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Tactics of the Excluded: Barabas, Shylock, and the Illusion of Social Mobility

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Abstract

This paper presents a comparative analysis of Barabas in *The Jew of Malta* by Christopher Marlowe and Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* by William Shakespeare who seek to achieve a social mobility in the orders that assign a status of outsiders to them being Christian dominated. Despite both having an extensive capital of the economic type, neither can be transformed into the symbolic capital or social legitimacy, since exclusion is enforced systematically in terms of religious identity. Taking its point of departure in the works of Pierre Bourdieu (capital) and Michel de Certeau (tactics vs. strategies), the discussion compares the highly improvisational and generally destructive actions of Barabas and the largely institution-facing appeals of Shylock. Barabas welcomes the opportunities in periphery, making use of deceit and vengeance; Shylock asserts his right according to the contract, only to be shown that even law is structured according to hegemonic ideology. Close readings of their texts reveal how their narrative arcs mobilize early modern anxieties of money, citizenship and order, wealth-without-status foments volatility, and procedural belief proves ineffective when rules determine who can address the world as an authentic speaker. This paper holds that the two plays explore the boundaries of the promise of meritocracy when it is part of an exclusive system. When convertible symbolic capital does not exist no tactics or strategies are able to provide durable status, and instead both implode under the pressures of the system, which congeals identity and patrols the borders of power.

Keywords: Social Mobility, Symbolic Capital, Economic Power, Bourdieu, De Certeau

1. Introduction

The Jew was an ideologically, historically, and culturally loaded dramatic construct; in early modern theatre, however, it remained politically absent. Although the social situation changed drastically in early sixteenth century with Jews being readmitted to England, they had been generally prohibited to enter England since being expelled in 1290 by King Edward I therefore audiences in late sixteenth century were only aware of them through religious literature, folklore and more so, the theatrical stereotypes (Berek, 2016). This historical vacuum formed the space in which Jews might be imagined not as a

neighbor but as a symbolic 'Other' as a projection of the Christian uneasiness with regards to heresy moneylending, betrayal and difference (Wise, 2017). These factors are within this context that Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare present two of the most memorable Jewish characters in English drama: that of Barabas in *The Jew of Malta*, and that of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*.

The Jew of Malta is a diabolic satire and a harrowing tragedy based in Malta one of the Mediterranean islands, which at the time was a Christian stronghold being sieged by the Ottoman forces. The action follows the fortunes of the fabulously wealthy Jew merchant, Barabas, who is dispossessed by the ruling Christian government who need to finance military resistance to a foreign invasion. As a reply to this, Barabas embarks on a bloodthirsty path of revenge, manipulating religious and political leaders to orchestrate a chain of murders until he ultimately turns against the island by befriending the Turks who torment the island. Barabas is an extreme character -he is joyfully evil, argumentatively flamboyant and theatrically self-conscious. However, what appears on the surface is a caustic commentary on the hypocrisy of religion; to which all dominant institutions Christian, Muslim and Jewish are subjected to as hypocritical and self-serving. Barabas has been made more than a villain in the play and is shown as a reflection to a cynical power-seeking world around him.

Positioned by Shakespeare in *The Merchant of Venice*, the myth of Jewish-Christian relations is rather morally ambiguous and ambiguous in the emotive sense. Set in sixteenth-century Venice, a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural city of trade and law, the play tracks the estrangement between Shylock, a Jewish moneylender and Antonio, a Christian merchant. When Antonio fails to pay the loan that he took, Shylock wants him to pay a pound of his flesh as agreed upon. Subsequent trial scene then simply dramatizes ideas around justice and mercy, legal interpretation, and Shylock is defeated, made to convert to Christianity. In opposition to Barabas, Shylock is not just a black villain of the play; he is an injured person who is laughed at in the streets, disowned by his daughter and discriminated by the Venetian society (Overton, 2015). His infamous speech when speaking about himself as the Jew provocatively titled, "Hath not a Jew eyes?" comes out as humanizing, and takes the listener through the feeling of re-considering the motives and ethics of his punishment.

Despite their differences in style and form, the two plays place their Jewish characters as men who are trying to establish dominance within societies which they are excluded in. The differences in the strategies that Barabas and Shylock use to attain protection, control or status are contrasted by the fact that at the end of the day both are their own worst enemies, in the same ways they are defined as outsiders. This paper examines how Barabas in *The Jew of Malta* and Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* use different forms of power—economic, legal, and performative—to negotiate their marginalized positions within Christian societies. Despite their wealth and intelligence, both characters fail to ascend the social ladder due to the religious and cultural barriers that block their path to legitimacy. Through close analysis of the texts, supported by Bourdieu's concepts of capital and de Certeau's notions of tactics and strategies, this study explores how early modern drama dramatizes the limits of social mobility for Jewish outsiders. In this paper, we use comparative literary analysis to explore the character arcs of Barabas and Shylock in the context of early modern drama. Emphasises on close textual reading, focusing on dialogue, dramatic structure, and character development to understand how social exclusion and ambition are dramatized in each play. Theoretical concepts from Pierre Bourdieu and Michel de Certeau are employed not as the center of the argument, but as tools to sharpen the understanding of how the plays construct and limit Jewish characters' social aspirations. Attention is also paid to the historical and theatrical context of the plays, particularly the anti-Semitic undercurrents and the Christian-dominated worldview that shape audience expectations and character outcomes.

Modern criticism has been revisiting both characters of Barabas in *The Jew of Malta* by Marlowe, and Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* by Shakespeare not as antisemitic archetypes but rather as fully-developed characters brought to life against the backdrop within a Renaissance framework of thinking and acting. James Shapiro in *Shakespeare and the Jews* (1996) offers a backdrop of the possible Jewish presence in Elizabethan dramas, setting *The Merchant of Venice* in the context of a post-expulsion England in which Jews were not legally present but whose cultural memory lingered. According to Shapiro, Shylock represents the English anxieties of otherness, money-lending, and religious difference. He places Shylock in the context of wider ideological anxieties, and states how Shakespeare worked within traditional stereotypes and troubled them. What the analysis of Shapiro does not provide is any discussion of how Shylock utilizes the material and legal resources available to him within the play, as that falls outside the synthesized views on mechanisms of excluding and neglecting the poor. Likewise how Shylock endeavors to carry out his efforts within the context of a broader theme of lack of successful social mobility is not explored (Shapiro, 2016).

An ideological reading can also be presented, most powerfully perhaps in the thinking of Jonathan Dollimore in *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries (2004)*, where the figure of Barabas is no simple villain, but a product of a self-devouring political system. Dollimore argues that Marlowe uses Barabas to expose the hypocrisy of Christian and political institutions, suggesting that the supposed "villainy" of the Jew mirrors the immorality of the state. Although this is insightful, Dollimore is more interested in institutional criticism rather than how the character himself copes with power, or pursues an upward mobility (Dollimore, 2010).

In *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (1998), Harold Bloom discovers Shylock and his influence and believes that Shylock is a morally weighty character and that his character is that of a tragic outsider. By saying this, Bloom argues that Shylock has the psychological depth lacking in other characters, such as Barabas, indicating that Shakespeare permits his Jewish character to speak out of pain and inner richness. However, Bloom's emphasis lies in character psychology and moral complexity, not in social structures or the material limits of power and recognition in the Venetian world (Bloom, 1998).

Walter Cohen, *Drama of a Nation: Public Theater in Renaissance England and Spain* (1985), is a Marxist-drawn interpretation of early modern drama in which real-world structures of economics inform motivations and narrative conflict in character. He views the contract literally agreed upon by Shylock and his debtor, Antonio, as representative of contemporary economic philosophies in Elizabethan England, i.e., the emergence of commercial capitalism. Cohen relates those developments to the conflict between feudal and mercantile values. Although his readings of the economy add much value, they fail to capture how characters such as Shylock seek to move up the social ladder through these economies, or how exclusion through institutions is part of the means to deny symbolic capital (Cohen, 2019).

In *Speaking of the Moor: from Alcazar to Othello* (2008), Emily Bartels discusses how representations of racial and religious Otherness work in *The Jew of Malta* in greater detail, as part of her examination of the subject in early modern texts. Bartels has also explained that Marlowe does not create Barabas as a flat stereotype but as a character who is struggling to navigate and to maneuver through dominant power discourses. Her work focuses on the extent to which the stage is a place of performance and regulation of foreignness and identity. Bartels is more concerned with the rhetoric of identity over and above the economics of the social positioning/mobility (Bartels, 2010).

Janet Adelman, in her *Blood Relations: Christian and Jew in The Merchant of Venice* (2008), reads Shylock in the play in psycho-symbolic terms that challenge the identity and heredity of Christians. She indicates that the insistence on the bond by Shylock indicates a want to be treated equally to others in a society that regards him as throwaway items. Adelman is aware of the structural exclusion that Shylock is treated to but more so focuses on religious and psychological trauma and does not dwell too much on his misplaced access to institutional and symbolic power (Adelman, 2008).

In *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, Stephen Greenblatt traces the building of identity in early modern literature through the way that characters respond to social pressure and authority. Although Greenblatt does not directly address Barabas or even Shylock, his contributions offer clarity about how both characters engage with or work against dominant ideologies in terms of performing their Jewishness. Self-fashioning, as developed by him, provides support to the point that the initiatives of these characters to become visible and to be noticed are fundamentally conditioned by the boundaries of the respective worlds. Nevertheless, Greenblatt tends to produce apposite analyses of identity formation, as opposed to systematic processes of power that influence mobility (Greenblatt, 2012).

In *Ideas of Judaism in The Jew of Malta and The Merchant of Venice* (Wilson, 2024), it is explained that the understanding of Jewishness was central to the characterization of both Barabas and Shylock in their dissemination during the Renaissance. Wilson also takes pains to underline that Barabas is a character who can be construed using the kind of flamboyant antisemitic stereotypes (sneaky, conniving, and ethically irredeemable). Although also suffering the influence of the same stereotypes, Shylock is given a much higher amount of human struggle and conflict. The main argument by Wilson is that the image of Judaism was not historically correct but represented through Christian theological concerns and literature. He remarks that these characters are not exactly Jews but what the renaissance mind visualized as Jews. The lens casts both characters as products of the greater cultural imagination of the time, both not realistic and or sympathetic Jewish characters.

Ćuže provides a broader literary-historical context (2017) in her thesis, *Images of Jewish Characters in the History of English Literature*. Her discussion positions both Barabas and Shylock in the context of a history of Jewish images on an English stage. Although the two characters reflect the "Jew-as-devil" trend, she adds, nevertheless, that Shylock is richer, since he is in psychological turmoil and experiences paternal loss. According to Shylock, he is more of a vehement person torn between his feelings of love and vengeance, particularly in the moments involving his daughter Jessica. Barabas, in comparison, is said to have been a literary invention with no inner struggle—a narrative apparatus, not a stimulator of emotion. This thesis suggests that such differences have led to Shylock being much more versatile in literary criticism than Barabas.

Although the existing body of scholarship on these characters and plays is rich, there is an informational gap that needs to be filled when it comes to explaining how these two characters (Barabas and Shylock) attempt to gain social mobility amidst structurally exclusionary systems and fail to do so not because they are morally flawed but rather because they lack symbolic capital in the Christian hegemonies. There are few articles or works using Pierre Bourdieu's, the theory of capital or Michel de Certeau's, theory of tactics and strategies in order to investigate how all these figures are negotiating powers, either through law, wealth, manipulation or performances and how the plays reveal the futility of these attempts. This paper addresses that gap by exploring how the economic capital of both characters fails to affirm them institutionally or to provide them with social rise, thereby providing a structural interpretation of the character work that interpolates between character studies and sociological theory.

To examine how Barabas and Shylock attempt to navigate and challenge the social structures that exclude them, this paper adopts a dual theoretical approach. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital and Michel de Certeau's theory of tactics and strategies, the study situates both characters within broader sociological models of power, marginalization, and agency.

2. Barabas and the Tactics of Power in *The Jew of Malta*

Barabas, the main character of *The Jew of Malta* by Christopher Marlowe begins as a rich merchant who is already described as a social and religious outcast because of being Jewish. He has a great deal of economic capital, but he has no access to symbolic legitimacy in Christian Malta. This division is made evident in the opening act of the play where when the governor, Ferneze, decides to confiscate the wealth of all the Jews so as to pay a debt to the Turks, Barabas complains about the injustice by claiming that he deserves to be respected as he is a wealthy person. Give me my gold, and let me go from hence, he demands

(Marlowe, 2021). The reality of Christian authority in the person of Ferneze appears to dismiss the claim of Barabas- not because there is something flawed with the law, but instead, because it is the identity of Barabas that makes his possessed the property undeserving of protection. Ferneze exonerates the expropriation: Now as for tribute, we will send it to the Turk / With our ambassador that now is bound for Turkey. / But to ourselves we take Barabas' goods (Marlowe, 2021). This act sets the terms of the world Barabas is living in: Godless money is useless- or rather, ripe to be picked.

"Symbolic capital is credit; it is the power granted to those who have obtained sufficient recognition to be in a position to impose recognition" says Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 2011, p. 82). Barabas' wealth though substantial, cannot confer symbolic legitimacy, and no respect is paid to his wealth, it is subject to seizure. In the terms developed by Pierre Bourdieu, Barabas has economic capital but does not gain access to the symbolic capital, the legitimacy that makes the capital meaningful within the society. In Christian Malta, the validity to possess wealth and grieve or exercise justice is dictated by religion and support to the ruling regime. Barabas Jewishness categorically excludes him as a practitioner of symbolic dispositions, therefore, his enormous wealth proves to be ineffective in this case. His rhetorical flourishes and tactical moves are hence not only expressions of malice rather show a deeper struggle for acknowledgement and power with a stratified social system.

The act of poisoning the convent nuns is not merely a plot device but a deliberate act that underscores Barabas' tactical intelligence. When the deaths are confirmed, he exclaims, "How sweet the bells ring, now the nuns are dead, / that sound at other times like tinkers' pans!" (Marlowe, 2021, p. 125). This line employs irony to juxtapose the solemnity of death with the crudeness of the bells, reflecting Barabas's complex relationship with Christian symbols. His remark, "I was afraid the poison had not wrought," followed by "Now all are dead, not one remains alive," further emphasizes his calculated approach to vengeance (Marlowe, 2021, p. 125). These statements reveal a man who, despite his exclusion, manipulates language to assert control over his circumstances.

Being left without the protection by the institution, Barabas turns into an undercover strategist. He starts to maneuver in the crevices of the social order, and such practices of resistance are what Michel de Certeau calls tactical. According to de Certeau, tactics are "calculated actions determined by the absence of a proper locus" (Certeau & Rendall, 1984, p. 37). These post-dispossession activities conform to this mode: Barabas does not take direct responsibility against the system, he perseveres at the fringe: plotting, impersonating, betraying. They build in doubt. Wherein I trust they'll find / A plot of ground that will serve their turn (Marlowe, 2021). His words prelude his retaliation in kind: he goes on to poison the entire convent.

Strategies employed by Barabas are imitation of the ethos of the Christian system: mimicry of the core Christian values like religious conversions and service in politics, not as conversion but subversion of the system. His hypocritical conversion to Christianity, is played for ironic excess: To be short, the truth is I am content to be a Christian (Act 4, Scene 1) (Marlowe, 2021). Such a declaration is merely phony and this is nothing but a camouflage to his conspiracy. In appropriating the semblance of assimilation, Barabas can be viewed as conducting a form of what de Certeau refers to as 'poaching' in an attempt to effectively exploit a situation of opportunity within a foreign system. Nevertheless, merely successful mimicry is unstable with him, and the success of this mimicry consists in avoiding detection. When he starts to endanger the current order by his tactics, he is struck back by the system.

However clever he is, Barabas is defeated because of the unstable nature of his place. In the last act, after being made governor of Malta by the Turks- a position he earns by betraying them- he betrays them in turn only to end up falling into his own trap. And in his death he cries out: "Die, life! Fly, soul! Tongue, curse thy fill, and die!" (Act 5, Scene 5) (Marlowe, 2021, p. 130). His death, which he informs us with convincing dramatic irony, underlines the analytical boundaries of strategic living. He has taken advantage of each and every loophole that he had, but the grandeur he wanted to take advantage collapses around him. This he falls within the perspective of de Certeau that tacticians work under the threat of immediate expulsion: It must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers (Certeau & Rendall, 1984).

It follows that Barabas is a man who takes matters tactically the economic Marxism, the jester-God, the alibi of vengeance-as-diplomacy -all this because the system provides no strategic framework. His pushback does not only come as a consequence of hubris or evil but exclusion. He is unable to turn his capital into legitimacy since legitimacy is dominated by Christian state itself In *The Jew of Malta* the outsider can only triumph temporarily, and only by sharing in the logic of destruction according to which the society in which he is an outsider operates.

3. Shylock and Legal Strategies in *The Merchant of Venice*

In *The Merchant of Venice* the character Shylock is presented as a Jewish money-lender in Venice, a Christian dominated city of trade where he holds a tenuous social standing. Shylock may hold much in the way of economic capital, being an important lender, but his position in the community is still marginal nevertheless, because he is a Jew, and thus is not respected, but instead continually abused, both verbally and physically. His opening speeches reflect this exclusion: "I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?" (William, 2014, p.35). This statement is not just of grievance, it is a strategy aimed at making common humanity as the counter-argument against a system that excludes him. Shylock seeks social legitimacy through the legal system, viewing it as the only arena where he might assert his rights and command respect. His reliance on law illustrates his intelligence and structural limits of his power.

Shylock's request of one pound of flesh of Antonio, the Christian merchant, is an example of his ability of using legal apparatus as a potential symbolic capital, or the authority of contractual enforcement. Yet, Bourdieu's framework explains why

this fails: wealth only cannot provide legitimacy in a society where recognition is based on religion. As his concept suggests that Symbolic capital is power that comes from acknowledgement by hose who are already recognized (Bourdieu, 2011, p. 82).

Nevertheless, the use of legal strategy fails when the end goal is to find a social mobility path ending with Shylock. Through the influence of Portia in disguise, the Christian court re judges the case by re defining the bond and stating that the Shylock may take away the flesh, only on the condition that he does not shed a drop of Antonio blood- which was utter impossibility. In addition, Shylock is sentenced to conversion to Christianity under pain and loss of half of his possession. The court verdict at the end of the case underlines the boundaries of his symbolic capital: the right made legal is conditional on the goodwill of the dominant group and religious belonging is still a distinguishing mark.

The concept of symbolic capital expressed by Bourdieu can be applied in this case to explain why Shylock does not really possess any social legitimacy despite the economic fuels and legal rights he has. Shylock, rich and legally minded does not belong to the symbolic order governing the society of Venice. His conversion violates (his forced conversion strips him of religious identity - the essence of his social difference) and is a violent reinstitution of unchallenged Christen symbolic dominance.

The idea of justice advocated by Shylock is expressed in his words, which discussed the following: “If you wrong us, shall we not revenge?” (William, 2014, p. 35). He also hopes and believes that obeying the legal contracts will impose social equality or at least ensure his survival. In the consideration of de Certeau, the approach of Shylock can be explained with the idea of trying to work within the system of power, using the mechanisms of law as the instruments of inclusion and recognition. However, his plan fails as the controlling group reinstates its control over the law reminding that the law is a tool of power exercised by the Christian majority through which it tries to exert its value system, but in fact, the law is a means of power to the majority. Strategies, according to de Certeau, require a structured position within the system that allows one to exercise control over its rules (Certeau & Rendall, 1984). The fact that Shylock was unable to seize the same strategic tools demonstrates that disempowered persons are not in a position to exercise comprehensive command over these strategic tools. While Shylock does operate tactically within the legal framework, relying on the law to assert his claim of return, he is constrained by the dominant group’s ultimate control of interpretation and enforcement.

The courtroom scenes in the play further dramatizes there apparently hidden tensions, “This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood; The words expressly are “a pound of flesh.” Take then thy bond, take thou thy pound of flesh; But, in the cutting it, if thou dost shed One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods, Are, by the laws of Venice, confiscate, Unto the state of Venice. (William, 2014, p. 57). While his appeals as a person of social standing are valid, yet here the system bends the law to maintain Christian authority. Towards the end, under the guise of Christian mercy Shylock’s wealth is confiscated as Portia turns the law against shylock: “The party ’gainst the which he doth contrive, Shall seize one half his goods; the other half, Comes to the privy coffer of the state.”(William, 2014, p. 59). And then the duke mercifully spares his life but keeps his property as a penalty in its place.

Shylocks situation calls upon bigger questions about how far people on the fringe can take agency in systems built to keep them out or force the system on the seemly other. In order to get part of his own wealth Shylock is forced to accept Antonio’s terms “He presently become a Christian; …and that he do record a gift, Here in the court, of all he dies possess’d,
Unto his son Lorenzo and his daughter” (William, 2014, p. 60). So, seemly Shylock technically retains some control on part of his wealth but that too is based on terms that half of it goes to the state, half is left to Antonio’s control and ultimately after his death is transferred to Jessica and Lorenzo.

The legalistic approach that Shylock follows exposes the instability of social mobility among foreigners in the early modern Venice, where identity and power exist in a complex interrelationship and are established within ruling monumentalized orders. Through Bourdieu and de Certeau, Shylock turns out as a character who’s legal and economic acts exposes the fragility of symbolic recognition of those excluded from power. His legal tactics, speeches and ultimate defeat magnifies the limits of social mobility in a society dead bent on and structured to deny the outsiders legitimacy, showing how even the most clever and calculated strategies cannot overcome ingrained and institutionalized exclusion.

4. Barabas and Shylock Negotiating Social Mobility through Capital and Power

Both Barabas (*The Jew of Malta*) and Shylock (*The Merchant of Venice*) are prosperous Jewish individuals who have to live in a Christian majority world that systematically denies them the possibility of enjoying full levels of social acceptance and legitimacy. They struggle to climb up the ladder as symbolic capital is beyond the limit of economic capital and the tactics/strategies that they apply to take their fortunes into terms of social climbers.

The case of Barabas shows that economic capital on its own does not mean much when it comes to social mobility without symbolic capital - the socially recognized legitimacy that truly gains power and status (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2013). Barabas, although rich beyond belief, is nonetheless deprived and pushed to the periphery of the dominant Christian society because the society refuses to grant him any type of symbolic capital due to his Jewish origins (Ferreira, 2025). His own action is to act in the domain of tactics as defined by De Certeau; that of maneuvers taken of advantage and improvised in a non-instituted position of power. Barabas is selectively deceitful, dissimulating, and violent because the use of such features through cracks in the dominant power structure provided him with a point of temporary leverage where he can exert his influence. His strategy is to disrupt social order so that he does not become entitled to enjoy unlimited access to symbolic capital and consequent social mobility.

Contrary to this, Shylock tries to take part in strategic deployment of institutional power where he invests his trust in the Venice law of the land that will spare his prosperous interests and fulfill the justice of the contract. This echoes the de Certeau understanding of strategies as being rooted in the use of the institutional space as well as the codification of the law (Frijhoff, 2018). The demand that Shylock raises regarding the release of the bond is precisely his attempt to transform his economic capital into the symbolic one through the legal legitimacy that can be seen as a disinterested channel of social recognition (Sarker & Ahmed, 2021). Yet what the trial scene shows is that Shylock's strategy is undermined, the Christian authorities can re-conceptualize the legal system in order to rob him of his claim and subject him to onerous terms--an example of how the symbolic capital and law are tightly held by the dominant social group.

In the context of such conversion of economic capital to symbolic, Bourdieu can be used further to explain why both of the characters eventually fail in their efforts to use economic form of capital to ascend to higher social statuses: their economic capital cannot be effectively converted to symbolic as the dominant Christian societies exclude Jewishness as an identity to be recognized and honored (Boyarin & Boyarin, 1993). Symbolic power is the kind of power accorded by the gate keepers of the social field in order to maintain hierarchical boundaries by not granting legitimacy to the marginalized groups.

Additionally, the nature of the strategy of both characters, that is, military maneuvers of Barabas and strategic legality of Shylock display little opportunities to reach social promotion. Barabas strategies help illustrate that marginalized people are forced to take clandestine and pliable actions that disrupt but not fix the system, and the failure of such a strategy in the case of Shylock helps exemplify that being welcomed in through institutional channels is contingent, and regulated. Both modes represent the structural restrains to upward mobility that was a characteristic of Jews in early modern Europe.

In these ways, Barabas and Shylock can be seen as offering two possible responses to the challenge of exclusion: one through calculated subversion, the other through the attempt to enter or negotiate institutional structures that fundamentally reject access to full inclusion. Their narratives show that social mobility is not only about individual will or financial success but largely determined by the symbolic borders and the hierarchical relations implemented on the basis of the predominant legal and cultural institutions.

5. Conclusion

This paper has drawn upon the intricate characterization of Barabas in *The Jew of Malta* and Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* with the perspective of social mobility, explaining that both characters, despite their differences in approaches, are eventually shut out of the world of symbolic legitimacy in Christian communities. In their efforts to transform their economic power into social respect and institutional authority, Barabas' manipulative tactics are aimed at realizing his economic capital, and that Shylock has adopted legal strategies. Both characters are systematically denied success not due to personal flaws but by virtue of the societies in which they exist, and are designed to be incapable of moving upwards.

Barabas is an external infiltrator with no institutional voice in the system, who is able to exercise his tactical subversion, exploiting the loopholes and inconsistencies of the social order. Shylock, by contrast, resorts to a more procedural, plan-like course of action by addressing the law, only to learn that the very legal framework is prejudiced in a certain way and open to manipulation by the powerful Christian group.

The comparison of these characters lead to the realization of a sad state of things in early modern drama: economic wealth, intelligence, and even having a point of the law on his side are not enough when it comes to symbolic power under the watchful eye of dominant ideology. This reveals the fallacy of meritocracy in these cultures and highlights the pointlessness of pursuing equality on a level playing field when not involving any structural considerations. Barabas and Shylock are not merely villains or tragic heroes, they are case studies of the denial of mobility, with each of them representing a facet of the same system of pre-movement.

Although this paper contains a concentrated literary comparison, it has several limitations that affect its scope. It adopts the theory presented by Bourdieu and de Certeau and excludes employing other theories that would deepen the analysis, including postcolonial theory, theological criticism or trauma studies. These other views would present a more balanced interpretation of the texts. Also, the genres covered in the comparison are quite different (tragedy and dark comedy), the paper mostly focuses on similarities in relation to the themes and practically ignores genre-specific features of how the ideas of social mobility and identity are treated. Therefore, the way characterization is influenced by genre differences is a yet unexplored area.

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