

# THE VENICE OF MAQUIAVEL AND SHAKESPEARE: FROM CLASSICAL REPUBLICANISM TO THE MODERN IDEAL OF LIBERTY

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**Abstract:** The intention of this brief article is to demonstrate, through the Machiavellian and Shakespearean analyzes, mediated by the latter's work, "*The Merchant of Venice*", the contrast between the classical republican conception and the modern political ideal of freedom. We will take as a gauge the ideas of social belonging (religion, social recognition); legal constitution of rights (individual freedom), trying to understand how these aspects are constructed in the representations of the city of Venice by the two authors. For this undertaking, it will be necessary to understand the Machiavellian understanding of the political and social structures that founded and sustained the Venice of his time. Then understand the scenario in which Shakespeare sees the Venice of his era, analyzing his work mentioned. Finally, we will try to demonstrate how one can extract from this intricate approximation subsidies to think the contrast between the traces of a classic republican thought and the incipient points of a modern conception of individual freedom.

**Keywords:** Machiavelli, Shakespeare, republicanism, freedom.

**Resumo:** A intenção deste breve artigo é demonstrar, através das análises maquiaveliana e shakespeariana, mediadas pela obra deste último, "*O Mercador de Veneza*", o contraste entre a concepção republicana clássica e o moderno ideal político de liberdade. Tomaremos como bitola as ideias de pertença social (religião, reconhecimento social); constituição legal de direitos (liberdade individual), buscando compreender como tais aspectos se constroem nas representações da cidade de Veneza por parte dos dois autores. Para tal empreendimento, será necessário compreender o entendimento maquiaveliano sobre as estruturas políticas e sociais que fundaram e sustentaram a Veneza de seu tempo. Em seguida, compreender o cenário no qual Shakespeare vê a Veneza de sua era, analisando sua obra mencionada. Por fim, buscaremos demonstrar como se pode extrair desta intrincada aproximação subsídios para se pensar o contraste entre os traços de um pensamento republicano clássico e os pontos incipientes de uma moderna concepção de liberdade individual.

**Palavras-chave:** Maquiavel, Shakespeare, republicanism, liberdade

## Introduction

Trying to contrast constitutive points of an understanding of a certain classical republicanism in the face of modern problems of freedom and social belonging, constitutes an intricate and potentially vexatious

enterprise. When we put in line two authors as different as Machiavelli and Shakespeare, we run the risk of confronting two problems, first, to find a thread for such an approach, second, to “transubstantiate” political, ethical, and fictional concepts in the same language. Faced with these previously announced misfortunes, we will seek to follow an itinerary that allows us to satisfactorily navigate the two universes represented here, that of politics and fictional literature.

Although they are set in practically the same historical period, the two authors here taken as a reference are extremely distinct in cultural and political terms, Machiavelli’s (catholic) Italy does not express the same political and cultural background as Shakespeare’s Elizabethan (Protestant) England. How, then, can we discuss any political or ethical subject from the thought of these two figures? It seems to us that a possible, perhaps not the most plausible, path would be to approach the expensive themes of Machiavelli’s politics through the Shakespearean fictional plot. Obviously it would not be possible to do this covering the full extent of the works of the two authors in the short space available to us in this article. In this way, as already architected beforehand, we will take as counter-light the Shakespearean work “*The Merchant of Venice*”.

The most anxious reader will surely ask himself: What are the themes subsidized by this work in view of politics? Well, the answer will be searched hard in this work, however, it is not guaranteed to find it on a golden pedestal. However, we draw the following itinerary to satisfactorily state that such an undertaking is at least possible. First, we shall search on Machiavelli’s analysis of the Republic of Venice, especially on the aspects that, according to the Florentine, constitute the basis of the stability of this city. Our focus will be on the issues of social belonging (recognition) and the legal constitution of rights (individual liberty). We hope to find in this analysis strong traits of a classical conception of the republic, especially as regards the figure of the individual within the body politic.

As a second movement, we will seek the understanding of the English political scene that fermented Republican ideas, both in the period immediately prior to Shakespeare, and in his own writing period of his major works. After this step, we will succinctly demonstrate some of the political aspects that can be identified in the Shakespearean work, either by means of the foreshadowing of modern ideals of freedom, or by the ironic critique of the myth itself of the republican perfection of Venice. However, we hope to be able to identify traits that point to a possible resonance of political

discussions, perhaps recognizing the influence of some majoritarian conception of his time.

Finally, in a third move, we will take as a mediation the work already mentioned, “*The Merchant of Venice*”, from which we hope to be able to intricate the thoughts of the two authors addressed, aiming to recognize aspects that fit the incipient idea of political freedom which will later influence European political thinking. At this point, seeking not to incur theoretical anachronisms, but having already the ‘blade’ on the neck, we will take as a gauge the modern ideals of freedom expressed mainly by B. Constant. From this, we will present what we understand as the tension between a classic republican model and an incipient model of modern libertarian ideals of freedom based on individual freedom and the absence of social, political and religious ties. Certainly we do not expect to have an exhaustion of the subject, given the succinct nature of our approach and the deplorable fact that it is the deeply diffuse subject. We hope, with the feasible coherence of the text, to raise questions that will leverage the discussion of the proposed theme and its direction towards consensus.

## **1 The Venice of Machiavelli and the classic republican conception**

The Machiavellian analysis of the foundations of constitution of a republic takes place in view of a clear paradox, namely, expansion or stability, as follows:

In all the human thing you see this, who examines it well, that you can not cure one inconvenience without provoking another. In this way, if you want a warlike and numerous people, expanding the possession of the republic, you must give it a character that will make it difficult to govern, wanting instead to restrict it within narrow limits, or disarm it for the better control him, he will not be able to keep his achievements, or he will become such a coward that he will be easy prey for the aggressor. (MACHIAVELLI, 1954, *Discorsi* I, 6).

In these terms, the founder of such a body politic must, from its inception, establish what will be the fate of its people, whether to expand or to remain stable, but small. However, the Florentine is peremptory in stating that “necessity, in turn, compels us to ventures that reason would make us reject. Thus, after founding a republic adapted to remain unconquered, should the need arise to make it grow, it would soon collapse, for lack of the necessary base “. (*Ibid*, I, 6). In proposing this paradox, Machiavelli brings as opposing

examples the republics of Rome and Sparta in the past, as well as the republic of Venice in his present<sup>1</sup>. Rome is the example of the expansionist, active republic, difficult to govern but belligerent and avid for conquests. The opposites, Sparta and Venice, are examples of closed, stable and hermetically constituted republics.

Among the main factors that contribute to the definition of the future of a type of republic and its opposite are: social belonging and the body of laws. In that first factor, social belonging in a stable republic, the restriction of the right to belong to the body politic, as well as the restriction of social recognition, are determinant to keep the republic stable. In this second, the body of laws, the constitution of laws that guarantee freedom, the balance between social classes, keeping, in the case of the stable republic, the custody of this freedom in the hand of the elite, as will be seen later. As a first illustration of the use of these devices, we have the Sparta Republic, shaped by the skillful mind of Lycurgus, which established devices that restricted foreigners access to prominent political positions, as well as restricted marriage and citizenship of foreigners. (*Ibid*, II, 3).

A similar file was adopted in Venice at a given moment, mainly in access to the most prominent public positions and of greater political power. According to Machiavelli, Venice was formed by fugitive individuals from other regions, as the number of its inhabitants increased, the older citizens proposed laws restricting foreigners' access to the highest positions, in the words of the author:

[...] and acting together in the council of the city, when it seemed to them that the inhabitants were enough to establish a political life, they closed the way, to all the new inhabitants that arrived, to be able to participate in their governments. In this time, being in that place enough inhabitants outside the government, to give reputation those who governed, they called them *Gentiluomini*, and to others it was called *Popolani*. So the government was born and remained without tumults, because when it was born, all that inhabited Venice were put in the government, so that none of them could complain.

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<sup>1</sup> On this discussion, we indicate the text of Gabriele Pedullà, Machiavelli and the Critics of Rome: Rereading Discourses I.4: In: JOHNSTON, David; URBANATI, Nadia; VERGARA, Camila. *Machiavelli on liberty & conflict*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017. In this text the author makes a fruitful effort to demonstrate that the dichotomy between Rome and Venice is a purely Machiavellian creation, as opposed to G. Sasso's thesis, he seeks to demonstrate that there was no Florentine pro-Venice aristocracy. Following his path, he points out that this dichotomy led to several errors of interpretation and the erroneous propagation of theses on a possible anti-Roman philosophy and another anti-Venetian philosophy in the Italian Renaissance.

Those who later came to inhabit it, finding the government closed and finished, had no reason or convenience to make tumults. (*Ibid.*, I, 6).

This device created the first social division in the Venetian Republic, the *Gentiluomini*, lords or nobles, and the *Popolani*, the people or commoners. The Venetian republic was extremely dependent on this political-social arrangement, since its disposition as a body politic was aimed at maintaining a stability that would guarantee both the privileges of the masters and the freedom of the people. In this sense, the possible social belonging to the individuals migrating to this city was only that of citizen subject to the laws of the aristocratic government. One can imagine that Machiavelli is merely illustrating the beginnings of the Republic of Venice, without taking into account the changes that have taken place over the centuries. However, his intention is precisely to demonstrate that the configuration given to a republic in its early years will shape its history and its development.

Although it is a republic focused on stability and not on expansion, this being the factor that allows it to remain untouched for a longer time in the face of alternations of government, but at the same time restricted in its power, Venice is not a city impoverished. Its strength is tied to trade and maritime activity. Privileged by its geographical position and its stable constitution, it was apparently able to satisfactorily compensate for the need to expand territorially, while retaining the character of an aristocratic republic. However, the Machiavellian analysis being certain, sooner or later the necessity will cause it to expand or accept the influence of its new inhabitants. What Machiavelli himself shows us is that because of the ambition of Venice, especially in the late fifteenth century, the king of France had entry into the Italian peninsula and gained power by helping the Venetians in the conquest of areas of Lombardy. (MACHIAVELLI, 1954, *Il Principe*. III). This shows that Venetian ambition was on the lookout for new expansions, but their companies were not so successful, given their constant need for help from outside forces.

On the other hand, the lack of internal conflicts in Venice, contrary to what happened in Rome, according to Machiavelli, can be understood as the thermometer of the good constitution achieved by the Venetians. However, this constitution was not given by an experienced legislator or a virtuous founding ruler. In this sense, the arrangement between the first Venetians demonstrates how the institutions themselves were accommodated in the political and social organization, with no socially 'traumatic' episode. According to the Florentine: "It is fortunate, rather than to the wisdom of its

legislators, that Venice owes its form of government". (MACHIAVELLI, 1954, *Discorsi* I, 6). Thus, the specificity of the Venice Republic is the somewhat peaceful arrangement between the two classes that were formed and the maintenance of customs, laws and institutions that preserved the maintenance mechanisms of this organization.

The Venetian laws were based on a social basis of customs and traditions which, in turn, laid the foundations of government. Once a legislative tradition had been established, a political model of government was established which should be safeguarded in view of not being substantially altered or tainted by internal disputes. This expedient was necessary to ensure that freedom was not hampered by disputes arising between the desire to maintain the status quo, namely the fear of loss of privilege, the *Gentiluomini*, and the desire for greater participation in power by the *Popolani*. In discussing the best guardian of freedom, Machiavelli points out that for the defenders of the model of the Venetians this answer can only be answered in view of the primacy of the nobles, as follows:

On the other hand, those who defend the Spartan and Venetian order say that by placing the custody of liberty in the hands of the powerful, they did two good deeds: one is that they have more satisfied the ambition of those who have more part in the republic, by having this rod in the hands, have reason to be more content; the other is that they derive a kind of authority from the restless spirits of the plebs, which is the reason for infinite dissensions and scandals in a republic, capable of leading the nobility to some desperate act which in time produces harmful effects. (*Ibid.* I, 5).

In pointing out the defense that some commentators make of the expedient adopted by the Spartans and Venetians, Machiavelli reinforces the paradox that exists between the two possible types of republic, mainly when in the sequence of its explanation it indicates that the freedom between the Romans was left in the hand of the plebs. Reinforcing this paradox, the author also reinforces the idea that the disposition assumed by the Venetians seems to guarantee greater stability, while the disposition of the Romans seems to imply a greater love of freedom on the part of the people and institutions that allow a more expansionist character.

However, what interests us is to emphasize the aristocratic character that was delineated and settled in the Venetian republic from its beginnings, which Machiavelli emphasizes like example of a stable constitution. "Thus the aristocratic character of the Venetian constitution, where the *'guardia alla liberta'*

is in the hands of *gentilumomini* and these alone have the right to administrative posts, has in fact guaranteed the city's *libertà* for a long time". (GUARINI, 1993, p. 37). In this arrangement, social belonging is strongly dependent on the adherence and submission of individuals to the customs, laws, and traditions that underpin the body politic. In spite of all this aristocratic structure, the aura of freedom was present in the construction of the thriving and flourishing Venice, in this sense, the defenders of the Venetian model sought to luster the participatory character of all classes, having the direction of the aristocratic class, but encompassing popular participation.

This defense seems to be deeply deliberate in substantiating the supremacy of the Venetian model vis-a-vis other models of republic, especially the Florence model. From this point of view, one can understand that the traditional restrictions of social belonging, implanted at the beginning of the republic and sedimented in the course of its history, are softened by the ideal of social participation invoked in the construction of a democratic figure, even of an aristocratic background, of the Venetian Republic. To this end, the legislative arrangement is of vital importance, playing a crucial role in guaranteeing the participation of individuals, those with social recognition, political belonging, and the primacy of aristocratic classes.

The legislative construction that sustains the body politic is a reflection of the aristocratic organization, emphasizing by the sturdy maintenance of the devices that guarantee a 'serene' freedom, that is, a freedom that gives vent to the restlessness of the town and that does not take the nobles to use its power against them. As stated, the intrinsic dependence that existed between the legislative construction and the political organization was safeguarded by the intransigent application of severe punishments to those who promoted some kind of derangement. Machiavelli underscores this fine link between government and legislation in reaffirming the need to use force to support good laws:

Those who ruled the Republic of Venice between 1434 and 1494 said, in this regard, that it would be necessary to redo the government every five years if one wanted to keep it. To redo the government, for them, was to revive in the minds of the citizens the fear of punishment and respect for institutions, with the elimination of those who had acted badly [...]. (MACHIAVELLI, 1954, *Discorsi*. III, 1).

The Florentine is very specific in pointing out the temporal lapse to which he alludes, the sixty years in which Venice had the strong expansionist

effort in which it sought to expand its could in Lombardy and other Italian regions, as already alluded above. In this period the skirmishes against Milan, Florence and Bologna, as well as the support to Pope Sixtus IV, took to the city of Venice to diverse setbacks, mainly with the betrayal of the latter. However, its power was considerable and was favored with French support at the end of this period. However, it is interesting to note that it is the same period in which one can see the most powerful political influence of the Medici in Florence.

The Venetian constitution, with all its burden of aristocracy and class distinction, was taken as an example of a social-political arrangement, not only because of its lack of conflicts, as we have already mentioned, but also because of its ability to adapt to setbacks that the republic faced. From this point of view, what can be said, unlike Florence, which lived more ‘sensibly’ the disputes between factions and the various internal and external political forces, is that in Venice policy, internal and external, did not deviate from the traditionally established establishments taxes. “The tone of the Venetian character was therefore that of a proud and even contemptuous isolation and, consequently, of a strong internal solidarity, to which the hatred of which it was targeted by the rest of Italy contributed”. (BURCKHARDT, 2013, p. 91).

In a broad sense, it can be said that the Venetian model was practically a mixed government, in which the Doge had the role of a monarch, not hereditary, but elected - which will also be appreciated by the English republicans - also having the participation of several advices. Let us see what Martins (2013, p.62) instructs us on this subject:

In general lines the Venetian republic was presented as a regime that had a single ruler, the doge, a sort of monarch elected without the right to leave hereditary successors, who also could not leave the city and should execute the determinations coming from the different councils; (the Great Council, the Council of Ten, the Council of Commercial Law, etc.), which gave rise to the main decisions on the political life of the city; and finally, the presence of the other social groups when it was convened to elect the representatives on these councils, making in this case the rule of many.

All this configuration gave to the Venice of the time of Machiavelli the graceful nickname of the ‘*serenissima*’, giving base to the call ‘myth of Venice’. As will be seen in the reception of classical republicanism in England, this myth of Venice as a serene republic will foster a great interest in its constitution and a heated ideological use of its presuppositions. “As has been

shown elsewhere the influence of what has been called the myth of Venice, the idealised image of the history and the institutions of that republic, made a strong impact where institutions and administration were to be defined more precisely.” (MULIER, 1993, p. 253). The foundations that support this image are undoubtedly the clear classic republican dispositions anchored in the political and social recognition of individuals, in the strict foundation of laws in strong traces of tradition and customs.

The myth of Venice as a stable, fair and flourishing republic will be a piece of propaganda, especially after the mid-fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. In this period the intellectual, political, and even ‘patriotic’ dispute between Venice and Florence was strongly fought. Both boasted of their Roman and Christian origins, merging a past of glory and holiness there. In this dispute, the assumptions that supported the representation of a classical republican heritage, especially in political participation and stability, were worth more. “Only Venice and Florence had remained on the Italian scene as powerful and independent republics: republicanism created an ideological connection.” (GILBERT, 1977, p. 126).

Taking this indicative of the dispute between Venice and Florence over the true republican heritage of the ancient Romans, and bearing in mind the fact that Machiavelli was not one of the most fervent supporters of the Venetian model, we can intuit that the affirmation of stability could not be a claim of Roman membership, at least not by the bias employed by the Florentine. Since the Roman republic was expansionist, not stable, having constant social and political frictions and a strong sense of attachment to freedom, it was not Venice’s natural successor. On the other hand, it was not Florence either, since it was hesitant and little shaken by a truly expansionist spirit. Having this understanding, it seems to us that Machiavelli sees no possibility of both being true heirs of the great Rome, but Venice represented the classic type of republic that stood as opposed to the Roman model. Florence, on the other hand, could have had a more courageous spirit, more detached, however, not only did not possess such a spirit, but also did not stand out for its stability.

We can intuit that Machiavelli is clearly establishing the republican boundaries that define Venice, not in line with the praise of the Venetian myth of a perfect republic that can be taken as true heir of Rome, but at the same time recognizing that this feature, stability and constancy, can be understood as the result of an arrangement won by ‘luck’ and by a strong attachment to tradition, customs, and the keeping of laws. In this way Machiavelli’s Venice is an example of a republic that achieved its stability by chance, having solidified

a thriving aristocracy, but managed to adapt to an arrangement in which the other classes enjoyed a certain political participation, social recognition, even that based on restricted devices, constituting a stable political body and capable of achieving economic prosperity, legislative and certain political power.

However, this model was not the Florentine's favorite, nor could it be understood as the legitimate remnant model of the glorious Rome of the past. Unfortunately we do not have enough space to delay this discussion, nor to point out the factors that give substrate to the ideological dispute between Venice and Florence, much less what would be Machiavelli's position in the face of this quarrel. However, we understand that Machiavelli sees in Venetian arrangements the traces of a kind of classical republicanism dating back to Sparta, these arrangements will constitute the very myth of the perfect Venice and will give way to the apprehension of republicanism in Northern Europe. This apprehension of the Venetian myth and of the republican arrangement that it represents will not be directed by Machiavellian criticism, much less by the paradoxical dispute between stability and expansion, rather it will be guided by the search for a model of mixed government that allows a greater participation of the aristocratic classes and certain popular participation. In this way, the central motto of the assimilation of republicanism in the North, mainly England, will be the construction of a model of government that allows to limit the powers of the monarchy and to guarantee a balanced participation of the political life.

We shall now proceed to the task of summarizing the process of apprehension of classical republicanism by English and Scottish politicians and thinkers, as well as the assimilation of the myth of Venice as a perfect republic and the political objective of laying the foundations for a government more participatory and limiting monarchical powers.

## **2 The assimilation of classical republicanism in England**

It is extremely important to understand the prevailing political scene in England in the early sixteenth century. Even though the focal point of Shakespeare's work was in the Elizabethan period, the assimilation of republican ideas by English thinkers, mainly Protestants, took place from the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The English configuration was densely ruled by the hereditary monarchy, having strong religious trait after the first Protestant reforms. However, hereditary monarchy was not a consensus for all social strata of the English body politic. The nobility showed a constant desire

for greater participation and endless mistrust of the unlimited powers that could make the monarchy an undesirable tyranny.

This scenario enters the XVI century with central figure Henry VIII, succeeding his father, Henry VII, he continues the monarchy of the Tudor, having as main challenge to extend the English power and consolidate the house of the Tudor as a legitimate inheritance to the English crown. However, as will be seen later, he will be one of the last Tudor, having his daughter Elisabeth as the last ruler of this house. Henry VIII was succeeded by Edward VI in 1547, after his death in 1553, ascended to the throne Maria Tudor, who reigns until his death in 1558. This year, Elizabeth, who had been imprisoned in the Tower of London, is crowned queen.

It is interesting to note that in this exchange of monarchs there was a strong religious tension between the Protestants, mainly supported by the Scots, and the Catholics, supported by Rome and Spain. The road traveled by Henry VIII had several political, religious and moral mishaps. However, our initial interest lies in the political configuration which generally marked its reign, its importance for the consolidation of the Protestant Reformation, and especially the consequences of these events for Elisabeth's reign and the strengthening of republican ideas within the English.

Henry VIII's search for an heir to consolidate the Tudor family as a ruling family led him to a true marriage pilgrimage. We will not devote too much time and space to settle this question, however, we are interested precisely in this point of necessity for any hereditary monarchy, namely, the establishment of a line of succession. This theme will be strongly present in the reign of Elisabeth and will guide the discussions around republican ideas and the search for a mixed government.

Between 1521 and 1526, Henry joins the papacy and Charles V against France of Francisco I and Venice, initiating the Italian wars. It is interesting to note that in earlier times the Church had allied with Spain to gain power in Italy, but the scenario had changed and changed even more after the beginning of the 1530s. As pointed out, the need to establish a line of succession led Henry to various marriages, and in one of these links the rupture with the Church was final. In general, the situation of tension between the Roman Church and the king dragged on since 1527, when he was denied the request for dissolution of his marriage to Catherine. However, only in 1534, with the Act of Supremacy, did the Anglican Church become the official church of England and the king its sole and sovereign leader.

In the course of these movements and following the monarchical successions, Edward VI assumed the throne, as an infant, after the death of

Henry VIII, having a Regentary Council as guardian. In this period the Anglican church was strengthened, mainly by the action of Tomás Cramner, which gave the own characteristics of a Protestant Christianity and moved away even more England of the Roman Church. However, after Edward's untimely death, his half-sister, Mary Tudor, who reestablished the primacy of Catholicism in England and reverted to the process of strengthening Anglican Protestantism, ascended to the throne. As mentioned above, these abrupt changes, made more for political reasons than actually theological or religious faith, led to the creation of a state of instability in the English social body after the death of Henry VIII. The pressure exerted by the Roman Church and the Holy Roman Empire led to an increase in this situation of instability and fostered the scenario in which Elisabeth I and the strengthening of republican thought in England will emerge.

Elizabeth I was a Protestant, promoting a strengthening of the Church which Henry had created, however, not fostering a very strong persecution of Catholicism, such as that made in the regency of Edward VI. However, in 1570 she was excommunicated by the Roman Church, which led to a growing fear of attacks on her life, mainly by the diffusion of the theory of beneficial tyrannicide. The Roman Church had a great interest in fostering such a mood of animosity against the queen and, after her excommunication, decreed that it would be an act of faith to murder a tyrant, in the case of Elizabeth, who oppressed the true 'body of Christ'.

The apprehension and assimilation of classical republican thought occurs in this scenario that goes through a relatively long period, but which maintains two constant themes, namely, the limitations of real power and the political participation of the other classes. In this sense, the first assimilation of republicanism will take place exactly through that first theme, as instructed by Hadfield (2005, p.17):

If republicanism was somehow taken as clear and coherent doctrine in the mid-sixteenth century in England, this was given to the intellectual conviction that it was necessary to control the power of the Crown by establishing a means of ensuring that a set of virtuous and servile counselors could always have the constitutional right to advise the monarch, and also to influence and control their actions within the limits of the law.

This view pleased the nobles and the incipient bourgeois class who saw the opportunity to increase their participation in power and to keep under control the real performance. In this way, the threats to Elizabeth's reign did

not come only from abroad, especially from the Roman Church and from Spain, she had to deal with a whole political-intellectual wing that drew on republicanism to raise grounds for proposing a mixed form of government. Indeed, this was the true intention of the individuals who solidified the republican discussion in sixteenth-century England, the proposition and constitution of a mixed government in which the power of the monarch was limited by the action of councils and chambers which could deliberate on matters relating to own community administration.

Having this understanding, one can see that it was first necessary to establish the equivalent of the term republic, not only in a philosophical or political sense, but in a sense that reflected the comprehensive character that it should have, ie, integrating the entire political body, from the king to the people. The term '*Res Publica*', a people's thing, was translated into English as 'Commonwealth', community, common wealth. However, this English term already denoted an incipient idea of State, like something separated of the own citizens or of the governing dynasty.

Following this view, supporters of the assimilation of republican ideas into the construction of a mixed government sought references in which they could anchor their propositions and establish clearly the construction of the government they sought. However, it can be affirmed that there was not a solid republican tradition in the Anglophone world, in fact the great masters of the Republican thought were Latin, mainly Italian. Thus, it was necessary to resort to the 'basics' of classical republican tradition, authors such as Livy, Salustio, Cicero and others. However, the path was too long and the discussion was already advanced in the Latin world, and thus, the necessary reference will be sought mainly in Italian and Neo-Latin authors.

In spite of this movement of assimilation of classical republicanism through Latin and Italian interpreters and thinkers, the production of intellectual material based on the idea of community (commonwealth) had a strong importance in the construction of a republican identity in England and consolidation of the idea of a government the participation of society in power. According to what we have discussed so far, the scenario favored this perspective and the very uncertainty regarding the continuity of the Tudor regency allowed the glimpse of the opportunity for change in the form of government. The idea of a community, a broader government, in which the monarchist model was based on the basis of a mixed government, fostered the intellectual production movement around the theme. Some thinkers, such as Sir Thomas Smith, have excelled in this movement, always having in vogue the

theme of strengthening an English identity for emerging republican thinking and its constitution of a community idea. As Hadfield (2005, p.20) points out:

Smith made a more substantial contribution to English political thought a few years later when he provided a political anatomy of England, *De Republica Anglorum: A Discourse on the Commonwealth of England*. Like the earlier *A Discourse of the Commonweal*, this work circulated widely in manuscript and had an important influence before its publication in 1583, at least 18 years after it was written.

The need to establish the theoretical and political bases of an English-style republicanism would not exclude the constant search for parameters in the Latin tradition of interpretation of the classic republican models. Thus, the natural disposition was to be guided by models that corresponded to the longings of the aristocratic classes that sought to sediment the ways for their greater participation in the English government. All this discussion would not be restricted to the intellectual scope, nor even to the aristocratic circle, in a way, this movement was taking shape in several other social areas of the English community. It seems correct to assert that the most educated individuals, intellectuals, thinkers, politicians, and writers were familiar with all this discussion and clearly reflected their apprehensions and positions.

It would not be naive to realize that all this discussion was harmful to the status quo of the English monarchist government, so it seems natural to imagine that some care was taken in presenting the assumptions of a mixed government, even a care in establishing itself more incisively a more extreme reading of Republican principles in the most prominent political and intellectual circles. This realization leads us to understand that the most exaggerated republican principles were discussed more cautiously, especially turning to less prominent sectors. Consider Peltonen's (1995, 54):

It is clear that classical humanist and even republican arguments were prevalent in the mid Elizabethan period. But in order to gauge the most thorough as well as the radical uses of these arguments in particular contexts, we have to move from the centre of Elizabethan politics to its margins. It is significant that the most pervasive and extreme employment of humanist and republican arguments occurred at the margins rather than at the centre of the political community and that they have been little known, at all. This is first an indication of the applicability of republican notions.

This indication may point us to the fact that in the mid-sixteenth century theater was one of the main tools for the propagation of ideas that often circulated veiled in the most prominent political and intellectual circles. Thus, one can still think that this discussion of republicanism and its principles of broad governance touched the playwrights of Elizabethan England, including Shakespeare, as we will try to demonstrate later. However, it is still necessary to understand what kind of republicanism will appear in this scenario, certainly not that paradoxical proposed by Machiavelli, however, will reflect the classic traits of social belonging, recognition and legal basis identified by the Florentine in the composition of Venice. The dichotomy between the expansive republic and the stable republic, indicated by the Florentine secretary, was not part of this English assimilation of classical republicanism. In fact, it can be said that such a discussion of expansion or stability was heatedly undertaken only in Renaissance Italy at the beginning of the sixteenth century, especially from Machiavelli's own work. As Pedullà (2017, p.109) points out:

The extraordinary attention that authors such as Guicciardini and Giannotti paid to the antithesis between these two models of republic – trying to offer solutions to what Machiavelli had posited as an unresolvable antinomy – should on its own be sufficient evidence of the turn that the alternative presented in Disc. I. 6 brought into Renaissance political thought.

This perspective is important to realize how the subject of republicanism will be established in a refined way in Elizabethan England. The discussion will not be in the process of establishing the best form of republican government, expansionist or stable, or the possible hardships and blessings that each can bring. In this sense, the discussion of the expansive capacity of the republic or its aristocratic or even more popular constitution will not be part of the English grasp of republican ideas, at least not in this Elizabethan period. One can not forget the fact that Machiavelli was already an author known in a deprecatory manner in various intellectual circles in northern Europe, especially after the first movements of the Protestant Reformation.

Thus, the discussion that he begins about the paradox of expansion/stability, starting from the Discorsi, will not be part of the English theme. In fact, Machiavelli will be a figure at once admired and repudiated in the English scene, either by his realistic attitude or by his apparent aversion to religion. As we have already mentioned, the theme of religion was of extreme

importance for the stability of the English political scene, or rather for the reduction of its tension.

The very establishment of a legitimation of the crown depended on a religious vision that would allow the monarch to be seen with ‘eyes of faith’. Republican ideals could not take religion as a mere political instrument, much less expose a threat to the very existence of monarchical power. Recalling that the main objective of the individuals who promulgated the republican theme was the constitution of a mixed government, not the construction of a popular revolution. In this way, the discussion undertaken by Machiavelli, involving the search for the paradoxical definition between two types of republic seemed too threatening for the English scenario. Peltonen (1995, p.16) further comments:

Although Machiavelli was known in England at an early stage, his writings, the standard interpretation proclaims, met with a profound repugnance and dismay. This was so because the encounter between one dominated by ‘an Augustinian universe’ and another dominated by purely secular politics. Machiavelli’s writings, we have lately been told, constituted a grave threat to the ‘Elizabethan world picture’ since they ‘not only challenged but subverted all the premises of the early modern English ‘commoweal’.

Even though Machiavelli was not taken as a reference for the assimilation of republicanism in England, it can be said that he was well known, whether by extreme criticism or veiled admiration, he was by no means neglected or passed unnoticed. Shakespeare’s own writing makes a number of allusions to the ‘bloodthirsty Machiavelli’, which is more indicative that his insertion into the English world was a mixture of love and hatred and Shakespearean taste. But can it be said that classical republicanism, whether by Machiavellian or other authors, directly influenced Shakespearean thought to the point of being noticed in his works? For Elton (1994, p. 30): “Among Elizabethan theater writers, it is Shakespeare who apparently provides the most numerous use of politics in the Machiavellian sense.”

This view indicated by Elton gives us a clue that we will try to follow in this topic, and in what follows, on the analysis of the work the “*Merchant of Venice*”. Could Shakespeare have assimilated the core of the Machiavellian view of politics and from there to see with critical, perhaps too critical eyes, the much-propagated ‘myth of Venice’ as a perfect republic? As we have tried to demonstrate in the preceding topic, the Florentine seems to propose the paradox between the expansionist and the stable republic precisely to

demonstrate that Venice was not the heir of Rome and that in the end, by impulse of necessity, it would be conquered. Thus, Shakespeare's image of Venice would not be that of an idyllic place, but of a political body with vicissitudes, flaws, and an extreme aristocratic character.

However, it is necessary to understand the repercussion of the 'myth of Venice' in Elizabethan England and its importance to the republican goal of its thinkers. Let us also take Peltonen's (1995, p. 102) statement on this question:

Towards the end of the 1590s two remarkable continental republican treatises were translated and published in England. As is well known, Lewes Lewkenor's translation of Gasparo Contarini's *De magistratibus et republica Venetorum* (written in the 1520s and first printed in 1543) was published in 1599. The appearance in 1598 of *The counsellor*, a translation of the *De optimo senatore libri duo* (first printed in 1568) by the Pole Laurentius Grimalius Goslicius (Wawrzyniec Grzymala Goslicki 1530 – 1607), has attracted less attention. Contarini and Goslicius were concerned with explaining and praising the merits of Venice and Poland respectively, and the English translations of their treatises can be partly understood as satisfying the intellectual curiosity about these countries.

The praise of Venice as a stable, just, prosperous and participatory republic spread precisely because of the long-awaited desire to establish a mixed government in England. The aristocratic character, allied to the configuration imposed by the existence of the Doge as 'elected monarch' and a certain popular participation, greatly pleased the defenders of a political opening in the government. In this way, an extreme wave of praise for Venice and the intense spread of its existence as proof that mixed government was the most just and profitable, has fueled the production of various works on the subject. In the words of Peltonen, an intellectual curiosity was created on the subject of republicanism, mainly by the mixed model incorporated in Venice and the possibility of its implantation in England.

However, as we have already indicated on Machiavellian thought, we may point out that even this milder movement of propagating republican ideas, based on the praise of a mixed republic, brought not only discomfort but a threat to the English crown. The most important works on Venice, such as that of Contarini, were written in Latin in the middle of the sixteenth century and published in English later, so it can be understood that first only the most educated, educated individuals would have access to works that, probably, initially circulated only in literary environments. Nevertheless, in the

1590s these works were translated into English, not by chance, and taking the indication of intellectual curiosity and the yearning for political participation and limitation of royal power, this represented a further problem for the crown. As Hadfield (2005, p. 41) points out:

It is surely no coincidence that the work which contains the most sustained and positive representation of Venice is Gaspar Contarini's *De Magistratibus et Republica Venetorum* (1543), translated into English in 1599 when criticism of Elizabeth had reached epidemic proportions, as she herself learned of after the Essex coup.

Shakespeare's perception of all this movement was certainly not alien or disinterested, as he said, his view of politics could reflect aspects of the Machiavellian conception of politics itself, at least in its most realistic sense. On this bias, we defend the thesis that his impressions on the subject were transcribed or influenced his works of this period, namely, *The Merchant of Venice* (1596/98), *Titus Andronicus* (1585/90), *Julius Caesar* (1599), among others with themes involving ancient Rome, Venice or Republican settings and institutions. Still following this line of reasoning, it is possible to defend the thesis that the author criticizes the exaggeration of the praise of Venice as the perfect republic in his work the Merchant of Venice, as we have already indicated. It will be this line of thought that we will try to develop in the next topic when analyzing the proposed work. The problem that arises from this assertion is to be able to point out whether Shakespeare makes this movement to defend the stability of the crown or if he only sees with distrust the sacralization of a republic that at bottom can have more traces of injustice and partiality than of justice and equality.

In the next topic we will go into the work already mentioned for this purpose, being careful to try to perceive the traits that may indicate to us if the author was even expressing a criticism to the own myth of Venice. In this sense, in addition to being able to trace the aspects of classical republicanism indicated by Machiavelli in the political construction of Shakespeare's Venice in his play, we can also glimpse his criticism and point to the incipient tension between the republican model sought in Elizabethan England and what would come to be the modern, liberal ideal of freedom that would emerge in two hundred years.

### **3 The Merchant of Venice: tension between classical republicanism and the modern ideals of freedom**

The constitution of Venice as a stable, prosperous and apparently just and participatory republic has fostered, as we have seen, the propagation of a myth that served as fuel for British intellectuals, thinkers and politicians who sought to sediment a proposal of a mixed government for England. This construction seems to reflect only one side of the coin, but the paradox proposed by Machiavelli was not discussed, growing or stabilizing. Nor was it disputed whether the deeply aristocratic character of Venice would, in practice, permit such a comprehensive and participatory government as was proposed. The Machiavellian criticism presents Venice as one of the classic models of republic, stable, but which is not constituted as the preferential one, precisely because it does not have the proper aspects of an expansionist republic. In view of this, as we have proposed, his paradox between Rome and Sparta/Venice serves to demystify the Venetian myth and to point to the Roman model as being the best (most desirable), even though it is more problematic as far as governance is concerned.

However, the constituent aspects of a republican model, recognition and social belonging, as well as the strong legislative apparatus, are easily identified in the Venetian model and the Florentine himself recognizes this. These provisions will also be embraced by English critics and assimilated by their thinkers, the myth of Venice will be widely disseminated and assimilated. However, as already proposed for our line of work, Shakespeare seems to disassociate from this trend, his play, *The Merchant of Venice*, reveals a thread of irony about the political, social and legal constructions of ‘mythological Venice’. From this point of view, we will try to read the work as a sort of satire to the propagated Venetian myth, containing also the proposal of themes on individual rights and social belonging that will only be strongly discussed almost two centuries later. It is precisely these themes, the discussion of individual rights, the detachment of laws from social, religious, and economic mores, as well as the obstacles to social recognition that have fostered the tension between the classic model of republic represented by Venice and the fledgling future discussion of the modern ideal of freedom.

The “*Merchant of Venice*” is one of Shakespeare’s most iconic and controversial works, not only because it was written in the most tense period of Elisabeth’s reign, but mainly because it has an incredible range of themes. As Wilson (1995, p. 105) points out:

Various bonds are established in *The Merchant of Venice*: legal bonds, bonds of love and friendship, bonds of hate and revenge, marital bonds, financial bonds and bonds between evil and laughter that operate in the general economy established in the play. 'General economy signifies not just the flow of goods and money, not just the production of wealth, but also the exchange of values and affections: the economy of love and hate, of inclusion and exclusion; and how the body, as always with Shakespeare, exists, along with money, as the medium for these exchanges.

Several of these connections have been explored in the critics of the play, from the question of love, which seems more obvious, through the question of marriage by interest, the relationship between daring and fortune, even the close friendship between Bassanio and Antonio led to the numerous allegations of homosexuality and homosexuality. There is an interesting relation between Antonio and Bassanio, who does not touch homosexuality, but it refers to the Machiavellian teaching. The Florentine maintains that *Fortuna* privileges young people, for being bold, fearless and dominating, it seems not to be the same with the older men who have already lost such audacity. Bassanio is young, fearless, daring and even inconsequential, while Antonio is cautious, thoughtful, even pessimistic. We see Bassanio conquer what he intended and Antonio suffer the terrible hardships that awaited him, but in the end the latter will also have his share of joy.

However, one of the most obvious and most exploited links in the criticism of the play, especially in the last century, is related to the apparent anti-Semitism in the treatment of the Jew Shylock. In fact, for a long time the play was best known with *The Jew of Venice*, in close proximity to an earlier play, Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*. According to Bloom (2001: 224): "... to perceive the gap between the human being invented by Shakespeare and the role that, as a playwright, he condemns Shylock, we must regard the '*Jew of Venice*' as a reaction, an ironic twist on Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*." This shows us that the issue of anti-Semitism was commonplace in the English playwright, yet Shakespeare does not seem to reflect that grotesque, and 'Christian' established anti-Semitism. It does not portray an individual who is humanly limited or projected immodestly and monstrously in society. Shylock is the most complex and "humanly" important character of the piece, either because of its antagonism to Antonio, the so-called merchant of Venice, or the very artistic constitution of the play.

No wonder some people think the play is a drama or a tragedy, when in fact it was first classified, including the author, as a comedy. However, it is

necessary to understand the theatrical structure of a comedy. According to theatrical parameters, in the comedy there is an imbalance between the two central characters, between the protagonist and the antagonist. In this model, the protagonist has around himself, involved in his purposes giving him help, most of the characters. In the case of “*The Merchant of Venice*”, we see that all the important characters are on the side of Antonio, as well as Bassânio. In this sense, the prejudiced, the one who suffers the hardships and becomes the motive of laughter for being deceived is exactly the Jew.

Shakespeare seems to hide behind the already defamed figure of ‘Jew’ a man who in fact is deceived, robbed, being always humiliated and execrated in the social environment. The cover that serves this purpose is the curtain of wickedness, the Jew becomes the villain of the play when demanding the fulfillment of a promissory note that he, by sport, together with Antonio as guarantor, established for the money lent to Bassanio. However, what led the Jew to lend money to the merchant was exactly the urge to get as close as possible to the ‘noble citizens’, to be helpful to the aristocrat who repudiated him in the Rialto. Let’s see how this scene goes:

*Antonio:* Well, Shylock, shall we be beholden to you?

*Shylock:* Signior Antonio, many a time and oft,  
In the Rialto, you have rated me,  
About my moneys and my usances:  
Still have I borne it with a patient shrung,  
For sufferance is the badge of all our tribe:  
You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog,  
And spit upon my Jewish gaberdine,  
And all for use of that which is mine own.  
Well, then, it now appears you need my help:  
Go to, then; you come to me, and you say,  
Shylock, we would have moneys: - you say so;  
You, that did void your rheum upon my beard,  
And foot me as you spurn a stranger cur  
Over your threshold: moneys is your suit.  
What should I say to you? Should I not say,  
Hath a dog money? is it possible  
A cur can lend three thousand ducats? Or  
Shall I bend low, and in a bondman’s key,  
With bated breath and whispering humbleness  
Say this? -

Fair sir, you spit on me on Wednesday last.  
You spurn'd me such a day; another time  
You call'd me dog; and for these courtesies  
I'll lend you thus much moneys.

**Antonio:** I am as like to call thee so again,  
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.

**Shylock:** Why, look you, how you storm!  
I would be friends with you, and have your love,  
Forget the shames that you have stain'd me With,  
Supply your present wants, and take no doit  
Of usance for my moneys, and you'll not hear me:  
This is Kind I offer.

(SHAKESPEARE, *The Merchant of Venice*, Act I, Scene III.)

One can see the resentment that moves Shylock, his social situation demonstrates the degree of exclusion imposed on Jews in Venice as well as in most of Europe, but also demonstrates the classic traits of social belonging reflected in the Venetian constitution. Shylock was part of the individuals who arrived in the city and already found the political and social scene established in a fully aristocratic way. In contrast, Antonio and Bassanio represent the aristocracy, the Venetian citizens who enjoyed full social recognition and distinction in the public media. However, something is out of place in this scene, even representing the political-social framework of exclusion, Shylock, and recognition, Antonio and Bassanio, one can see a change in the exchange ratio. The excluded Jew is in the position of having something that aristocrats need, in this case the three thousand ducats, whereas Antonio and Bassanio represent what men like the Jew do not have, social recognition and acceptance. It establishes a state of exchange, interests that intersect in a very clear and rigidly constructed political-social arrangement. The Jew seeks the friendship of the Venetian aristocrats, willing to forget all the insults and affronts, only wanting to be recognized and accepted.

It becomes quite symbolic the fine stipulated by the Jew in case the money is not paid. As said, for mere sport, it is agreed that a pound of meat

will be taken from Antonio if the note is not paid. Within the established state of exchange, it is symbolically intrinsic to the idea that the Jew wanted to have part of the 'body of Antonio', not worthless human flesh, but the 'body politic' to which he did not belong. "In the information economy of commercial Venice, value is a datum on a ledger or a word on the Rialto. Shylock's 'merry sport' reestablishes the link between monetary value and material life, insisting on their real inextricability". (EGAN, 2004, p.105).

The political and social relations perceived in the interaction between the Jew and Antonio reveal the fundamental features of Shakespeare's own organization of the Venetian republic. The constant humiliation suffered by the Jew, the strong religious and customs traits that very clearly separated Venetian citizens from foreigners and non-Christians. It can be said that these traits also represent the configuration of the Venetian beginnings pointed out by Machiavelli, the strict condition of social belonging, as well as the recognition of the individual, and the strong ties of tradition and customs. What changes this picture is the relationship established in the above-mentioned scene, the fact that a Venetian citizen, a traditional aristocrat, has to turn to the Jewish foreigner to raise funds for a friend.

There is no doubt that the economic factor, distinct from the social and political factor, appears centrally in the relationship established between Shylock and Antonio, this will be one of the points of tension between the classical model of republic and an incipient modern idea of freedom. We can glimpse in this scenario the paradigm shift that will be deeply rooted in the centuries following Shakespeare, but which appear implicitly in the relationship of the Jew with the Venetian aristocrats. Shakespeare's Venice does not seem as egalitarian, fair, welcoming and popular as it was seen in several works that praised the Venetian myth. It does not seem to be by chance that the author uses a figure so deprecated in the European scene to be the central antagonist in his play.

The ironic and satirical background that can be seen in the play is not only that it is masked by a tragedy, at least for modern taste, but also in the colors with which the author paints the 'Perfect Republic'. All main characters have some kind of interest, either implicit or explicit. In this sense, the human game of relationships ends up becoming a constant exchange of interests and benefits. We said that both the Jew and the merchant had an interest, yet they put aside the social ties and established an agreement. "The central exchange of Portia to Bassanio via the caskets, requires Antonio to give Bassanio the money he has secured from Shylock so that Bassanio can, in turn, arrive at

Belmont laden with enough gifts to appear an impressive suitor. These gifts hope for a rich return, of course". (WILSON, 1995, p. 108).

In this story there are no 'good guys' and 'villains', all characters have reproachable traits, guilts and ulterior motives. Thus, the Jew can not be judged as being the antithesis of 'good', or goodness. Still this aspect leads us to think in the criticism to the own English scene in which Shakespeare transits. The quest for an idyllic, perfect model, of society on the part of the English aristocracy seems to conceal second intentions that adhere more to the political than to the moral realm. Commenting on *The Merchant of Venice* and *Richard III*, Girard (1990, p. 310) states:

Two images of the king tend to dominate the piece alternately, a strongly differentiated one indifferent. In the cases of the Merchant of Venice and Richard III, we can understand why without difficulty. In one piece as in the other, the real object of satire is not such or such an individual, but a whole social or political system, Venice in one case and the English aristocracy in the other. Shakespeare could not attack the latter very openly. The method he envisions allows him to get away with an indirect, more highly effective satire among the elite of experienced people-and perfectly identifiable by the multitude of ordinary spectators, those who aspire only to the rough catharsis that Shakespeare never fails to supply.

The defense of a broader, partisan government as support for a mixed government was the fuel for the super exposition of the 'myth of Venice'. However, there was much fear of the danger brought by individuals who were not English, ie foreigners and even non-Christians. "In terms of the extant materials, the English, especially Londoners, usually rejected foreigners. There arose fears of being overwhelmed. In 16th century, England was a heaven to the strangers, while in other times it was a hell." (YU, 2015, p. 41). Shakespeare shows us a Venice where all have ulterior motives, interests, and act in view of establishing exchanges and reciprocities that can satisfy them, not just foreigners with fame of villains.

All these movements employed by the author in the writing of the play serve the purpose of establishing a scenario of constant tension and antagonisms. However, the tension that arises in the background is deeper and leads us to keep our line of thought. We see an excluded, socially and politically insignificant individual in the model on which the Venetian republic is founded, but who possesses something that gives it an advantage at a given moment. We may think that Shylock is the prototype of the capitalist, the

individual who does not seek recognition for moral, social, traditional values of the body politic, but who needs only freedom to pursue his lucrative activity without ties. Even if Shylock yearns for the friendship of the Venetian merchant and his recognition, what he really wants is to be able to carry on his activity without disturbance.

From this point of view, the exchange ratio between Shylock and Antonio is the mark of the end of one era and the harbinger of another. The end of a social arrangement based on social belonging, recognition, customs and traditions, the beginning of a social organization focused on economic interests, the possession of resources and the total freedom to use them as they wish, without social ties, political or legal. “The great importance of Shylock is not in the historical world of anti-Semitism, but within the development of Shakespeare’s art, no previous figure in Shakespearean dramaturgy has Shylock’s strength, complexity and life potential.” (BLOOM, 2001, p. 235).

As we have already pointed out in our introduction, this understanding leads us to see in Shakespeare’s own play, in addition to criticism of the Venice myth, the foreshadowing of a discussion that will develop at least two centuries later. The modern liberal ideals of freedom are based precisely on the possibility of exchange relations without social ties, without political obstacles, customs or traditions. In this sense, we can take Shylock as an example of the individual who needs to have the freedom proposed by liberals like J. Locke<sup>2</sup> and Benjamin Constant.

Not only were his social belonging and recognition limited by restrictive traditions, customs, and social constitutions, his experience with the laws of the Republic of Venice was also restricted by his political-social condition. After a whole game of betrayals, intrigues and losses throughout the play, Shylock finds himself in the possibility of collecting the debt note that had been made for ‘mere sport’. At this moment comes the villain who so shocked several viewers throughout the story, the Jew makes a point of plucking a pound of flesh from Antonio’s body. However, Shakespeare subtly seems to justify the Jewish’s action as a response, indeed a reproduction, to the treatment he always received from the Venetian Christians. At the same time, it puts into the mouth of the Jew what will be the basis for the ideals of freedom and equality sought in modernity. Let’s look at the scene in question:

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<sup>2</sup> For a deepening in this rather controversial view, we indicate the reading of the work ANDREW, Edward. *Shylock’s rights: A grammar of Lockian Claims*. Toronto: University of Toronto, 1988.

**Salarino:** ... But tell us, do you hear whether Antonio have had any loss at sea or no?

**Shylock:** There I have another bad match: a bankrupt, a prodigal, who dare scarce show his head on the Rialto; - a beggar, that was used to come so smug upon the mart; - let him look to his bond! he was wont to lend money for a Christian courtesy; - let him look to his bond.

**Salarino:** Why, I am sure if he forfeit thou wilt not take his flesh. What's that good for?

**Shylock:** To bait fish withal: if it will feed nothing else it will feed my revenge. He hath disgraced me and hindered me of half a million; laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies! and what's his reason? I am a Jew! Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? if you tickle us, do we not laugh? if you poison us, do we not die? and if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? if we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that - If a Jew wrong a Christian; what is his humility? revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? why, revenge. The villany you teach me I will execute; and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction. (SHAKESPEARE, *The Merchant of Venice*, Act III, Scene II).

Again the Jew demonstrates his revolt and bitterness against the treatment received, however, this time evokes the alleged equality that should exist in the very configuration of the Venetian republic. His speech can be seen as a humanist discourse that seeks to highlight an equality that should exist in the political body independent of religion, race, customs and traditions. At this point we bring in parallel the notions of freedom and equality that will later be evoked by the liberal thinkers of modernity as well. Freedom understood as equality between individuals, detachment from the political and social ties that dilute the subject within the universe of the collective. Let us take a definition of freedom according to Constant (1997, p. 593):

It is for any one the right not to be submissive but to the laws, to be neither arrested nor detained nor put to death, nor mistreated in any way, as a result of the arbitrary will of one or several individuals. It is for anyone to have the right to say his opinion, to choose his profession and to exercise, to dispose of his

property, even to abuse it, to go, to come, without having to obtain permission and without accounting for his motives and your steps.

This definition of liberty seems to be consistent with what the Jew evokes in his discourse, the justification for a freedom based on the equality of individuals, not customs, traditions or social, religious and political barriers. It would not be safe to say that Shakespeare would be the forerunner of this liberal view of freedom, it would also be risky to claim that we see in the mouth of Shylock the ideas of a classic humanist author. According to Anikst (1966, p. 125): “Shakespeare’s strength as an artist lay not only in his ability to see situations and characters which might be met with in life, but also in his ability to see them in a particular light-in the light of the ideals of a higher humanity”. However, we may rather glimpse, as it were, a coadunition which seems to foreshadow the stage of tension that would worsen in the course of succeeding centuries. A model of a more restricted society, based on traditional social and political traits with strong anchorage in social belonging and the recognition of individuals as part of a collective whole, in front of a more open model, centered on the subject and on his particularities and individuality.

The focal point that demonstrates the full burden of inequality that Shylock alludes to in his speech is undoubtedly the moment of judgment before the Doge. When charging the debt note before the jury of the city and before the figure of the Doge, Shylock is put at the height of the villainy that marks, for some spectators, his condition of monster. After going through all the hardships and all the betrayals and deceptions during the play, Shylock has the opportunity to perpetrate his revenge. However, the whole arrangement of the judgment is still a farce, a new scam that will lead the Jew to the condition of being deceived. Upon being informed that a notable jurist would be sent to arbitrate the matter, Shylock believes he has the opportunity to avail himself of the Venetian laws, which, on grounds, should be wholly impartial, fair and egalitarian.

Again Shakespeare reveals his satire in regard to the highly praised spirit of justice of the Venetian laws, instead of a notable jurist, what we have is Portia, already made the wife of Bassanio, dressed as a man and presenting himself as a deputy sent by the jurist himself. At the beginning of the trial, Portia points to the validity of Antonio’s debt note to Shylock and sets the tone for one of the most intriguing moments of the play. Antonio appears as the individual who is capable of giving his own life for the love of a friend. A just man, benevolent, extreme friend and ready to give up his own flesh to the fool who demands it. It does not seem so far from that haughty, biased,

aggressive and cruel man presented by Shylock in the dialogue in which the loan agreement is established. Take Masugi's (2014, p. 208) reading of the scene of Antonio's martyrdom:

Antonio need not have made himself a martyr for Venice's trading laws, in this caricature of Christian charity for the cause of a commercial republic. Antonio seeks literally to imitate Christ by expelling the money-changers from the temple of Venice. Antonio would also be a Lucretia for Venice: As Lucretia sought by her suicide to establish a republic, he would die to affirm Venice's commercial republic. As her death caused the Romans to expel the Tarquins, so might the Venetians be enraged enough to condemn Shylock. Antonio would appear to be a marvelous example of Machiavelli's critique of Christianity.

The laws of Venice are presented as sacred, demanding a sacrifice that can assert its strength and maintain its inviolability. The irony lies precisely in the fact that the whole situation revolves around a mistake, Antonio was not benevolent and selfless man, the jurist in question was nothing more than a farce, and finally, the laws themselves were ambiguous, partial and unsafe. In seeking to enforce the stipulated legal agreement, Shylock evokes the legal security that is expected of a just republic like Venice. However, in making this move, he still touches on a Venetian wound, slavery and hypocrisy that nurtures relations between citizens and foreigners as follows:

**Shylock:** What judgment shall I dread, doing  
You have among you many a purchas'd slave,  
Which, like your asses, and your dogs, and mules,  
You use in abject and in slavish parts,  
Because you bought them. Shall I say to you,  
Let them be free, marry them to your heirs?  
Why sweat they under burdens? let their beds  
Be made as soft as yours, and let their palates  
Be season'd with such viands? You will answer,  
The slaves are ours: So do I answer you;  
The pound of flesh which I demand of him  
Is dearly bought, is mine, and I will have it:  
If you deny me, fie upon your law!  
There is no force in the decrees of Venice.  
I stand for judgment: answer: shall I have it?  
(SHAKESPEARE, *The Merchant of Venice*, Act IV, Scene I)

It is quite clear that Shakespeare's intention is to create a situation in which the very institution of laws suffers the setbacks of a society that is not perfect, idyllic and much less egalitarian. Shylock becomes the herald of a discourse that exposes the hypocrisy and the partiality, not only of the Venetian laws, but especially of its society. Remembering the models of comedy, we see once again the situation in which Antonio, the protagonist, has the support of all the characters. In contrast, Shylock, the antagonist, has at his side only the prerogative of the law which hitherto was in his favor.

The trick of Portia, when he is a lawyer, demonstrates how it seems easy to deceive an entire court of justice, at the same time demonstrates the fragility on which the application of the laws is based. The jurist who governs the subject of the law governs the whole process of justification, interpretation and application of laws. However, at the same time that he applies these legal presuppositions, the jurist, in the case of still find the loopholes necessary to undertake his ingenious plan. By making an inversion of the terms that were set out in the debt note, Piacia could then make room for the application of what actually determined the course of legal proceedings, namely, the customs and political and social constraints of an aristocratic society.

By means of his devices, Portia reverses the roles, Shylock is no longer the claimant, that individual who has the right to demand payment, now he becomes the aggressor, the foreign Jew who attacks the life of a good and humble Christian, a Venetian citizen. Let's see:

*Portia:* A pound of that same merchant's flesh is thine; the court awards it and the law doth give it.

*Shylock:* Most rightful judge!

*Portia:* And you must cut this flesh from off; the law allows it and the court awards it.

*Shylock:* Most learned judge! - A sentence; come, prepare.

*Portia:* Tarry a little; - there is something, 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, 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.

(*Ibid.*, Act IV, Scene I).

All of Shylock's hopes for the laws of Venice were destroyed, the opportunity to take advantage of the single apparent equality between

individuals proved once again a trap. It is extremely complex this situation created by Shakespeare, the fraud that occurs deliberately in relation to the application of the law is overshadowed by the theme of revenge that did not work. The figure of the Jew as the bloodthirsty monster dominates the scene, and the issue of inequality in terms of access to laws by foreigners goes unnoticed. The law was extremely restrictive, partial and unfair. The religious, social and political customs prevailed before the legal institution of the republic. The difference between the situation of social belonging of the Venetian citizen, Christian, in relation to the foreigner, non-Christian, was decisive for the application of the legal code.

At this point we allude again to what, according to Constant (1997, p. 595), was the condition of laws in relation to customs in classical traditions: "Laws regulated customs, and as customs are at all, there was nothing that was not regulated by the laws." According to this understanding, the modern ideal of freedom must have another parameter, laws can not under the pressure of customs and traditions that lead the individual to submit to the arbitrary will of a group. In Shylock's case, the weight of customs and religious restraint made him the victim of arbitrariness. The tension between the justice model rooted in the social tradition, in the constraints of social belonging and recognition shows itself in the situation in which an individual does not respond to such requirements. We can take this tension, as we have argued up to now, as the tension between a new social reality, an open society centered on the individual, facing a more restricted society, centered on the collective and the traditions. Let's see how Shylock is punished for attacking the life of a 'good citizen' of the Republic of Venice:

*Portia:* Tarry, Jew!

The law hath yet another hold on you.  
It is enacted in the laws of Venice,  
If it be prov'd against an alien,  
That by direct or indirect attempts  
He seek the life of any citizen,  
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;  
And the offender's life lies in the mercy  
Of the duke only, 'gainst all other voice.  
In which predicament, I say, thou stand'st;  
For it appears by manifest proceeding,

That indirectly, and directly too,  
Thou hast contriv'd against the very life  
Of the defendant; and thou hast incurr'd  
The danger formerly by me rehears'd.  
Down, therefore, and beg mercy of the duke.  
(SHAKESPEARE, *The Merchant of Venice*, Act IV, Scene I)

The end of the trial is the apex of degradation of the antagonist, all his pursuit of justice were turned against him. The final scorn, the obligation to become a converted Christian and thus become a true Venetian citizen. Here we have the end of the ironic thread, the Jew who wanted social recognition, belong to the body of society, who wanted only to enjoy the acclaimed justice of Venice, to become, finally, a citizen. However, for this he must deny his own identity, his religion, his goods and his dignity. In stating that he is content with his pen, Shylock takes on the role of the resigned individual for the last time, dominated by customs, traditions and social constraints. Bloom (2001, p. 228-9) gives us an excellent view of this moment:

No one in *The Merchant of Venice* is what it appears to be - neither Portia, nor Antônio, nor Bassânio, nor Jessica. How could Shakespeare allow only Shylock to remain authentic and congruent? Who in the play deserves trust? Shylock agrees to the conversion because the Venice of the play, like the Vienna of Measure by measure, is too ambiguous for any congruence to prevail. The greatest irony of *The Merchant of Venice* is Shylock, the foreigner, becomes entirely Venetian when it is sold. What would be your motivation? Are we misreading the words 'I'm happy'?

Shylock's status as a foreigner was transformed into a citizen's condition, but for this the necessary adjustment was the very negation of his particularities and individualities. In this sense, social belonging and recognition were possible only within the limits imposed by tradition and customs. The modern ideal of freedom, particularly that advocated by the early liberals as Constant, has as its central premise precisely the preservation of individualities against the traditions and customs of the body politic in its collective expression. As we have tried to demonstrate, this disposition contrasts with a classical republican disposition in which the strongest political and social ties are stipulated exactly by tradition, customs and the condition of laws in this context.

## **Conclusion**

Certainly, the topic dealt with in this short space of time does not allow a deepening in all its aspects, nevertheless, we hope to have indicated the ways that condition the proposed reading. The Venice of Machiavelli and Shakespeare appear, after all, as an idealization, a place that should be the example of justice, equality and stability. However, for Machiavelli, Venice was a model of a republic that did not represent the Roman ideal and was doomed to ostracism, never becoming an expansionist republic. His criticism, as said, points to the prevalence of the Roman model, one that should be adopted by a country that wants to become strong, expansionist and, above all, free. In presenting the Venetian model, however, Machiavelli exposes those who are the very foundations of a stable, secure, and extremely restrictive republic in its aristocratic composition.

In Shakespeare's case, what we see is the critical assimilation of a reading of the Venice of his day. All the political discussion developed in England on the possibility of a mixed government, having Venice as an example, fosters the author's ironic criticism. Shakespearean Venice appears as a place of deception, artifice, prejudice and, above all, injustice. The figure chosen to represent this picture could not be better, the figure of the foreign Jew, the most disdained and devalued of European society. His social and political condition places him as marginal, excluded, yet the economic context and the changes he suffers place the Jew as one who can render service even to the Venetian aristocracy. In this Venice of Shakespeare we see the features of an aristocratic republic, as exposed by Machiavelli and assimilated by Venetian political thinkers. But we also see the claims of a new world, a modern world in which the economic factor must be free from any social, political, customs or traditions ties. This condition will be defended by liberal authors who defend individual rights precisely to favor the 'economic individual', the one who does not have social recognition, but has financial resources.

What we have in Venice of Shakespeare's play is the ideal scenario, as well as the ideal situation, to think about the tension between the old classical model of republic versus what would become the modern model of open society. The first centered on tradition, customs and social recognition, the second centered on the individual and the need for individuality that this should have, without social or political ties.

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