deeply rooted prejudice against his race" (p. 10).

In the contemporary British theatre it is very common practice for playwrights to rewrite Shakespeare's plays in order to reinterpret them with new perspectives. It is the fact that Shakespeare is able to capture universal aspects of human nature in his portrayal of characters (Altındağ, 2004). Of the contemporary playwrights, Wesker explains the reason why he wrote his version of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* with these remarks: "when , in 1973, watching Laurence Olivier's oi-yoi-yoi portrait of Shylock in Jonathan

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Miller's production at the National, I was struck by the play's irredeemable anti-Semitism. It was not an intellectual evaluation, but the immediate impact I actually experienced" (Wesker in the *Merchant*, p. XVII-XVIII). Moreover, Wesker tries to show the economic basis of anti-semitism as rooted in Shylock's bond as follows:

...because of the need for all dealings with Jews to be contractual, it is in fact Antonio who insists on the bond in order to save Shylock from breaking the law, respect for which was so crucial to the Jewish communities' existence in Venice (Wesker 1971 in Itzin, 1980, p. 113).

According to Itzin (1980) " *The Merchant* was most blatant in minimizing or ignoring the political issues ironically since with Wesker's clever reinterpretation Shakespeare was rooted in the economic basis of anti-Semitism in Shylock's bond"(p.113). Leeming (1983) continues to state three main considerations that she thinks influence Wesker's writing *The Merchant*:

Firstly, the fact that during the Second World War (1939-1945) six million Jews were killed in concentration camps by the Nazis reminds us that persecution of the Jews over the centuries can recur in an even worse form in an age which ought to have become more enlightened. Remembering this, audiences today are uneasy at seeing the Jews presented as an inhuman villain, because they are aware that this sort of portrayal has been used in living memory as an excuse for persecution. Second consideration is that the state of Israel, established in 1948, is involved in military and political conflicts, and international opinion towards it may be influenced by the residues of the old anti-Semitic prejudice. Thirdly, prejudice against the Jews is still common to greater or lesser degree in most societies; affecting the victim's lives adversely without necessarily amounting to outright persecution (in *The Merchant*, p. XVIII).

Due to its political and geological location Venice was a rich and powerful city through trade during the Renaissance. Money-lending was a common trading practice in this city but it was a controversial issue. Many Jews practiced usury, which was considered sinful and forbidden by the Bible. There are also other negative references to these money-lending practices. "In the

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classical world Aristotle had specifically condemned usury as being unnatural-making money out of money, rather than by producing goods” (in *the Merchant* p. XIV). According to Altındağ (2004, p. 6), “Wesker borrows the concept of law, usury and anti-Semitism from *The Merchant of Venice* as the major elements contributing to Shylock”. Lorenzo state this fact as follows: “Money is a dead thing with no seed; it is not fit to engender” (*The Merchant*, p.27). According to Goldhagen (1997 in Hugh, 2000, p. 136) “anti-Semitism begins as a ‘corollary of Christianity’ and no matter how extreme the medieval hatred of Jews would become, it retained its theological focus: the Church wanted not to kill Jews, for they were redeemable, but to convert them”.

In rewriting the play Wesker reveals his present-day feelings about Shylock’s role and he presents him as a consistent character with a questioning mind for his wrongs. While Shakespeare’s Shylock proposes a bond, but he does not mean this merrily, Wesker’s Shylock is sincere in what he thinks about the existence of the bond between friends:

Antonio: You are a good man, old man.

Shylock: Old man-forever! Good- not always. I’m a friend.

Antonio: What shall you want as a surety in the contract?

Shylock: The what?

Antonio: The contract, Shylock. We must draw up a bond.

Shylock: A bond? Between friends? What nonsense are talking, Antonio?

Antonio: The law demands it.

Shylock: Then we’ll ignore the law (*The Merchant*, p. 23).

Unlike Shylock presented in Shakespeare’s play Wesker’s doesn’t think friends need a contract when Antonio asks Shylock to lend him money. Although Antonio insists on drawing a contract and says ‘the law demands it, no dealings may be made with Jews unless by a legal bond, Shylock responds: ‘That law was made for enemies not friends.’ (*The Merchant*, p. 23). In this context Wesker is trying to show the possibilities of friendship across cultural differences. It can be argued that Wesker may have written this play to eliminate the bad effect *The Merchant of Venice* caused on his race. Furthermore, Wesker believes that Shakespeare had very little information about the daily lives in Venice at that time. It is this fact that Shakespeare never mentions the ghettos where the Jews were allowed to live.

Both Shylocks in two plays are trapped and crushed by the legal machinery they themselves set in motion, but in Shakespeare’s play the law fulfills its proper purpose, and in the latter play its destructiveness leads us to question its values (Leeming, 1983). In Wesker’s play it is possible to see the effect of the changes in human behavior. At this point Wesker makes Shylock speak out his reactions as being a Jew:

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Jew! Jew, Jew, Jew! I hear the name around and everywhere. Your wars go wrong, the Jew must be the cause of it; your economic systems crumble there the Jew must be; your wives get sick of you-a Jew will be an easy target for your sour frustrations. Failed university, professional blunderings, self-loathing- the Jew, the Jew, the cause the Jew... (*the Merchant*, p.75).

Wesker's approach to writing a new version of a Shakespeare play is not new in the contemporary British Drama. Several playwrights in contemporary British Drama tried to rewrite some popular plays of Shakespeare's and other classical playwrights. These playwrights in the second half of the twentieth century tend to search for the roots of the current social problems. Of these playwrights two modern playwrights "have written well-known plays with Shakespeare's as starting points- Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is based on *Hamlet*, and Edward Bond's *Lear* is based on *King Lear*. But where Stoppard's play depends for its effect on our knowing the small role his main characters play in *Hamlet*; Bond's and Wesker's plays rework the whole of their originals into new and self-contained units. This is why Wesker retains so little of Shakespeare's dialogue and why *The Merchant* does not depend directly on its predecessor" (in *The Merchant*, p. XXIV).

Since we are all affected by the existing conditions in the society, it would be agreeable for Wesker to be a supporter of peace. He longs for a life which is far away from the noise, racial discriminations, conflicts, wars and difficulties. Wesker's *The Merchant* also represents a view point which is very humanistic. He expresses this from Antonio's mouth:

Justice? For the people of Venice? The people? When political powers rest firmly in the hands of two hundred families? That, though he talks of principle, is what Lorenzo is impatient for, to share that power. You use the people's name, for through their grievances, you'll come to power. One of the grievances is what you call usury. The usurer's a Jew is what you call usury. The usurer's a Jew, and the Jew the people's favorite villain. Convenient! Easy! But the Jew pursues what he hates to pursue in order to relieve us of the sin. Usury must exist in our city, for we have many poor and our economy can't turn without it... (*The Merchant*, p.75).

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As seen in this play, another aspect of Wesker's other plays is the way he approaches to inter-personal relations. He believes in the necessity of establishment of humanistic principles. People, especially members of working class, and those who are not privileged must get their share from such concepts as art, education and culture. He wrote such a play to show that the Jews are not as presented in *The Merchant of Venice*. Wesker also thinks that the Jews did not deserve Shakespeare's treatment as he wasn't acquainted with the life in Venice at that time. (Hayman, 1970, cited in Takkaç, 1994). While writing *The Merchant*, Wesker is aware of writing a play in the shadow of Shakespeare although he expresses his admiration for Shakespeare's genius and feels proud to write in his shadow. (*The Merchant*, p. XLIX). In addition Kott states that "Shakespeare's works exceed the boundaries of the time they were written. When watching a Shakespearean play performed on the stage, the modern audience is exposed to problems that are relevant to his own time" (in Altındağ, p. 3). Once again, Wesker tries to reread Shakespeare's ideas by using his own individual experiences and his vision of life. In so doing he stresses the impossibility of establishing universal peace as long as racial and religious discrimination continue to exist in the world.

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