

**Shylock's Nationalism: The Ideas of Nation and (E)state
in *The Merchant of Venice***

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Abstract

The aim of the present paper is to explore Shylock's attitude toward Jews and Christians by paying attention to his use of the word *nation* and also by referring to the idea of nationalism. Of course we should not incautiously apply the idea of nationalism, which is based upon the building of nation-states in the modern era, to any early modern text without a sense of the fallacy of anachronism. Shylock's venerable sense of the Jewish nation, however, may be called a sort of nationalism and Shylock's nationalism seems to be based upon the primitive quality of the idea of nation, which derives from a Latin word *natio* meaning a group of persons which has similarities in terms of their birth, including such common qualities as the birth place, ancestors, families and so on. Shylock's sense of the Jewishness of the Jewish nation lacks what A. D. Smith calls the "civic" aspects of a modern nation-state. In terms of Smith's definition of nationalism, Shylock's nationalism centers upon the "ethnic" aspects of a nation, which Smith calls more primitive than the civic nation. Indeed it is a salient characteristic of Shylock's nationalism for it to emphasize the genealogical descent of a nation rather than the political system of a modern nation-state with a government and a national territory. Shylock defines the Jewish nation by tracing its origin to Jacob who tried to get the advantage of Laban by his tricky use of "the work of generation" of the rams and ewes. His justification of usury is also made in connection with Jacob who thrived like plants and animals. For Shylock the Jewish nation is supposed to thrive like Jacob who has God's blessing. Shylock's nationalism is also coupled with his contemptuous disdain of Christians. Shylock compares the present predicament of the Jewish nation to that of the biblical Jews who groaned under the tyranny of a "fawning publican" who ruthlessly collected taxes from them for the ancient Romans. In other

words Shylock refers to the common historical past of the Jewish nation when he distinguishes it from the Christians.

In *The Merchant of Venice*, the word *state* is used when it refers to the “state” of Venice. Although it is quite an interesting point how the idea of state, which originally refers to a condition of a person or a thing, especially the economic and monetary condition of a person, comes to be applied to the political or governmental aspects of a nation, *The Merchant of Venice* does not offer the momentum for the two ideas of the nation and the state to be merged into the modern idea of the nation-state which is the basis of modern nationalism. At the end of the play Shylock’s nation is merged into the state of Venice not only by Shylock’s forced conversion to Christianity but also by his estate, including his daughter Jessica, being confiscated by the state of Venice.

Key words:

The Merchant of Venice, Shylock, nationalism, nation and state

Introduction

In this paper I would like to explore Shylock’s attitude toward Jews and Christians by paying attention to his use of the word *nation* and also by referring to the idea of nationalism. Of course we should sufficiently be aware of the fallacy of anachronism in applying the idea of nationalism to a Renaissance text because the word *nationalism* emerged in the nineteenth century.¹ It is generally assumed that the idea of nationalism is based upon the development of modern nation-states, so it does not apply to *The Merchant of Venice* without any qualifications. However, we may recognize an early form of nationalism in Shylock’s view of his Jewish nation. Shylock’s use of the word *nation* suggests his quite positive, and at the same time, very primitive attitude toward the Jewish people as well as his pride in the Jewish nation.

¹ According to *Oxford English Dictionary*, the first instance of “nationalism” is cited from a source of 1836 and its meaning is “[t]he doctrine that certain nations (as contrasted with individuals) are the object of divine selection” (See *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, q.v. *nation*, 1,1), which is quite different from the general meaning of nationalism. Although in terms of history of ideas it is quite interesting to examine how the first theological meaning of *nationalism* leads to the contemporary meaning of the word, I would not like to go into the depth of the problem in this article.

Shylock's "nation" and Nationalism

Let us begin by examining the following speech of Shylock.

[*Aside*] How like a *fawning publican* he looks!
I hate him for he is a Christian;
But more, for that in low simplicity
He lends out money gratis, and bring down
The rate of usance here with us in Venice.
If I can catch him once upon the hip,
I will feed fat *the ancient grudge* I bear him.
He hates our *sacred nation*, and he rails
Even there where merchants most do congregate
On me, my bargains, and *my well-won thrift*,
Which he calls interest. Cursed be *my tribe*
If I forgive him! (1.3.41-52)²

So far negotiating with Bassanio on his bargain with a sort of calmness, Shylock suddenly brakes into his deeply felt passion toward Antonio a Christian. In the speech Shylock calls the Jewish people to which he belongs by the suggestive expression of "our sacred nation." The word "sacred" here invokes its etymological connotation which means "[t]o consecrate (the elements, or the body and blood of Christ) in the Mass."³ Shylock's use of the word *nation* manifestly shows his positive view of the Jewish people though early modern audiences could not accept it. There is no evidence that in order to refer to the Jewish people Shakespeare borrows the word *nation* from any of his sources except Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* in which Marlowe refers to the Jewish nation as "scattered nation."⁴ Unlike Marlowe's, however, Shakespeare's use of the word *nation* qualified by the adjective *sacred* suggests that Shylock takes pride in his identity as a member of the Jewish people descending from the Hebrew nation among whom was Judas Iscariot who betrayed Jesus.

In spite of Shylock's pride in his nation, at least in its etymological context, the

² William Shakespeare, *Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997). Parenthetical citations to Shakespeare's works are to this edition and all italics in Shakespeare's texts are mine.

³ See *OED*, q.v. *sacred* and *sacre*.

⁴ *The Jew of Malta*, ed. James R. Siemon (London: A & C Black; New York: W W Norton, 1995), 1.1.118. All references to *The Jew of Malta* are to this edition.

word *nation* does not have a positive implication. Before launching on the examination of Shylock's attitudes in detail, we would like to refer to the semantic development of *nation* with its etymological backgrounds⁵ because Shylock's pride in his nation is more dependent upon the etymological sense of *nation* rather than its modern sense of the nation-state. The word *nation* derives from the Latin word *natio* which shares the stem with *natus* meaning offspring. Both of the Latin words originate from *nascor* meaning to be born. Therefore *nation* was originally used to refer to people who share similarities in terms of their birth, such as birth place, ancestor, or family. One of the English words which derive also from *nascor* is *nature*. The primary meaning of *nature* which is also an etymological meaning is not all things under the universe but the essential quality which someone or something has had from their birth. By *human nature* we mean the quality specific to humans as distinguished from beasts. What is common between the two ideas of nature and nation is their emphasis on the genesis and genealogy of people and things. The concepts of nature and nation both share a perspective upon the generative context of all things including human beings.

What is important in grasping the significance of *natio* is that ancient Romans never called themselves "natio." They called themselves "*populus*." The word *natio* was used for aliens with pejorative connotations. For example, Cicero refers to Egyptians or Syrians as "natio."⁶ *Natio* was generally used for foreigners who had some state or quality being common in respect of birth. This is true of Shakespeare's Roman histories in which "nation" refers to foreign nations which make resistance against the Roman "people."⁷

The context of Biblical reference is also involved in the fact that *nation* was used for foreigners with the sense of discrimination against them. In the New Testament, *ἔθνος*⁸ is used for aliens and gentiles except Christians or Jews and the Vulgate sometimes translates *ἔθνος* as "natio," so English translators also often render it as "nation." Therefore *nation* is thought to have been often used for referring to aliens or pagans in Shakespeare's time.

Considering the negative etymological context of *nation*, it seems to be quite strange that Shylock refers to the Jewish people as a "nation." Is Shylock tacitly

⁵ See Guido Zernatto, "Nation: the history of a word," *Review of Politics* 6 (1944): 351-66, rpt. in John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith ed. *Nationalism: Critical Concepts in Political Science*, Vol. 1 (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 13-25.

⁶ Cf. Chap. 9, *On the Nature of Gods*.

⁷ Cf. *Coriolanus*, 1.3; 3.3; 4.5 etc.

⁸ This ancient Greek word is the origin of English *ethnic* and *ethnicity*.

acknowledging its assumed negative nuances when he uses the term *nation*? Does he acquiesce to the audience's attitude of denying the integrity of the Jewish people? On the contrary, Shylock's use of *nation* shows his deeply felt pride in the Jewish nation. His choice of the word *nation* in describing his Jewish origin paradoxically suggests his strong sense of the venerability of the Jewish people. By invoking the Jewish race as a "nation," Shylock directly refers to the historical past in which the Jews suffered from the tyranny of ancient Rome, establishing at the outset of the speech the similarity between Antonio the merchant and the "fawning publican"⁹ who in the Biblical context means a Roman tax-collector who was abhorred by the Jews because of his greediness and dishonesty. Shylock says that he hates Antonio not only because he is a Christian but also because he "lents our money gratis" whereby he "bring down / The rate of usance" and "rails / . . . On me, my bargains, and my well-won thrift, / Which he calls interest." In Shylock's view Antonio is also a competitor in his business, whom Bassanio calls as "one in whom / *The ancient Roman* honor more appears / Than any that draws breath in Italy." (3.2.294-96).

Shylock's pride in the Jewish "nation" derives from his sense of its genealogical origin which the word *nation* suggests. The modern idea of the nation is closely connected with the ideas of race, religion, language, a territory, government, custom and cultures. Shylock's idea of the nation is deeply rooted in far more primitive context than these modern ideas of the nation. Shylock also uses the word *tribe* as having the same meaning with *nation*, which also suggests that he intends to appeal to the primitive genealogical context of the Jewish people. The word *tribe* derives from Latin *tribus*, which originally means the three divisions of the Roman citizens. However, the word *tribus* was also used as a translation of $\phi\upsilon\lambda\eta$ which ancient Greeks used when they referred to the twelve clans of Israel.¹⁰ The word is used in The New Testament when it refers to the clan of Israel beginning with Jacob as the ancestor. In the biblical context the words *nation* and *tribe* both strongly appeal to the genealogical origin of the Jewish people. Shylock's "ancient grudge" can be grasped in such a genealogical context including the miserable history of the Jewish nation among ancient Romans. Shortly after the speech cited at the beginning of the present essay, Shylock tries to justify the Jews' "well-won thrift" by referring to the story of Jacob in Genesis,

⁹ This is the only instance in which Shakespeare uses the word *publican* in all of Shakespeare's vocabulary.

¹⁰ See *OED*, q. v. *tribe*.

which also suggests the peculiar aspect of Shylock's nationalism.

The Idea of Nation and Nationalism

We would like to summarize the intricate relationship between the idea of nation and that of nationalism. Broadly speaking, there are two views on the relationship. On the one hand, some claim that both ideas are so closely connected with each other that the idea of nationalism gives birth to the idea of nation. Therefore, the idea of nation itself does not exist before the idea of nationalism is established in the modern era. Since the word *nation* has existed since the fourteenth century, it naturally follows that the modern meaning of the nation and the pre-modern one of the nation are widely different. On the other hand, others claim that the long history of the significance of the word *nation* is closely connected with or has anything to do with the modern idea of the nation. Standing on the former ground, it is sheer nonsense to apply the idea of nationalism to any early modern text, and on the latter ground, Shylock's idea of the nation has a common context with the modern idea of nationalism. It is often said that the ideas of the nation and nationalism have some difficulties which prevent us from clearly understanding their meanings and usage. In the present essay I would not like to go into these difficulties any further. I do not stand on either ground and the present essay is an attempt to solve some of these difficulties.

According to Anthony D. Smith who is one of the leading scholars in the study of nationalism, we would like to grasp the idea of nation as one with some breadth in content with its one pole being the ethnic aspects of a nation and another being its civic aspects.¹¹ The ethnic aspects of a nation form the rather primitive, and therefore historically older, core of a nation, which includes a common origin and common historical past. On the other hand, the civic aspects of a nation are comprised of such elements as a common language, race, religion, territory, democratic government and common economic interest. It is often suggested that the ethnic notion of a nation is originated in the Orient whereas the civic notion of a nation has its very beginning in the Occident. Shylock's

¹¹ Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origin of Nations* (London: Blackwell, 1986), Chap. 1, 2; Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1991), pp. 8-5. And also we can refer to Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983) as one of the classic scholarly works on the origin of nationalism.

notion of the nation is based upon the ethnic core of a nation and this is illustrated by the fact that when Shylock refers to the Jewish nation, he is hardly conscious of their language, territory or form of government or even religion which are supposed to be included in the modern notion of a nation. Let us take the aspect of religion. In spite of the fact that one of the significant themes of *The Merchant of Venice* is religious antagonism between Christianity and Judaism, it is quite strange that the God Shylock invokes is not Judaic God who refers to deeply Judaic religious doctrines:

Yes, to smell pork, to eat of the habitation
which your prophet the Nazarite conjur'd the devil
into. 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.* (1.3.33-38)

It is noteworthy that spirituality the word "pray" invokes is preceded by materiality suggested by "eat" and "drink." Bodily practices are given priority over spiritual devotion to Judaic God. It is supposed that praying for God has the same significance with not keeping company with Christians in the places of eating and drinking. In this point it is quite intriguing that the term "pork" is jokingly associated with one of Christ's miracles. The fact that Shylock intentionally changes the expression of the Biblical reference to Christ's miracle in which he makes devils go into the heard of "swine" and also deliberately calls Christ as "prophet Nazarite" shows Shylock's contemptuous disdain for Christians as well as his peculiar sense of nationalism. Shylock is persistent in his understanding of Judaism as obeying merely materialistic customs and traditions. For Shylock Judaism does not preach deeply religious doctrines. Shylock understands the god of his worship only as the god who demands Jews circumcision and the habit of eating no meat. His attitudes may be a reflection of Christian audience's stereotypical understanding of the Jews and Judaism. Anyway, what forms the core of Shylock's nationalism is materialistic customs and traditions exterior to idea of religion and this is a stark contrast to the play's emphasis upon the ideas of love and mercy which are essential to Christianity.

In *The Merchant of Venice* Shylock's sense of "nation" which is based upon the genealogical origin of the Jews is represented as deeply connected with Jacob's

“thrift.”

Shylock. When Jacob graz'd uncle Laban's sheep –
This Jacob from our holy Abram was,
(As his wise mother wrought in his behalf)
The third possessor, ay, he was the third –

Antonio. And what of him? did he take interest?

Shylock. No, not take interest, as you would say
Directly int'rest. Marke what Jacob did:
When Laban and himself were compromis'd
That all the eanlings which were streaked and pie
Should fall as Jacob's hire, the ewes being rank,
In end of autumn turned to the rams,
And when *the work of generation* was
Between these *wooly breeders* in the act,
The skillful shepherd pill'd me certain wands,
And in the doing of *the deed of kind*,
He struck them up before the fulsome ewes,
Who, then conceiving did in eanling time
Fall parti-color'd rams; and those were Jacob's.
This was *a way to thrive*; and he was blest;
And *thrift is blessing*, if men steal it not.

Antonio. *This was a venture, sir, that Jacob serv'd for,
A thing not in his power to bring to pass,
But sway'd and fashion'd by the hand of heaven.
Was this inserted to make interest good,
Or is your gold and silver ewes and rams?*

Shylock. I cannot tell, I make it *breed as fast*. (1.3.71-96)

Shakespeare makes Shylock try to justify the trade of usury by invoking Abram and Jacob, two great ancestors of the Jews. He also attempts to associate Shylock with Jacob and Abraham in several ways: the name of his wife is Leah which is the same with that of Jacob's first wife; Jessica, Shylock's daughter, has the same name with Lot's sister; Lancelot, his servant, is called “that fool of Hagar's offspring” (2.5.44), Hagar being the black woman slave who bears Abraham's son Ishmael; Tubal and Chus, Shylock's two friends, have the same names of

offsprings of Noah; and Shylock says that he does not want to join a Christian party "by the Jacob's staff." Shakespeare repeatedly endeavours to establish significant connections between the Jewish nation with their ancestors, which shows that he well understands the peculiar etymological connotation of the word *nation* which derives from Latin *natio*. In *The Jew of Malta* Christopher Marlowe also makes Barabas refer to Abraham as an ancestor of his nation. However, the reference is temporary and Marlowe soon proceeds to enlarge the idea of scatteredness in the expression of "scattere'd nation," connecting the prosperity of the Jewish nation with their ubiquity in the world and their merchant-like (ad)ventures throughout the world in the period of great voyage in the Renaissance. For Barabas the great wealth of the Jews is "the blessings promised to the Jews"(1.1.104) and "old Abraham's happiness."(1.1.105) Although Shakespeare, like Marlowe, uses the word *nation* as the key concept for describing the Jewish nationalism, there is a considerable difference between their ways of making use of the idea of nation.

It is quite interesting that Shakespeare gives an extensive reference to the Biblical story of maneuvering between Jacob and Laban in Genesis. Shylock explains how Jacob increased his estate by making an elaborate use of a contract with Laban his uncle. Shylock says that Jacob owes the increase of his wealth to God's "blessing" and by doing so Shylock tries to locate his "bargain" within the historical tradition of Jewish prosperity beginning with Jacob. For Shylock Jacob's success is representative of God's special blessing toward the Jews in general. However, his justification of usury is not so understandable as to be accepted without questions. Jacob who bargained with guileful Laban for new-born multicoloured rams and ewes to fall into his property eventually succeeded in making ewes generate multicoloured rams and ewes by a trick in which he made his sheep copulate in front of the rods which "pilled white strakes in." (Genesis 30: 37) There is no evidence that the story of Jacob who outmaneuvers Laban in Genesis was made use of as a justification of usury,¹² so this is Shakespeare's own invention. Why does Shakespeare cite this particular episode in the various events in Jacob's life depicted in Genesis? The key word is "thrive." The word *thrive* originally means for animals and plants including human beings to grow or increase in the bulk or number, which in turn gives rise to its frequently used meaning of an individual's or a group's prospering in

¹² John Russell Brown, *The Arden Edition of the Works of Shakespeare: The Merchant of Venice* (London: Methuen, 1955), p. 26.

wealth or estate. The extension of Jacob's estate owes primarily to live-stocks' power of reproduction or generation, that is, "the work of generation" or "the deed of kind," on which Jacob make a slight trick. Because of no plausible explanation in Genesis of how Jacob's trick could cause the birth of spotted sheep or goats, Shylock can claim that it was God's blessing. By using the ideas of "thrive" or "thrift" Shylock can identify the process of animals' reproduction with that of monetary proliferation. Shylock can testify to God's blessing of the Jewish "kind" since it is manifested, he believes, by God's allowance of the increase of Jacob's estate. Although Antonio's indignant reply "is your gold and silver ewes and rams?" may have been shared with audience who cannot endure Shylock's chop logic. Anyway, to link interest metaphorically with the reproductive process is one of Shakespeare's favourite metaphors as is amply demonstrated in his sonnets in which the idea of interest and usury is made use of when the poet persuades beauty's multiplication through natural reproduction.¹³

For Antonio Shylock's "thrift" has the same significance with "venture." Since the word *venture* derives from *adventure*, it is a pertinent idea for Antonio who is a merchant of the Renaissance Venice famous for its cosmopolitan nature of attracting heterogeneous things. The idea of venture also plays a significant part in Bassanio's selection of the right casket. Antonio claims that the increase of Jacob's estate is owing to God's power and he also suggests the dubiousness of Shylock's interpretation of the Biblical story of Jacob. Although Antonio's question "[w]as this inserted to make interest food,/Or is your gold and silver ewes and rams?" may reflect the way in which Christian audience interpreted Jacob's story in Genesis, Antonio's logic also cannot be so smoothly accepted. Antonio's insistence that Jacob's success was "fashioned by the hand of heaven" could be interpreted as the same insistence with Shylock's because it testifies to God's blessing of Jacob. Anyway, Antonio and Shylock both appeals to their own Gods when they try to justify their trades.

Behind Antonio's brave assertion that "[i]f thou with lend this money, lend it not/As to thy friends" is a manifestation of suppressed complex against Portia his rival in getting Bassanio's love, as well as of irony against Shylock's nationalism:

I am as like to call thee so again,

¹³ Cf. Sonnet 4, 6 etc.

To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too.
*If thou wilt lend this money, lend it not
As to thy friends, for when did friendship take
A breed for barren metal of his friend?
But lend it rather to thine enemy,
Who if he break, thou mayst with better face
Exact the penalty. (1.3.130-37)*

The apparent meaning of Antonio's assertion that Shylock should consider lending money to an enemy instead of a friend is that a friend should not take interest when he lends money. However, Antonio's metaphorical rendition of the idea of friendship as that of "barren metal" implies that friendship cannot "breed" and in that point friendship is like metal. Antonio's metaphor reminds us that Jacob could "thrive" because his God gave him "blessing," which was manifested by the increase of his estate by the "work of generation." The contrast between "barren metal" and "work of generation" or "the deed of kind," in spite of the fact that both could have the power of increase, highlights Antonio's predicament in which he is placed by his love (friendship) for Bassanio. It is his strong desire to bear interest metaphorically as an offspring in his flesh in behalf of loving Bassanio to make Antonio stake his flesh as a ransom. In terms of that desire, Antonio could imagine his manly flesh as identical with female flesh, so the desire may be said to impel him to become an antagonist of Portia his rival in love for Bassanio.

Shylock's following speech shows that the genesis of the Jewish nation and its continuation as a nation throughout history are maintained by the power of Nature as the god of generation:

These be the Christian husbands.
I have a daughter –
*Would any of the stock of Barabas
Had been her husband rather than a Christian! (4.1.294-97)*

The word *stock* in "the stock of Barabas" literally means stump or tree-trunk which implies, like the word *thrive*, the image of the generative development of plants and animals. Shylock's sense of nation is strongly characterized by the

multiplication of species by the power of generation.¹⁴ Anyway, Shylock's nationalism is characteristically based upon the etymological sense of *nation* as a group of people who are closely connected with each other in their genealogical descent. Shylock's emphasis of this genealogical descent is repeatedly shown by his stock phrase to refer to Jessica his only daughter: "my flesh and blood." It also well displays his sense of nation and nationalism. For Shylock Jessica is the only heir who is supposed to inherit not only his estates but also the Jewish blood beginning with Jacob. However, Jessica decides to cut off the Jewish descent by falling into love with a Christian:

*Alack, who heinous sin is it in me
To be abashed to be my father's child!
But though I am a daughter to his blood,
I am not to his manners. O Lorenzo,
If thou keep promise, I shall end this strife,
Become a Christian and thy loving wife. (2.3.16-21)*

Although what "manners" refer to is not clearly shown in her speech, "blood" clearly means her Jewish origin which Shylock has tried to keep intact.

Nation and State in *The Merchant of Venice*

Shylock's nationalism never leads to what is later called as "nation-building."¹⁵ This is plainly suggested by the fact that his estate is finally confiscated by the

¹⁴ With the development of the modern market capitalism, the word *stock* has acquired the new meaning of monetary fund which will multiply itself by its circulation through market economy. According to *OED*, the process of the development of the new significance is obscure, but the original association of the word *stock* with "race" or "breed" has some role in the development. Shylock's speech has been interpreted as a forerunning use of the word *stock* which is given prominence in the context of modern market capitalism, such as "stock exchange market" (see, Walter Cohen, "The Merchant of Venice and the Possibilities of Historical Criticism," *ELH* 49 (1982): 765-89). However, I think that it is an anachronistic fallacy to see a germination of modern market capitalism in Shylock's nationalistic use of the word *stock*. Although there are many interpretations which try to explain why Shylock refers to the story of Jacob in Genesis in order to justify usury (see, Lars Engle, "Thrift is Blessing: Exchange and Explanation in *The Merchant of Venice*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 37 (1986): 20-37), I think that the point of Shylock's reference to Jacob lies in his introduction into the play of Jacob as the founder of the Jewish nation.

¹⁵ According to *OED*, the phenomenon of nation-building is concerned with the construction of a state as a nation and it is quite a modern phenomenon. So it is quite natural that the momentum to fuse a nation and a state as one government or the political body is not observed in *The Merchant of Venice* which is a Renaissance work.

state of Venice:

Duke. That thou shalt see the difference of our spirit,
I pardon thee thy life before thou ask it.
For half thy wealth, it is Antonio's;
The other half comes to the general state,
Which humbleness may drive unto a fine.

Portia. Ay for the state, not for Antonio's.

Shylock. Nay, take my life and all, pardon not that:
You take *my house* when you do take the prop
That doth sustain *my house*; you take my life
When you do take the means whereby I live.

Portia. What mercy can you render him, Antonio?

Gratiano. A halter gratis—nothing else, for God sake.

Antonio. So please my lord the Duke and all the court
To quit the fine for one half of his goods,
I am content; so he will let me have
The other half in use, to render it
Upon his death unto the gentleman
That lately stole his daughter.
Two things provided more, that *for his favor*
He presently become a Christian;
The other, that he do record a gift,
Here in the court, of all he dies possess'd
Unto his son Lorenzo and his daughter. (4.1.368-90)

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Venice is often referred to as a “state.” The Duke of Venice orders that the half of Shylock’s “wealth” be confiscated to “the general state.” The word *state* here fuses the two notions of the government and wealth into one abstract idea. The word (*e*)*state* originally means not only economic conditions of a person, but also social status constituting the body politic. In the Middle Ages, three “estates” were defined when they participated in the government either directly or through representatives. The Duke’s “the general estate” shows that in Venice the ideas of the government, the political body, and wealth are closely connected with each other. Therefore, it is quite interesting that in *The Merchant of Venice* the state of Venice is also called as the

“commonwealth”:

Jessica. Nay, you need not fear us, Lorenzo, Lancelot, and I are out. He tells me flatly there's no mercy for me in heaven because I am a Jew's daughter; and he say you are not good member of *the commonwealth*, for in converting Jews into Christians, you raise the price of pork.

Lorenzo. I shall answer the better to *the commonwealth* than you can the getting up of the Negro's belly; the Moor is with child by you, Launcelot. (3.5.31-39)

The expressions of “general state” and “commonwealth” remind us of the fact that in the Western world the ideas of the government and the political body before the establishment of the idea of nation-state is closely related, not to the genealogical and ethnic aspects of a nation, but to the abstract notions of social position, wealth, estate, and community which the words of *state* and *commonwealth* suggest. In its later history this abstract fusion of the several concepts has driven nations to form their form of democratic government that is called “nation-state.”¹⁶ However, in a Renaissance text, the idea of nation never has a strong alliance with the idea of state. The “sacred nation” which Shylock greatly approves at the beginning of the play turns out to be trivialized into “my house” at the end of the play. Defeated Shylock can only entreat the bare continuation of his “house.” But it is quite ironical that his house is essentially transformed with the loss of his wealth. Asked what “mercy” he will give Shylock, Antonio proudly answers that he will give it for Shylock by rendering a part of Shylock's wealth to Lorenzo who is a Christian as well as his son. Although it is uncertain that Antonio will get the interest which is suggested by the expression “in use,” he has taken Shylock's right to use his wealth for his proper purposes. Jessica who is supposed to become the basis for the Jewish nation's “thrift” is portrayed as an estate stolen by a Christian through marriage. Shylock's “flesh and blood” is transformed into a commonwealth in its proper sense of the word. Shylock's daughter is referred to as “his daughter.” But “his daughter” is already coupled with “his son Lorenzo” and Shylock will be

¹⁶ Peggy A. Knapp, *Time-bound Words: Semantic and Social Economies from Chaucer's England to Shakespeare's* (London: Macmillan; New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), pp. 28-47.

forced to become a Christian. In Christianity genealogical connection with race and ethnicity should be negated and humans and their estate must be built into a new order. Shylock's provoking challenge against the "fawning publican" eventually ends up with the Venetian state which is a figure of the "fawning publican" confiscating his wealth and estate. In *The Merchant of Venice* the ideas of nation and state, which should gain importance in later history in the Western world, did not have the momentum to contribute to the building of a nation-state.

[Postscript]

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