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**Shakespearean Crusades:
The Shaping of a New Europe and a New European Identity
in *The Merchant of Venice***

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ABSTRACT

[In this article I propose, by means of intertextuality, historical recontextualization and close textual reading, to look at the neglected Islamic content of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. Bringing to light this content presents the Bard under the unexpected light of an artist aware of the mixed European cultural and racial heritage and therefore actively involved in the fighting of this non-Christian and non-European influence in order to make the post-Medieval Early Modern Western Europe and European identity possible. In particular, this enterprise involves in the play the rewriting of a Medieval Christian literary tradition betraying this reality, the re-appropriation of a Moslem Jerusalem as a symbol of triumphant Christianity, and the silencing of the Moorish Moslem cultural influence and physical presence which were still palpable in Shakespeare's lifetime. It is worth remembering, indeed, that the Moors had not yet been totally expelled from Spain at the time of the play. Besides, I think that the British Shakespeare's personal involvement in this ethnical and cultural cleansing is all the more interesting to study as it suggests that this Moorish and Moslem civilization had extended far beyond the geographical limits acknowledged by official history.]

If Shakespeare's literal references to the Moslem world are not as extensive as in the plays of Early Modern contemporaries like Marlowe or Massinger, such plays as *Othello* and *The Tempest* lead one safely assume that he was not thoroughly unaware of a religious, political, cultural and economic area whose contacts with England fetched centuries back, as shown brilliantly by Dorothy Metlitzki.(1) For a long time, however, criticism, both oblivious to the Bard's fondness for riddles, innuendo, and allegory and long under the influence of an approach to difference mostly centered on ethnicity and race rather than on history and culture, has minimized, ignored and even, in some cases, silenced the Islamic content of his plays. (2) Therefore dominant figures such as Caliban-whose mother comes from Algiers, branded as "the scourge of Christendom" in Shakespeare's age-and Othello, the Barbary warrior, whose strange amnesia about his origins does not seem to have raised much questioning, have been thoroughly studied from the perspective of their non-white appearance and alienness rather than as symbols of the century-old competition between two civilizations which kept raging in Shakespeare's lifetime.(3)

Under the influence of New Historicism which has encouraged a recontextualization of Western literature in general and of early modern works in particular, critics, such as Nabil Matar and Daniel Vitkus have started to rehabilitate the Islamic content of Shakespeare's plays.(4) These studies, however, most probably impacted by Bernard Lewis's and Fernand Braudel's works, concentrate on a seventeenth-century context of strong Ottoman progression in Eastern Europe and of conflict with daunting Barbary pirates raiding the south western coast of England and making Europe anxious about the return of Islam in Western Europe. They hardly concern themselves with equally important issues such as the conquest of Jerusalem or the Reconquista which though seemingly with little influence on the course of the current world have nonetheless deeply marked the course of Western and Christian history and long been present in the Western popular imagination .

In the present paper, I contend that the latter events are not only thematically present in *The Merchant of Venice*, but determine much of its structure, characterization, tropes, metaphors and symbols as well. In a play aimed to glorify the rise of a new Early Modern order and to define in exclusive terms a new European identity made necessary by the emergence of a new Europe, Shakespeare, indeed, considers that full glory and security can be achieved only with a definite victory over a dangerous Moslem contender . In order to make my point I will first look at the historical references, tropes, images and symbols that point undoubtedly to a Jerusalem taken from the Moslems and handed over to a true and pure Christianity signalling the advent of a long-awaited Millenium. The relation established in *The Merchant of Venice* between what looks very much like the New Jerusalem, whose wealthy and royal inhabitants strongly evoke the brilliant and wealthy Early Modern aristocracy on the one hand, and offensives—or shall I say crusades- carried out against Moslems on the other, suggest that Shakespeare subjected the emergence of what is presented as a millennial Europe to the annihilation to the destruction of not only such Biblical traditional foes as the Pagan and the heretic but to that of Islam as well. The references to the Reconquista in the play, which I explore in a second step, reinforce the importance given to this fight against Islam which is presented as necessary to the rise of a new era in Europe and thus to the importance given to the constituting of a genuine Christian European culture free from any alien influence . The Reconquista, indeed, took place on European territory and was bent on exterminating Europeans different by race, religion and culture. Most interestingly, his using Venice as territory to be set free suggests that for Shakespeare, the whole of Europe, and not only those territories such as Spain and Sicily traditionally said to have been concerned by the Reconquista had actually to fight an influence whose

pluricultural and multiracial ideal was incompatible with an exclusive white, Christian and mercantile Early Modern Europe. In a third and last step, I will examine the methodological issues raised by the cryptic almost esoteric literary treatment which Shakespeare has reserved for his treatment of Islam. The fact, indeed, that several plays, such as the lost *Jerusalem*(1591) and *Godfrey of Bulloigne* (1595) and Thomas Heywood's *The Four Prentices of London*(1592) were written about Jerusalem in his lifetime without making this content secret, on the one hand, and that his conformist and even conservative views on Islam put him under no obligation to obscure his content on the other, leads us to put forward the view that this semantic obscurity and ambiguity involves aesthetic and critical considerations that put us at the heart of a better knowledge of the Bard's plays.

From the very beginning, *The Merchant of Venice* is fraught with historical references and symbolic allusions to Jerusalem and to the crusades which vie with more mundane and financial and mercantile concerns for control of the play. This fierce thematic competition indicates that the marriage between heaven and money is uneasy in the play and that their union can be achieved only in a blessed millennial period in which money loses its base materialistic nature. Portia's holy and heavenly nature is stressed from the very beginning of the play. She is a place of "pilgrimage, a "shrine" whose sunny locks hang on her golden "temples" visited by people from "the four corners of the earth." Whereas the high mount on which her castle is situated and the "Hyrcanian and Arabian" route followed by her visitors- who sometimes, like Bassanio, have also to cross the seas--forcefully suggest the Oriental Jerusalem and the hills on which it is erected, the fact that Bassanio her future husband first visited her with the Marquis of Mountferrat, whose family was tightly associated to the history of the crusades and of the kingdom of Jerusalem, definitely confirms her standing for the Holy City at the time of the crusades. Boniface of Montferrat, indeed, had led the third crusade from (significantly) Venice, while Baldwin of Monferrat was the infant king of Jerusalem Baldwin V. (5) Due to the number of contenders to the throne, Baldwin's death had caused a political crisis allowing Saladin to take Jerusalem. To a Jerusalem lost because it lacked an adequate king and suffered from the presence of too many contenders to its throne, Shakespeare therefore provides a new leader, Bassanio, the "scholar" and "soldier" who knows both how to handle the sword and to interpret the scriptures and riddles. His enemies, a militant Christian Shakespeare contends, are Morocco and Arragon the unhappy contenders to Portia's hand, that is to her wealth and grace.

That Morocco stands for Islam, has been noted by most critics. For his part, Nabil Matar points out that his wealth and interest in gold is a reminder of the Morocco's reputation as a gold-rich land, whereas Samuel Chew views him as a sign of the developing diplomacy between Morocco and Britain and the recent coming to England of the first Moroccan ambassador.(6) Their reading of the character, however, has concentrated on superficial physical, historical and religious characteristics and failed to go deeper into the theological, christian-centered discussion on Islam constituted by his address to Portia, his comments on the casket and the scroll dismissing him. Being, like Othello, a blackamoor, an aggressive soldier, and a superficial mind easily influenced by appearance, his words center around what the Christians considered, and still consider, as the tenets of Islam that is, Holy War, base materialism and alienness. In this manner, Shakespeare subtly attacks a religion to which he did not want his audience to pay too close an attention especially at a time when Britons were not averse to become Moslems. 5 But Morocco's implicit call for natural equality, when protesting that his blood is as red if not redder than a northerner's, together with the scroll likening him to the multitude, send to other fundamental tenets of Islam which the Europeans monarchies and aristocracies, then in the making after a long conflict with the Church of Rome, viewed as a threat to the social hierarchy on which the Early Modern order was built and therefore dismissed as the hallmark of its inferiority. The Islamic world, indeed, was noted by European observers for its democratic and communal organization which allowed gifted commoners and even slaves to rise to the highest positions in society, a social mobility which led many a poor but gifted Christian to leave Europe for Moslem lands. In *Jerusalemme Liberata*, a long poem about the conquest of Jerusalem which was written the same year as *The Merchant of Venice*, Torquato Tasso scornfully notes that one of the sultan's general Aletes,

is born in lowly shed,
 Of parents base, a rose sprung from a brier,
 That now his branches over Egypt spread,
 No plant in Pharaoh's garden prospered higher;
 With pleasing tales his lord's vain ears he fed,
 A flatterer, a pick-thank, and a liar:
 Cursed be estate got with so many a crime,
 Yet this is oft the stair by which men climb(II;108-15)

Catholicism is next rejected by the divine Portia "who has nothing to envy to Cato's[Roman] Portia." Arragon, indeed, evokes Spain, the Church of Rome's and Champion of Catholicism. The silver, which he chooses, is said by Morocco to have a "virgin hue" and, as such, points at the Catholic

veneration of the Virgin. While both contenders take a vow of celibacy and secrecy, these are much more prominently pronounced by Arragon, who conjures up in this way the Catholic principle of secret confession and celibacy for the priests. Lastly, Arragon, who puts much stress on reward and merit, reminds us of the importance given to personal works by Catholicism and the Church of Rome to which the Reformation, ired by the dispensations provided by the Vatican, opposed election. In his speeches to Portia, Bassanio, who is chosen by Portia, mentions not so much responsibility as election and Providence which make of him a new and better Christian more suitable for the good days to come. Whereas his fondness for gambling and fascination with hazard point to the mysteries of election, his choosing the modest lead casket underlines a rejection of the lavishness and luxury that the Reformer reproached Catholicism with. He further sharply differs from Morrocco who complained about the injustice of election:

But alas, the while
 If Hercules and Lychas plaie at dice
 Which is the better man, the greater throw
 May turne by fortune from the weaker hand:
 So is Alcides beaten by his rage,
 And so may I, blinde fortune leading me
 Misse that which one vnworthier may attaine,
 And die with grieuing (II;1,549-556)

Being of noble extraction, Bassanio makes a predestined king to Jerusalem which he has saved from unworthy hands. His being poor in corrupting money but great in election and deeds make of him the king who will instore the kingdom of god on earth, the millenium so eagerly expected by Christians.

In my schoole dayes, when I had lost one shaft
 I shot his fellow of the selfesame flight
 The selfesame way, with more aduised watch
 To finde the other forth, and by aduenturing both,
 I oft found both. I vrge this child-hoode prooffe,
 Because what followes is pure innocence.
 I owe you much, and like a wilfull youth,
 That which I owe is lost: but if you please
 To shoote another arrow that selfe way
 Which you did shoot the first, I do not doubt,
 As I will watch the ayme: Or to finde both,
 Or bring your latter hazard backe againe,
 And thankfully rest debter for the first (III; 2, 149-161) .

It is important to note, however, that Bassanio and Portia, though connoting a reformed Christianity, are more than conventional Protestants. The tense theological discussions and the dream-like and brilliant atmosphere characterizing Belmont rather evoke the Millennial Christianity which was promised by the Reformers during their fight against the Church. Portia is therefore the New Jerusalem, the end of history, the beginning of a thousand years of bliss, a dream which, as Norman Cohn has shown in *The Pursuit of the Millenium*, was very potent across the whole of Europe.

Whereas the millennial atmosphere of the play, backed by such apocalyptic tropes as a beast-like Shylock, converted Jews, and a wise Daniel- the three of whom were considered as necessary for the advent of the millenium-has been acknowledged by critique, its depending on the annihilation of Islam represented by a defeated Morocco has drawn less comments. Yet, a closer look at the characteristics of this millennial order may help us push our point further. Its resting, indeed, on friends whose community dominates the beginning and the end of the play and counterbalances that of fathers and sons who, like Shylock and the Gobbos are predominantly ethnical and thus inferior, strangely reminisces the famous Millenarian thinker Joachim of Fiore who may therefore well have contributed to the making of Shakespeare 's view of the millenium. Joachim of Fiore divided history into the three ages or states of fathers, of sons and of friend or monks and hermits. To quote Marjorie Reeves:"...Joachim's grand design remains that of the three *status*. Each is characterized by its own order: the status of the father by the *ordo conjugatorum*, that of the Son by the *ordo clericorum*, that of the[Holy]Spirit b y the *ordo monachorum*, or even *ordo heremitarum*"(7) Shylock and Gobbo as fathers and supporters of the law—which makes Shylock go as far as ask for his pound of flesh—clearly point at the First Age, whereas Jessica and the young Gobbo, at odds with their sires forcefully conjure up the Second State. The third Age is strongly echoed by the fact that the fathers of main characters like Bassanio or Antonio are physically absent from the play and are not even mentioned, as occurs in the case of Portia. Further characteristics of the 'third age, described as millennial, oecumenical and contemplative by Fiore, are found in the play. Whereas Shylock's conversion to Christianity and, as we shall see ,the "silencing" of the Moslem removes any obstacle to oecumenism, Portia defending mercy against Shylock's insistence on the law together with Bassanio's scholarly background and clever deciphering of the enigma of the casket both connote love and intellect. Connecting Shakespeare with Fiore allows us to illuminate aspects of the play which have intrigued Shakespeare's critics. Therefore, Portia's trip to a monastery on her way to Venice and her being accompanied by a holy hermit on her way back to a millennial Belmont, which led Johnson assume that

Shakespeare had probably another plot in mind when writing the play, cohere into the main plot when viewed from the perspective of a Joachimist millennial third state; these events are examples of Shakespearean riddles rather than mark of plot inconsistency.

But traces of Fiore's Millennial vision in the play reinforce not only the unity of the play but its crusading spirit as well. Shakespeare, indeed, may have turned all the more willingly to Fiore as the latter was violently anti-Islamic and thus suitable for his intention to subject the rise of a new Europe and a new European to the destruction of the Islamic world and cultural influence. Fiore, is therefore another reminder of the crusades to Jerusalem of which Shakespeare makes much of in his desire to build up an exclusively white and Christian modern Europe. Excluding the Moslem from Jerusalem and from, as we shall see, a millennial Europe ties in well with Fiore's view of the Moslem as a particular obstacle to the advent of the millennium. It may be objected that Fiore's influence on Shakespeare, unmentioned before, is unlikely as he lived in the Middle Ages and was probably forgotten in an Early Modern Protestant British society led by its Protestant beliefs to cast aside whatever pointed at medieval Catholicism. The Cistercian Abbot, however, though a medieval and a catholic figure, still loomed large on Shakespeare's time and the whole of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries which were still under the thrall of Millennial beliefs. These were exploited by Elizabeth Tudor and James Stuart as well as other sovereigns in order to present the thorough transformation of Europe then taking place as the eve of the Millennium. These same millenarian beliefs sent a group of Puritans to America in order to found another "City upon a Hill." Shakespeare may all the more probably have been familiar with Fiore who was visited by Richard Lionheart on his way to Jerusalem and was much made of in those very English Medieval chronicles which were very familiar to Shakespeare,

As a matter of fact, Saladin, himself, which Fiore posed as one of the aspects of the Beast, is present in the play in the subtle, almost cryptic manner which by now looks very strongly like Shakespeare's way of tackling Islam. Intertextuality rather than historical contextualization helps us establish this presence here. Whereas the influence of the *Gesta Romanorum* on the motif of the caskets is undeniable, to such an extent that Shakespeare has borrowed complete lines from this work, the religious meaning that, as stated earlier, can be attributed to the three caskets point at Boccaccio's Third tale of the First Book of the *Decameron* as another possible influence on the play. A look at Boccaccio's text, which tells about Saladin defending his religion against Melkisedek the Jew, may cast further light on the treatment of the Muslim head of Jerusalem in *The Merchant of*

Venice . Interestingly, just like the royal Bassanio, who symbolically takes Jerusalem from him in the play, Saladin has spent all his money in lavish display and thinks of borrowing money from a Jewish money lender Melichsedek who is reputed for his high rates of usance. Hoping to embarrass Melichsedek and to force him to lend money “gratis”, as Shylock would have it , Saladin bids him tell which of Christianity, Judaism or Islam is the best religion . Melichsedek skilfully avoids to answer by telling the story of an old man who gave to his three sons three similar rings among which was a very precious one and which no one could tell from the others; none of his sons could thus prevail himself of being his favorite . He concludes: “And so, my lord, to your question, touching the three laws given to the three peoples by God the Father, I answer: Each of these peoples deems itself to have the true inheritance, the true law, the true commandments of God; but which of them is justified in so believing, is a question which, like that of the rings, remains pendent.” Checkmated, as befits a Christian text about him, and pleased by the story, Saladin borrowed money which he paid back very generously and made of Melichsedek a long time friend.

Just as he modified Fiorentino’s *Il Peccorone*, which inspired the writing of the play, in order to discuss his own issues in the play, and in particular his apology of a new Modern West, Shakespeare’s has altered Boccaccio’s story for the same purpose. More skilful than Saladin, Portia will take the Jew’s money and convert him to Christianity. More militant than Boccaccio Shakespeare will provide a definite answer to the riddle of the three rings which he will turn into caskets in his play—probably under the doublefold influence of the *Gesta Romanorum* and the play’s interest in money (Jessica will also steal a casket of ducats from her father). In this manner he states that Bassanio’s vision of Christianity is definitely the best. At the same time, however, what can be termed as a subversion of Boccaccio’s text is a powerful hint that the days of cultural, religious and ethnic diversity are over. Just as the Early Modern times have erased the Middle Ages, the new triumphant, exclusive and white Christians who are God’s elects have annihilated difference.

As a matter of fact, Portia, who stands for Jerusalem, partakes of all the characteristics reserved for the Europe that Shakespeare helps emerge from the Middle Ages. She is fair of complexion , rich and racist. Her choice of Bassanio, whom, as critique has noted, she helps with a song pointing at the lead casket, suggests that she places arbitrary election above justice or fairplay. She thus typifies the thoroughly self-righteous, self-confident and exclusive early modern Europe who considers its superiority as a gift of God and feels entitled to perform any form of persecution,

exploitation or oppression against the "other." Portia prepares the relentless domination, rather than integration, of difference which were to be the lot of those who were not lucky enough to look like her. It is worth noting, however, that her whiteness is not only to be understood as skin color but as culture as well.

I may be objected that the Bard's restoration of Jerusalem might be taken as more of a symbolical treatment of Modern Europe's ability to make up for past wrongs than as an actual call for a military invasion of the East. Whereas this symbolic dimension may not be totally absent from the play, Shakespeare's militant stance, as brought into the open above, is a powerful reminder that *The Merchant of Venice* is more than a miracle play setting right the injustices of history by arranging for Christ's Second Coming and the advent of a millennial Christian kingdom whose values strangely reminisce those of Early Modern Europe. Moreover, the fact that Western Moors, and not Eastern Moslems, are actually excluded from the Holy City reinforces the fact that the play concerns itself with actual contemporary crusades against Islam which are handled as a continuation of the medieval ones.

The play, indeed, tackles the tragedy of the ethnical and cultural cleansing which was carried out in Europe in Shakespeare's time as a fundamental condition for the setting up of Early Modern Europe. Of this tragedy the Reconquista was the most outstanding act because of Spain's century-old involvement with Islam. The fight against whatever partook of a Moorish influence was relentlessly fought wherever found in Europe. The extirpation of the pluriethnic, pluricultural and multiconfessional culture which had developed and which had spread through military conquest, dynastic marriages and multiple commercial and cultural exchanges had to be exterminated in order to reinforce the nascent European identity. (8) This extermination was all the more pressing as Islam was still a powerful enemy who could regain its lost positions. Whereas the Ottoman empire, whose religious unity, political centralization and military strength contrasted with religiously divided and politically antagonistic European nations, seemed invincible in Eastern Europe, the Barbary coast teemed with Moors expelled from Spain who continually attacked Christendom and came as near as Plymouth and Newfoundland. The motif of the Reconquista is all the more interesting to find in the play as it is further indication that Shakespeare's awareness of Islam was far from occasional. Moreover, the fact that the Reconquista, in its cultural and ethnic dimension, was not achieved when he wrote the play as the Moriscos had yet to be totally expelled from Spain only in 1613, reinforces our point that Shakespeare

conditioned the making of a new Europe and of a New European identity to the destruction of cultural, religious and ethnic difference.

The Reconquista is tackled as subtly and silently as the crusades to Jerusalem by means of tropes, motifs, historical references, both implicit or literal, and metonymies which, though used in an innocuous context, are nevertheless most informative. Therefore characters like Aragon and Morocco, who are significantly involved in a religious quest, forcefully connote such historical actors of the Reconquista as Ferdinand of Aragon, who took Granada, and the Moorish origin of the Moslem Spanish dynasties. At one point, Shakespeare draws an ephemeral link between the Moslem Morocco and the Jewish Shylock who both defend the quality of their blood against the Christians' thereby indicting the Christian Spanish fierce defense of the *limpieza de sangre*, or the differentiation between the blue blood of the Christians, which could be seen easily through their white skin, and less distinctly so in darker skins.

Morocco therefore exclaims:

Bring me the fairest creature North-ward borne,
Where Phoebus fire scarce thawes the ysicles,
And let vs make incision for your loue,

To proue whose blood is reddest, his or mine (II;1, 521-24), whereas Shylock equally strongly protests:

I am a Iewe: Hath not a Iew eyes? hath not a
Iew hands, organs, dementions, sences, affections, passi-ons,
fed with the same foode, hurt with the same wea-pons,
subiect to the same diseases, healed by the same
meanes, warmed and cooled by the same Winter and
Sommer as a Christian is: if you pricke vs doe we not
bleede? if you tickle vs, doe we not laugh? if you poison
vs doe we not die (III, 1, 58-68)

However, Shakespeare quickly drops Morocco, who is not only non-European but also openly Moslem and discusses the full implications of the racial and cultural cleansing through Launcelot Gobbo, whose identity is significantly revealed when Shylock calls him a "son of Hagar's offspring." Gobbo, a forerunner of Othello, is the converted Moslem who has been integrated to the Christian community. He is eager to fit in, at the cost of forgetting his origins and casting doubt on his legitimacy. Aware that a Christian bastard is better than a Moslem legitimate child, he declares, in a joking tone which, as we know, has to be taken seriously in Shakespeare's case, that he is "honest man's or rather an honest woman's son." However, just like the Inquisition, this instrument of the Reconquista, Shakespeare

does not trust Gobbo's conversion for long. He turns him into a crypto-Muslim rather than a fully converted Morisco; his carefully concealed faith is relentlessly laid bare and exposed. Gobbo, therefore, lacks greatly in Christian militancy. Rather than exalting Jessica's conversion to Christianity, he dismisses it the cause of Pork selling more expensive. His remark may also be aimed at reminding Jessica of the Christian hostility against Jews who were dismissed as "marranos" that is swines., Moreover, he leans strongly towards the tenets of Islam which Shakespeare continues to caricature and ridicule through him. Whereas his numerous affairs with women connote the polygamous Moslem, who is also mentioned in King Lear where Edmund's womanizing makes him "outparamour the Turk", his being a servant pokes fun at the Moslem stress on Islam as submission to God. Interestingly, Gobbo, who is Iobbe in the 1623 First Folio, connotes Job, and therefore poverty which is synonymous with social inferiority and slavery in this new rich society. It is worth remembering that the French word "gredin," used to denote a rascal, a villain and a poor man, was coined after the "Grenadines" or inhabitants of Grenada who were stripped of their possessions and doomed to beggary by the Reconquista. Iobbe is all the more interesting as a name as it also means son of Ayub, and thus of the Ayubid Saladin whose full name Shakespeare most likely knew as it was used by medieval giants such as Boccaccio, Dante and Joachim of Fiore. After having been toppled from his throne by Bassanio, Saladin is now reduced to a servant, and a lazy snail.

Just as it is denied existence in the play, Gobbo's identity as a Moslem convert, whose sincerity Shakespeare, in the best tradition of the inquisition deeply doubts, is soon to be denied in seventeenth century Spain to such an extent that his likes will be expelled from Spain in a most inhuman and often deathly manner. To tighten his control over him and prevent a possible reaction, Shakespeare will reduce him to not only poverty and derision but to social nothingness as well. Being a male who can give his name and thus culture to his children, his potential offsprings are bastards whose color further bars them from any significant role in society. Gobbo has, indeed, forbidden intercourse with a Moor, a negro who is pregnant by him. Through this denial of identity and existence, Shakespeare expresses his desire for a final solution to a presence in Europe that could not only bring Islam and the neighbouring Islam states back into Europe but also contest the exclusively white and culturally and religiously uniform Early modern Europe. For this reason, he legitimizes and condones that expulsion and extermination of the Moriscos from Spain which was to take place about two decades after.

Shakespeare's interest in the Reconquista, though useful for his militant purposes, may surprise more than one. Indeed, the long conflict between Spain and Britain which went back to Henry VIII's divorce from Catherine of Aragon and had been recently re-ignited by Mary of Tudor's persecution of the Protestants and the naval battle of the Armada, made references to Spain's internal political situation other than derogatory hardly expected in an English literary work of Shakespeare's time. The Anglo-Spanish hostility may explain why few critics have devoted more than passing mention to the undeniable presence of the Reconquista in Shakespeare's plays, and in particular in *The Merchant of Venice*. Samuel Chew hurriedly explains that Shakespeare, though probably anti-Spanish, felt nonetheless a Christian before all and therefore backed the Spanish Reconquista. (9) This remark, however, does not explain why Shakespeare, almost alone among his contemporaries, the abstained from the heavy caricaturing in which the latter all the more willingly indulged as they were backed by Ann Boleyn's daughter. Shakespeare's probably aversion to Britain's most important enemy was seemingly surmounted by his militant desire to defend an exclusive West and Western identity which appears therefore as one of the riding forces of his plays. In this case, as in many others, he reminds us of the fact, so thoroughly studied by Stephen Greenblatt, that his time was open to self-fashioning, ready to endorse any identity as long as it allowed him to reach his end. He ends up defending on cultural and historical grounds the drama of his time which was a drama of identity-making in a Europe equally involved in shaping itself into a new and powerful entity. Self-fashioning and identity-making however had limits, which were the limits imposed on whoever looked and believed differently. The world was a stage for the white, Christian European only. The other had to look what he thought and believed in.

I could not end this paper, however, without commenting on the issues raised by the approach that I have followed in order to illuminate a cultural and religious content which I believe lies in *The Merchant of Venice* and probably in other Shakespearean plays. This study therefore has stressed that this content, following New Historicism, was reached by a recontextualization of the text highlighting the fact that it was written at a time when Islam was still present on Western European territory as the Moors had not been totally expelled from Spain and the cultural, religious and ethnical cleansing which it entailed still an urgent current issue. This recontextualization minimized the Ottoman dimension so strongly stressed by current criticism and focussed on the Western European internal situation. Interestingly enough, this recontextualization has led us to a "rehistoricizing," to use David Shield's term, of the conflict between Islam and the West. The Shakespearean text has, indeed, allowed us to "talk with

the dead”, as recommended by Stephen Greenblatt, and to deduce that a good part of Europe was concerned by the ethnical extermination and the cultural cleansing that was carried out against the Moor in Europe. The British Shakespeare, indeed, felt as concerned by this purification of Europe.

The “unearthing” of the Jerusalem motif, however, which in turn has reinforced the militant way in which Shakespeare handled the crusade against the Moor, has been made possible by not so much recontextualization as a close textual analysis which has allowed me to put together references to the crusades scattered here and there in the text. As a matter of fact, due to the chronological discrepancy between an Early Modern Shakespeare and a Medieval issue, recontextualization would have been misleading in this case. Close textual analysis, however, could not alone serve my ends, as a knowledge of the history of the Crusades and of the Medieval literary and theological was necessary to make up my point in a satisfactory way. Such knowledge made clear what could have appeared as unnecessary detail, as plot weakness. It made also visible what could have been easily ignored and would thus have led to deplore Shakespearean unneeded ambiguity or obscurity. It further enabled me to see in Shakespeare a propagandist intent on rewriting those medieval texts, such as the Decameron which could be too open to difference.

It follows that, whereas the Shakespearean text has an undeniable hermetic dimension, as any acceptable literary text written under Ficino’s Neo-Platonist rules had to be, much of its obscurity is due to the fall into disuse of a deep immersion into history and culture which has been made increasingly difficult by both educational programmes under the pressure of profit as well as under the impact of new interests in society and culture. This educational weakness and its impact on literary criticism was pointed out as early as the 1940’s by Rosemond Tuve who, in her *Reading of George Herbert*, blamed the superficial reading of this poet on her society’s utilitarianism. But the present paper suggests that New Historicism which has made history crucial again for literary criticism has still left some texts only partially approached. An unbiased and unselective knowledge, looking remotely at the current issues, is therefore needed to approach a text satisfactorily. At this condition only can the energy hidden in a text be let free and lead to a knowledge of the human mind and sensibility across lands and ages.

Notes

- 1-*The Matter of Araby in Medieval England* (New Haven:Yale UP,1977).
- 2-Examples of this focus on race are Gerard Barthelemy, *Black Race, Maligned Race*(Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State UP, 1987); Elliot H. Tokson, *The Popular Image of the Black Man in English Drama, 1550-1688*(Boston:GK Hall, 1982) and Imtiaz Habib, *Post-colonial Praxis in the Early Modern Period* (Lanham Md:UP of America, 2000).
- 3-One of the best studies in that field is Emily Bartels,"Making More of the Moor: Aaron, Othello and Renaissance Refashionings of Race," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 41.4(1990):433-454.
- 4.*Turks, Moors and English Men at the Age of Discovery* (NY:Columbia UP, 1999)
Turning Turk:English Theater and the Multicultural Mediterranean,1570-1630(London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).
- 5.I am indebted for this historical background about the Crusades to Lane-Poole Stanley. *Saladin and the Fall of the Kingdom of Jerusalem* (Beyrut: Khayats, 1964).
- 6.*Turks, Moors and Englishmen*, p. 80; *The Rose and the Crescent*(Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937.
- 7.*Joachim of Fiore and the Prophetic Future: A Medieval Study in Historical Thinking* (Phoenix Hill: Sutton Publishing, 1999), p. 13.
8. More details on the way in which the Moorish civilization expanded over Europe can be read in Rita Lejeune, "Le rôle littéraire de la famille d'Aliénor d'Aquitaine, *Cahiers de Civilisation Médiévale* (Juillet-Septembre 1958): 319-32.
- 9.*The Rose and the Crescent*, 104.