



THE CENSORSHIP AND BAN OF *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE* IN ISTANBUL OF THE LATE OTTOMAN PERIOD

GEÇ OSMANLI DÖNEMİ İSTANBUL'UNDA VENEDİK TACİRİ OYUNUNUN SANSÜRLENMESİ VE YASAKLANMASI

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Abstract

Researchers studying the bans on dramatic works in the Ottoman Empire mainly put forward two possible reasons in relation to censoring and banning of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* in the late imperial period. One of these possibilities is a rumour alleging that Abdülhamid II, during a performance at the palace theatre, became so frightened when the actor playing Shylock began sharpening his knife that he immediately banned the play. The other reason is related to the play's capability to cause a conflict among religious minorities in the Empire. The lack of comprehensive academic sources on the incident prevented researchers from reaching precise outcomes. Moreover, there is no existing research on the ban of the translation of the play. This is largely due to the limited availability of formal papers in the State Archives until recently. The classification and scanning of the documents held at the State Archives in Turkey have provided researchers with new evidence. Accordingly, this study explores the process of censoring and banning of *The Merchant of Venice* in the light of historical documents and formal correspondence with the aim of contributing to the discussions in this field.

Öz

Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda tiyatro eserlerinin yasaklanmasını çalışan araştırmacılar, Shakespeare'in Venedik Taciri oyununun geç imparatorluk döneminde sansürlenmesi ve yasaklanması ile ilgili olarak temelde iki muhtemel sebep ortaya koyarlar. Bu ihtimallerden biri olan bir söylentiye göre saray tiyatrosundaki bir gösterim sırasında Shylock'u oynayan aktör bıçağını bilerken II. Abdülhamid öyle korkmuştur ki hemen oyunu yasaklatmıştır. Diğer neden ise oyunun İmparatorluk'taki dini azınlıklar arasında bir karışıklık çıkarabilme kapasitesi ile ilgilidir. Olay hakkındaki kapsamlı akademik kaynakların eksikliği araştırmacıların net sonuçlara ulaşmalarına engel olmuştur. Dahası, oyunun çevirisinin yasaklanması şimdiye dek hiçbir araştırmada incelenmemiştir. Alandaki bu boşlukların temel nedenlerinden biri Devlet Arşivleri'ndeki resmi belgelerin uzun bir süre kamuya kısmen açık olmasıydı. Ancak Türkiye'deki Devlet Arşivleri'nde son zamanlarda hızlanan belge tasnifi ve taraması gibi arşiv çalışmaları araştırmacılara yeni ortaya çıkarılmış gerçekler sundu. Buna bağlı olarak bu çalışma, alandaki tartışmalara katkıda bulunmak amacıyla Venedik Taciri oyununun sansürlenmesi ve sahnelenmesinin engellenmesi sürecini tarihi belgeler ve resmi yazışmalar ışığında incelemektedir.

Introduction

Sultan Abdülhamid II's strict control over the press and literature during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has become a popular topic for researchers of cultural studies and the history of literature in Turkey, especially after the mid-twentieth century.¹ However, quite a number of recent works of censorship studies concerning the imperial period focus on forbidden words in literary texts and deleted columns in newspapers rather than banned books and plays. This limited research has led to the emergence of overgeneralising assumptions rather than diverse conclusions reached by studying each banned work individually. For instance, in *Başlangıcından 1938'e Türk Tiyatro Tarihi* (The History of Turkish Theatre from Its Beginning to 1938) Metin And (2015) claims that “from 1884 to 1908, theatrical activities and developments halted, and playwrights could not write plays under Abdülhamid II's strict control”² (p. 67). However, in other previous books, he explores the theatrical activities carried out and lists the plays written and performed in the period in question.³ Similarly, such contradictions produce various interpretations and claims on the matter of censoring and banning of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* in the Ottoman Empire. Some sources take the Sultan's fear of tragedy or paranoia as the reason for forbidding the play while other believe that the content of the play could have caused a conflict among different ethnic and religious groups living within the Ottoman boundaries, especially in Istanbul.

The lack of reliable sources to confirm the information found in memoirs and scholarly publications is one of the main factors causing doubt about this issue. Many researchers of censorship studies have not been able to refer to formal papers, correspondence and first-hand sources in their publications, which mainly include rumours. Recently, archival documents have been uncovered, classified and made accessible to the public in the recent decades. Therefore, different from most other surveys, this research views the issue with a historicist method by exploring the

¹ Sultan Abdülhamid II pioneered many reforms and innovations during his long reign, yet he also had a highly conservative and sceptical character. With the spy organization he established, he not only monitored international developments but also the social situation within the country. This surveillance mechanism was particularly disturbing the intelligentsia. The Sultan sought to control the press in order to prevent movements and conspiracies to be designed against his rule. Due to all these censorship and silencing efforts, the reign of Abdülhamid II is often referred to as *devr-i istibdat* (the period of tyranny/despotism/oppression).

² Unless stated otherwise, all the translation of the Turkish texts has been done by the author.

³ See And, M. (1970). *100 Soruda Türk Tiyatrosu Tarihi*. İstanbul: Gerçek Yayınevi; And, M. (1972b). *Tanzimat ve Istibdat Döneminde Türk Tiyatrosu (1839-1908)*. Ankara: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları.

process of banning *The Merchant of Venice* in the light of archival documents and correspondence, and provides new evidence to support the theory concerning its ban to prevent a possible conflict among religious minorities in the Ottoman Empire.

Performance and Publication of the Play in Turkey in the Ottoman Period

The Merchant of Venice was mostly performed by Armenian, Greek, Italian, and French theatre companies in the Empire. According to İnci Enginün (2008, p. 45), Arslan Kaynardağ (1960, p. 6) and Margaret Litvin, Avraham Oz and Parviz Partovi (2017, p. 98), the earliest performance of the play dates back to 1842 when it was staged in Armenian by the players of Gedikpaşa Theatre in Istanbul. The Armenian players were mostly Ottoman citizens and therefore, it may be regarded as a local production. In 1866, the famous actor Ira Aldridge performed the play in Istanbul (And, 1967, p. 15; And, 1971, p. 80). Similar to the 1860s, the 1870s seem to be unproductive for the play as its only known production was staged by the Osmanlı Tiyatrosu company, in which the Armenian actor Mardiros Minakyan played Shylock (And, 1972b, p. 462; *Minakyan*, 1912, p. 13). The 1880s, on the other hand, witnessed the beginning of a considerable interest in the play. The Armenian actor Fasulyeciyani staged the play in 1885 (Kaynardağ 1964, p. 13). In 1889, the famous Italian actor Ernesto Rossi put it on the stage twice, one of which was in the presence of Sultan Abdülhamid II (And, 1961b, p. 143; And, 1967, p. 18; Enginün, 2008, p. 25; Sevengil, 2015, p. 509). Basing his narration on Rossi's memoir, And (1961b) noted that Rossi, upon being informed by İlyas Pasha that Abdülhamid II spoke a little Italian, performed *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice* in Italian before the Sultan and many prominent statesmen, and earned exclusive gifts and privileges as well as the Sultan's appreciation (p. 145-146). The Greek player N. Lekatzas and his company's performance at Tepebaşı Theatre in 1890 is the only known one in the next decade (And, 1972a, p. 95). The grip of censorship was strongly felt by press and literature in the first decade of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, despite the ban and censor by the officials, the play achieved great success in Turkey. In 1900, Ruben Manulyan (or rather probably Manuelyan) staged it (Kaynardağ, 1964, p. 13). In 1902, it was performed in Italian by an unnamed company (BOA, BEO 3222/241593.2.1, H-28/11/1325). Another famous Italian actor Ermete Novelli put it on the stage in Istanbul in 1903 (And, 1967, p. 18; BOA, HR.TH 297/50.1.1, M-20/01/1904). Lekatzas staged it once again in Istanbul in 1906, but at Odeon Theatre this time (And, 1972a, p. 102). Even though the year 1907 witnessed a conflict among theatre companies, police force, censor officers, state officials, and

foreign missions about banning the play, it was staged by an unnamed Italian company that year (BOA, ZB 46/102.1, R-24/10/1323). Following the disputes, the inauguration of the constitutional monarchy for the second time in 1908 created an atmosphere of freedom for the press and literature, and the play could be staged without being censored or banned. As a result, it was performed by Veroni and Liquoro companies in Istanbul in 1908 (And, 1972a, p. 102-3; Nutku, 2015, p. 161).

As for the publication history of the translation(s), there is almost no information in primary or secondary sources. The earliest known Turkish translation of the play is a now non-existent copy of a text translated by someone, most probably a foreign national, by the name of Antonio (BOA, MF.MKT 28/46.1.1, H-25/04/1292). Hasan Sırrı's translation, on the other hand, is the earliest known translation which is available today. Although Talat Halman (2011, p. 22; 2014, p. 13), Muhsin Ertuğrul (1964, p. 6), and Margaret Litvin, Avraham Oz and Parviz Partovi (2017, p. 99) date it back to 1885, the work was actually published in 1884 as clearly seen in its advertisement in *Tercüman-ı Hakikat*, published on 30 May 1884, which reads,

Venedik Taciri. A play by the famous English writer great Shakespeare has been translated and published with that title this time. The translation is written in a style to be read with zest. Its translator is Mr. H. Y.; and its owner is Arakel Efendi, one of the luminaries of our diligent booksellers. To describe the printing quality of the book, we find it sufficient to state this sentence only: It has been published at the printing house of our brother Mr. Ebuzziya Tefvik (p. 1).

What is quite unusual about this advertisement is the fact that to popularise the play or to distract the attention of the readers from the offensive content of the play, which was not well-known to Turkish readers at that time, the style of the translation and the name of the publisher have been emphasised, rather than the content of the play.

The multinational population of the Empire preferred watching the play to reading it. Though the play was staged in Istanbul for a long time, the translation was published only once. Nevertheless, the beginning of the twentieth century witnessed an increasing limitation on the play. The process of censoring and banning took place in three steps: Self-censorship in the act of translation, recalling the translation and forbidding the importation of the play, and banning the play from being staged in theatres. Although the printed books were recalled, they were not destroyed; at least, an unknown number of them were preserved, which is why some

of them are accessible to the public today. For instance, the copy used for this research is present in the National Library of Turkey in Ankara.⁴ According to the official documents found in the State Archives, certain practical differences about the ban on the play's performance are observed, and there is not a consistency in the attitude and practices of the *Zabtiye* (Police) and the censor officers. In many cases, policemen stopped the staging of allegedly harmful or immoral plays that were concurrently permitted by the *Sadaret* (the Grand Vizierate). Banning a play from the stage also depended on the language of the performance; it is revealed in various formal papers that directors had been allowed to stage some plays in various languages, but their performance in Turkish was forbidden afterwards.

Self-Censorship

The earliest available Turkish translation of *The Merchant of Venice*, the copies of which can be found in state and university libraries belongs to Hasan Sırrı, a former teacher who was later employed as the translator of Yıldız Palace. Published by Ebuzziya Press in Istanbul in the year 1301 (Islamic calendar, 1884 A.D.), this work is one of the oldest known translations of Shakespeare's plays into Ottoman Turkish. In the *Mukaddime* (Introduction) part of the translation, Hasan Sırrı (1301) states that he translated the play from English, but also specifically mentions his use of its French translation in certain cases where he had difficulty in understanding some parts because of "the grandeur and lexical richness of the English language" (p. 7).

The fact that the subject matter and content of the play might be unfavourable for the Ottoman administration and peoples must have been predicted by the translator Hasan Sırrı before the publication of the play. Othering and humiliating a group of people in an empire that had citizens from various ethnicities and beliefs would not be welcome by rulers and society, so much so that according to "Matbuat Nizamnamesi" (the Press Regulations) (1289/1290) which became effective as early as 1864 (Demirel, 2007, p. 32), it was forbidden to make negative remarks in newspapers even about foreign officers appointed by other states to a mission in the Empire (p. 224), let alone the Sultan's own Jewish subjects. Therefore, Hasan Sırrı acted accordingly and, while remaining loyal to the original text as much as possible, he used his linguistic skills to avoid suspicion of a meticulous censor officer. First of

⁴ The exact copy of the book which is used for this work and whose inner cover page is reproduced in the Appendices section is recorded in the National Library with the call number EHT 1948 A 1094.

all, he translated some words and idioms differently as exemplified below, and omitted certain parts through self-censorship. However, it is highly possible that this method was followed in order to avoid offending the Ottoman Jewish community rather than avoiding the reaction of the Sultan. In the introductory chapter, Hasan Sırrı (1301) justifies his textual alterations in the translation, and adds that he might have failed to notice each humiliating expression:

In order to meet the public demand, writing literary works in accordance with the trends and ethics of the time is a non-negligible condition. The nature and ethics of humankind and civilisation did not reach in the 16th and 17th centuries in the Common Era to its current magnitude; therefore, as it was essential to depict violence in the works written then, the forenamed author [Shakespeare] abode by this trend, too, and in some cases used rather offensive phrases while writing *The Merchant of Venice*. However, as there remains no need to maintain the use of such phrases in this time and civilisation we are in, it was intended to remove any words and expressions of that sort. Nonetheless, it is left to the reader's fairness to excuse the writer [indeed meaning the translator] for such words that may be found (p. 5-6).

Analysing the Turkish translations of Shakespeare in the Late Ottoman and Early Republican Periods, and examining the authenticity of the translation of *The Merchant of Venice* by Hasan Sırrı, İnci Enginün (2008), in her book *Türkçede Shakespeare* (Shakespeare in Turkish), notes that “it is quite possible that Hasan Sırrı, who was a statesman, removed these parts lest they would offend Jews, a community constituting the Empire” (p. 45). Similarly, in his MA thesis, Adem Uludağ (2007) states that “the play closely touches upon extremely sensitive issues within the frame of the relations among communities and religions in the Ottoman Empire of the 1880s” (p. 102) and attributes the reasons of Hasan Sırrı’s attitude towards the text to “the religious, populational, and etc. differences” (p. 4). Enginün and Uludağ reveal the altered or omitted parts in the translation to a great extent. However, since their works have not been translated into English, it is beneficial to present some of those omissions and alterations in this study, as well.

First of all, unlike Shakespeare, Hasan Sırrı avoids featuring Shylock’s ethnic and religious identity so as not to offend the Jewish readers in the Empire. He thus alters the text and either omits or replaces the word “Jew” –usually with the character’s name–when it is used pejoratively. Nevertheless, he seems to be aware of

the possibility that too much change in the text may have driven the play into a different direction and sense. In this regard, he prefers to translate Shylock's well-known equalitarian monologue in Act III, Scene I as it is, and conveys the difficulties and humiliation the Jewish community suffers from. However, later on, he translates Salanio's words "*unless the devil himself turn Jew*" (III.I.73) as "*meğer ki şeytan kendisi ola*" (Sırrı, 1301, p. 89) ("unless he is the devil himself" or "unless he himself becomes the devil").

As for the representation of Christianity in Hasan Sırrı's translation, it is apparent that names and expressions related to this religion are not used in a pejorative sense. Nevertheless, since Sırrı seems to be strongly influenced by the multi-religious culture he was born into, the name of the Christian God in the play is Islamicised; so much so that "God" is translated as "Allah" and "Cenab-ı Hakk", another Muslim name of God, most of the time. For instance, "*God defend me from these two!*" (I.II.51) is translated as "*Allah beni ikisinden de esirgesin*" (Sırrı, 1301, p. 25), "*By God's sounties*" (II.II.41) as "*alimallah*" (Sırrı, 1301, p. 46), "*God be thanked*" (II.II.49) as "*Cenab-ı Hakk'a çok şükür*" (Sırrı, 1301, p. 47), and "*I thank God*" (III.I.95) as "*elhamdülilllah*" (Sırrı, 1301, p. 91). Although these expressions seem like Islamic ones as stated above, it must be kept in mind that the Christian minority and Muslims in Turkey used a similar religious terminology at those times. Even so, in *Kitab-ı Mukaddes* (a Turkish Bible) (1885) published the next year after the publication of the play's translation, the word "Allah" is preferred to refer to God (i.e. p. 2). Therefore, it can be safely claimed that the names and expressions belonging to Christianity are not censored in Sırrı's text, but rather domesticated in accordance with the cultural codes of the audience.

Although the translation of the play had been accessible to the reader for eighteen years (from 1884 to 1902), censor officers found its content offensive later on; and the process of stopping the printing and publishing of the book was undertaken. Henceforth, this article studies the withdrawal of the copies of Hasan Sırrı's translation that were already censored partly and the banning of the staging of the play, even in a foreign language. The fact that the play had been printed and staged –even in the palace theatre– many times before led to a confusion among the ministries; therefore, they had to act by taking initiative. As a result, there was no unity in practice between the state institutions, and a small-scale conflict occurred.

The Withdrawal and Destruction of the Copies of Hasan Sırrı's Translation

Procedures related to banned books in the Ottoman Empire depended on how harmful, offensive or immoral their content was found. While some books were both withdrawn and destroyed, some books were only withdrawn. *The Merchant of Venice* was among those books that were both withdrawn and partly destroyed. Fortunately, as a consequence of the delivery of the withdrawn copies to different institutions and boards, there are still a good number of surviving copies available today.

The pressure on written media was not a longstanding phenomenon when Abdülhamid II ascended the throne. Nevertheless, “[t]he censorship, already well established in the time of Abdülaziz, was maintained and reinforced, and extended from newspapers to almost all printed matter” (Lewis, 2002, p. 187) during his reign.⁵ The censor officers were a very small number of people in the beginning. Yet, as the number of the officers rose up to fifteen in 1902 (Kudret, 1977, p. 36), a rise in the cases of censorship and ban was observed, as well. Following this year, numerous books, booklets, newspapers, atlases, and even cigarette boxes were prohibited on account of their allegedly objectionable contents. The scope of the officers' work was not limited to works to be imported or published, but also included a retroactive examination.

Hasan Sırrı's translation of *The Merchant of Venice* was first censored in 1902, eighteen years after its first publication, the year when the number of the censor officers increased dramatically. The earliest formal document related to the issue, found during the research for this study, is a report (BOA, MF.MKT 654/31.2.1, H-16/05/1320) written by Rıza Efendi, the Inspector of Printing Houses, dated 21 June 1902.⁶ After reading and inspecting the book, Rıza Efendi attached a copy of it to his

⁵ Abdülaziz is Abdülhamid II's uncle who reigned from 1861 to 1876.

⁶ Since abbreviations are used in the catalogue of the State Archives, the document tags are abbreviated accordingly in the citations in order to provide information for researchers to reach the archival documents easily. The expansion of the tags is given below:

BOA: *Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi* (Ottoman Archive of the Prime Ministry). The Archive was taken over by the Presidency of Republic of Turkey in 16 July 2018. However, the previously used abbreviations and tags are still valid.

BEO: *Bab-ı Ali Evrak Odası* (Documents Section of the Sublime Porte)

DH: *Dahiliye Nezareti* (Ministry of Interior)

HR: *Hariciye Nezareti* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs)

MF: *Maarif Nezareti* (Ministry of Education)

MKT: *Mektubi Kalemi* (Office of Correspondence)

report and sent them to *Maarif-i Umumiye Nezareti* (Ministry of National Education). Although he claims in his report that “*it has been understood that the content of the book is not free from inconvenience*”, he requests further investigation to be conducted by the Ministry. He also invites the authorities to take the necessary action “*in case its detriment is made manifest*”. On the other hand, another officer, named Hasan who put additional remarks below the same report, is rather biased about the work and the playwright. It can be inferred from Hasan’s statement that he never actually read the book. He suggests that “*as the majority of the mentioned writer’s [Shakespeare] works are banned, this book must be banned, too*”.

The next accessible document (BOA, MF.MKT 654/31.2.2, H-16/05/1320) in the State Archives covers the decision made about the fate of the translation of *The Merchant of Venice*. Although it is not possible to exactly recognise by whom it was penned since the paper does not contain a letterhead, it is possible to deduce from the statement “*it has been decided*” present in the text that the document is an official report prepared at a meeting at the Ministry of Education. It reveals that the previous report and a copy of the book are attached to it, and it introduces the play as “*the translated work of Shakespeare, one of the eloquent English writers, most works of whom are banned*”. The decision in the report is to inform the related government offices of “*the necessity of confiscating any copies detected*”. The upper and lower sections of the document include the lists of the people and offices it is to be delivered to.

Following the issue of the document above, the Ministry of Education prepared a well-written formal paper (BOA, DH.MKT 580/79.2.1, H-17/06/1320) to be sent to *Dahiliye Nezareti* (Ministry of Interior), dated 21/22 August 1902.⁷ The decision assumed to be made at the aforementioned meeting is restated in this paper. However, without referring to Shakespeare’s other banned works, this one introduces the play as “*the drama book named The Merchant of Venice which was published with*

TH: *Tahrirat* (Correspondence)

ZB: *Zabtiye Nezareti* (Ministry of Police)

⁷ As the Turks used two different types of calendar (the Islamic/Hijri [*Hicri*] and the Roman [*Rumi*]) before 1926, some documents have two dates. The dates in those calendars may have different equivalents in the Gregorian one, which is the reason why some documents, such as this one, have two consecutive dates.

a formal license in *Dersaadet*⁸ in the year three hundred and one⁹ and translated from the works of Shakespeare who was one of the eloquent English writers”. It is very significant that there is no reference to the prohibition of Shakespeare’s other works and that the license given for the publication of the book is especially emphasised. It is indeed the Ministry of Education that issued the license for the work; therefore, probably in order to avoid any accusation of carelessness or malice by other statesmen, neither Shakespeare nor his play is discredited in this document as much as in the others. Furthermore, this one does not propose radical precautions including the destruction of the book, but suggests that a notice be given of “*the necessity of confiscating its copies to be detected to related central offices and all the educational departments in the provinces, under the signature of the Committee of Inspection and Examination*”. As this one is a formal paper directly submitted to a ministry by another, the text is more or less free from prejudicial and severe statements, and displays a tactful language in accordance with political etiquette.

The Director of the Domestic Press at the Ministry of Interior reviewed the paper sent by the Ministry of Education and wrote a report (BOA, DH.MKT 580/79.1.1, H-17/06/1320), dated 4 September 1902, conveying the demands of the former Ministry to higher offices in the latter Ministry. Nevertheless, although he repeats the necessity of seizing the copies of the play due to its inconvenient content, the report does not demand the distribution of some copies to other offices and institutions. Moreover, the Director states that “*necessary warnings were given to the inspectors in this regard*”.

The authorities of the Ministry of Interior, not having comprehensive knowledge of the decision made by the Ministry of Education, followed the directives of the Director of Domestic Press and sent a note (BOA, DH.MKT 580/79.5.2, H-17/06/1320) to several institutions. This document declares that the play, which, unlike the previous definitions, is simply defined as “*Venedik Taciri, translated from English*” here, has been banned, that “*its importation and publication should not be allowed*”, and that it is necessary “*to seize and destroy the existing copies immediately*”. It is the last available formal paper related to the process of the book

⁸ *Dersaadet*, meaning “the door of peace”, is another name given to Istanbul, the capital of the Ottoman Empire.

⁹ The Ottoman Turks sometimes preferred not to use the digit of thousands in dates. In this respect, the year “three hundred and one” actually means “one thousand three hundred and one”, which corresponds to 1884 in the Gregorian Calendar. Other examples in the formal documents are a result of this preference, too.

ban. However, it is strongly probable that there was further correspondence, considering the fact that not each and every copy of the book was immediately seized and destroyed upon the note. Still some state and university libraries, as well as private collections, keep a number of copies of Hasan Sırrı's translation.

It is overtly obvious that none of the reports openly indicates why the translation of the play had to be banned. What part of the play was found harmful is not stated in any of the Turkish archival documents classified so far. Therefore, it may be beneficial to examine the documents concerning the stage performances of the play in order to have an idea about the reasons of categorising the play as an objectionable one.

The Banning of the Play from the Stage

The results of the research carried out for this study show that only a few people have touched upon the ban on *The Merchant of Venice* in their publications so far: Metin And, who has numerous comprehensive academic books and articles about the history of Turkish theatre, sets forth two reasons as to the ban on the play in his works, one of which is related to Abdülhamid II's personal temperament. According to And's (1961a) claim, the Sultan did not like tragedy and would avoid watching death scenes (p. 85). Although And does not cite any source for this information, he probably refers to Richard Davey's (1897) account claiming that

[the Sultan] hates tragedy in any case, and fully enjoys opera bouffe. Some years ago, the Italian Ambassador induced him to "command" Salvini to recite one or two of his great tragic scenes in his presence. His Majesty was so dreadfully frightened that he got up in the middle of the performance, and hastily left the theatre. He absolutely refused to see Sarah Bernhardt, saying he did not care to witness the acting of a woman who mimicked death to such perfection (p. 358).

Considering the fact that the Sultan was a dedicated fan of detective fiction, his fear of death scenes does not seem to be probable. Furthermore, as memoirs by Ayşe Osmanoğlu (2007, p. 75-76), the Sultan's daughter, and Tahsin Pasha (2018, p. 42), the Head of the Royal Secretariat from 1894 to 1908, and formal documents (BOA, BEO 2335/175110.1.1, H-05/03/1322) clearly report, the Sultan invited Ottoman and non-Ottoman tragedy players to his palace, watched their plays, and granted

them imperial orders¹⁰ from time to time. And (1970) conveys in his work *100 Soruda Türk Tiyatrosu Tarihi* another rumour about the Sultan's fear of tragedy and his sudden banning the staging of the play at a performance by the famous Italian actor Ermete Novelli: "He [the Sultan] was extremely afraid of death. When Novelli sharpened his knife while playing Shylock at the palace, Abdülhamit got frightened and cried 'enough, enough' and said 'abandon this and perform amusing things'" (p. 195). This claim is not supported by any formal or informal source, which shows that the incident was conveyed to him through rumours; nevertheless, we cannot simply deny the possibility of its authenticity since yet-to-be-classified archival documents may verify the rumour in the future.

The second reason And puts forth is the emergence of a possible social disturbance that might have been caused by the play. And (1972b) reinforces his argument with the statements in *The Last of the Dragomans* written by Sir Andrew Ryan (pp. 248-249), who worked as a dragoman at the British Embassy in the late Ottoman Empire. In his memoir, Ryan (1951) first tells about an actor's being prevented from staging a performance in Istanbul, then adds his subsequent personal experience with the police forces:

Two of Shakespeare's plays had in old days been popular in Constantinople—*Othello* and the *Merchant of Venice*. The same or another actor wished to revive the latter, but the Ministry of Police was immovable. Vainly I urged that the play was the work of a British subject named Shakespeare, whom we had never regarded as undesirable, but on the contrary as a credit to the country. The officials explained most politely that no reflexion was intended on Mr. Shakespeare or any other British subject, but that what was suited to one country was not necessarily suited to another, and that the treatment of Shylock was calculated to create discord among the Sultan's subjects (p. 38).

In academic terms, Ryan's statement does not go beyond being a personal assessment as he does not offer any evidence or external testimony to support his claim. In addition to this, besides Ryan, Talat Halman, the first Minister of Culture of the Republic of Turkey, tells of a similar hearsay in his "*Türk*" *Shakespeare*

¹⁰ For instance, according to the referred archival document, Ermete Novelli was granted the Second-Class Order of Ali Osmani.

[“Turkish” Shakespeare] (2011), which is rather non-academic due to its style and lack of sources, although it narrates several confirmable happenings. He states,

there was also an incident of censorship related to ‘The Merchant of Venice’ during the reign of Abdülhamid. The Ministry of Police did not allow the staging of the play. As to the reason for the prohibition, they stated in their explanation that ‘it may cause uneasiness by hurting the feelings of a minority in the Ottoman Empire’ (p. 33).

Similar to And’s narrative, in consideration of the claim about the Sultan’s fear of death scenes, Halman (2014) alleges in a proceeding that the Sultan panicked in the course of a performance of the play and had it abruptly banned:

It was rumored in the late 19th century that when *The Merchant of Venice* was presented at the special exclusive palace theatre in İstanbul, and Shylock began to sharpen his knife to take his revenge, the Sultan became apprehensive, actually so scared that he ran out screaming and caused the play to come to an abrupt end. The Sultan later reportedly said: “Abandon such frightening scenes; instead, present performances that will make us laugh” (p. 13).

Halman, like Metin And, does not present any sources for this piece of information. However, considering the publication dates of their works and the similarity of the way they narrate the incident, it is possible to conclude that Halman heard about the rumour from And. Furthermore, in “*Türk*” *Shakespeare*, Halman (2011) recounts his allegation, with more assurance this time:

While “The Merchant of Venice” was being staged for the Sultan and the notables of the Ottoman State at the Yıldız Palace, the actor whetted his knife so violently that the Sultan became sorely terrified and yelled, “enough! Enough!” They say he ran away out of fear and therefore the performance could not be rounded up. Nevertheless, it is certainly known that he said, “leave this and perform amusing things” (pp. 32-33).

Regarding the publication date of Halman’s work and the similarity of the testimonies, it is possible to conclude that this piece of information too might have been received from And’s works. Unfortunately, Halman’s book was not written with an academic reference system and does not cite any sources. Therefore, it is rather difficult to say on what grounds he claims that “*it is certainly known*”. Apart from these, two recent academic works by Süheyla Artemel and Nedret Kuran-Burçoğlu, and Anna Carleton Forrester revisit these accounts. Artemel and Kuran-Burçoğlu

(2019) quote the fleeing scene from And and the potential multi-ethnic conflict from Ryan (pp. 36-37) while Forrester (2020) refers, for the same pieces of information, to Halman and Ryan respectively (pp. 11-12).

That both And and Halman do not refer to any sources for the issue of the banning of the play and that they both are not alive today leave their claims uncertain. Moreover, the lack of information that can be proved with reliable sources in And's and Halman's publications and the rarity of primary and secondary works exploring the issue of banning stand as an obstacle in reaching a definite conclusion. Therefore, other researchers have been unable to add more perspectives to the available information, and those rumours have dominated the field of study so far. However, recently accelerating archive works like classification and scanning in Turkey have provided researchers with new documents and information concerning the world of literature, as well. The formal documents obtained for this article from the State Archives, thus, are of vital significance for the clarification of the issue of banning *The Merchant of Venice* from the stage.

Considering the dates of the formal papers found in the State Archives, two periods of time stand out for the ban on the staging of the play and the abolition of the ban. The correspondences of both periods start due to the requests of the Greek Embassy demanding permission for Greek drama companies to perform the play in Turkish lands. *The Merchant of Venice* must have been one of the most popular plays among Greek players and audience, so that the Embassy applied for permission for staging the play in Greek language. Of the correspondence sequence in 1904 (or probably between 1903 and 1904), only one response letter (BOA, HR.TH 297/50.1.1, M-20/01/1904) dated 20 January 1904 is accessible. As reported in this document sent from the Ministry of Police to *Hariciye Nezareti* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), the Greek Embassy asked the latter to lift the ban and to permit the Greek players to perform the play, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs informed the Ministry of Police about this request with a formal letter. In their response letter, the Ministry of Police kindly reminds the other party of the fact that the ban had already been lifted by referring to a performance in Istanbul in 1903. The Ministry clearly expresses in the letter that "as the ban on the play named 'The Merchant of Venice' which was performed on the stage by the Italian player Ermete Novelli last year and is desired to be staged this year, too, has been renounced", the Embassy could be informed accordingly.

The correspondence related to the second period of ban, witnessed three years later, is quite valuable due to the abundance of accessible documents which reveal detailed information about the censorship process. The related documents obtained from the Ottoman Archives of the Presidency of the Republic of Turkey in Istanbul reveal that *The Merchant of Venice* was banned from the stage once again in 1907, and this ban too was lifted on the initiatives of the Greek Embassy. When the available letters and reports are listed chronologically, a piece of notepaper (BOA, BEO 3211/240817.2.1, H-14/11/1325) with no date, letterhead, and addressee is excluded from the list, which reads, “Merchand de Venise” in French above and “The Merchant of Venice. *It has been allowed to be staged in various languages before. Now it is not allowed to be staged in Greek*”¹¹ in Turkish below. The lack of requisite identificatory information about the paper obliges researchers to go through possibilities. From the content and style of the paper and its specific location among the folders and files, it can be inferred that this document is a notepaper on which an officer from the Grand Vizierate jotted down the complaint of the Greek Embassy. On the other hand, the document which the notepaper is attached to rewords the complaint in more detail. This paper (BOA, BEO 3211/240817.1.1, H-14/11/1325) sent from the Grand Vizierate to the Ministry of Police, dated 19 December 1907, reads, “*on the grounds that although the play named The Merchant of Venice was allowed to be performed in English in Beyoğlu last year, staging it in Greek is prevented by the illustrious Ministry this time, a permission has been asked by the Greek Embassy*”. Being one of the higher governing offices of the state, the Grand Vizierate behaves more prudently and reasonably compared to the Ministry of Police; and in order to represent the justice of the state and to protect its diplomatic prestige, they conclude that “*as its staging was not objected to last year, no harm in its performance in Greek is found now*”, and then orders the police forces to act accordingly.

Even though the Grand Vizierate cared to take fair and egalitarian actions due to its diplomatic position, this behaviour did not have efficient impact on the Ministry of Police. Upon the latter’s not showing enough sensitivity for the case, the former sent another letter (BOA, ZB 46/100.1, R-18/10/1323), dated 31 December 1907, stating that the Embassy this time verbally demanded the permission for a performance in Greek. The letter repeats their insistent complaint, asserting, “*although the staging and performance of the play named The Merchant of Venice in*

¹¹ Due to the divergent grammar rules of Turkish and English languages, it must be additionally stated here that the sentences in the actual document are written as reported speech.

Greek by the Greek theatre company are not objected to by censor officers, the ban is kept on by the police". As inferred from the letter, censor officers, who had previously banned the publication of the Turkish translation of the play, quite surprisingly allowed its being staged in Greek later. The Ministry of Police, on the other hand, resisted obeying the orders of the Grand Vizierate. Instead of enforcing its orders, the Grand Vizierate, which acted with common sense and fairness about the issue of censoring the play text before, asks the Ministry of Police in the same letter if there is a reasonable excuse to ban the performance insistently, and implies that it would cause more trouble with the Embassy if there is none:

If there is a danger in staging this play in Greek, which has been repeatedly performed by many companies in various languages so far, and a reason for the continuation of the ban by the police, state it; if not, in order not to give rise to any requests and complaints again, send the necessary orders in accordance to whom it may concern.

After the tactful manner of the Grand Vizierate, which does not present the Ministry of Police with a *fait accompli*, the latter penned a response letter, dated 31 December 1907 telling about the content of the play and explaining in detail why they prevented its being staged. In order both to emphasise the significance of the content of the text and to avoid a disconnection in the correspondence sequence, the translation of the full text of the letter is given below. However, a problem related to the Ottoman Turkish language is visible here: the difficulty in translating the language of archival Ottoman documents into modern languages. About the complexity of the language of these document, Bernard Lewis (2004), who has innumerable works on Middle Eastern countries and civilisations, remarks,

The language is Ottoman Turkish, the already not inconsiderable difficulties of which are increased, in the diplomatic documents, by the use of a complex and intricate chancery style, full of allusion and artifice. At its best, as in some of the imperial letters, it can produce magnificent and resounding prose; but all too often, in the hands of inferior manipulators, it degenerates into mere bombast—vast expanses of contorted syntax and swollen verbiage where the thin rivulet of meaning is lost in the endless wilderness of words (pp. 418-419).

The complexity of the language makes it almost impossible to translate the whole document word for word. Therefore, the following passage is not the literal translation of the letter. The extremely long sentences written in an ornamental

language are divided into shorter simple ones. The following is the translation of the archival document (BOA, BEO 3222/241593.2.1, H-28/11/1325) a copy of which is presented in the Figures section of this article:

It is the submission of His humble servant that

This is the response to the note by the illustrious Grand Vizierate, dated 19 December 1907 and numbered 527. Upon the thought that although it was allowed to be staged in English in Beyoğlu last year, and that it has been prohibited from staging in Greek this time, the Greek Embassy has asked for permission for the play named *The Merchant of Venice*. As no one was allowed for the performance last year, it was not staged in English, either; however, it was performed in Italian five years ago. The play depicts a Roman¹² borrowing money from a Jewish moneylender on the condition that if the debtor cannot pay his debt in due course, the creditor is going to cut off one kilogram¹³ [sic] of flesh from any part he likes from the debtor's body, and upon the debt's not being paid in time, the moneylender's applying to court and demanding a sentence in accordance with the contract, which is terribly ugly. When it was realised that the play, apart from being contradictory to humanity and civility, would cause a huge coldness and animosity among people, it was immediately banned and has not been permitted again. The play [text], in Greek this time, has been returned to the theatre owner/manager. The order and decree on this matter belong to the illustrious command-giver.

First of all, the unpleasant incidents in the content of the play are found rather incongruous with the Ottoman social structure and discourse shaped by Turkic traditions and Middle-Eastern values. Approaching the issue from a wide perspective, the police force considers staging such topics harmful and unethical in the name of humanity. In addition to this, another motive for banning the play specifically in cosmopolitan Istanbul is the "coldness" it might have caused among its multinational society.¹⁴ Indeed, although Turkey gathered a diversity of peoples from various ethnic

¹² The Ministry of Police mistakenly identifies Antonio as "Roman" instead of "Venetian".

¹³ As the Turks used metric units rather than imperial ones, the Ministry of Police prefers to adjust the measurement into the familiar usage. Nevertheless, Hasan Sirri uses the term "*libre*" (i.e. p. 38, 39, 114, 126), the Turkish word for "pound", in his translated text.

¹⁴ In fact, the reservations of the Police may be justified as the tension between the Christian and Jewish minorities in the Ottoman Empire was immensely high in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Stanford J. Shaw states in this regard that "[t]he revival of Ottoman Jewry during the last half of the nineteenth century produced ugly reactions among their Christian rivals within the territory that remained under Ottoman rule" (1990, p. 1118). Such conflicts between the two minorities were usually

and religious backgrounds under the same umbrella for centuries, common values could not diminish the communal identities and sensitivities of the minorities. Therefore, it was rather difficult to come up with methods to satisfy all from time to time, so much so that, as And (2015) reports, “*there always occurred melee and brawl due to various reasons in the theatres. Sometimes a brawl was raised upon a religious case or interpretation on the stage*” (pp. 69-70). The cultural ties among religious and ethnic groups were so weak in the late imperial decades that

an author and an art form that had, in fact, once been brought over, cultivated by, and catered to diverse communities was now presumed to cause widespread discontent and conflict among them. Shakespeare, who had come to be a symbol of international collaboration and common ground, who could be adopted and adapted by and for various peoples into various contexts, was, by the end of the nineteenth century, seen as capable of creating fracture among the Sultan’s people (Forrester, 2020, p. 12).

In such an environment, minding the sensitivities of those communities was of vital significance. In regards to this fact, the biggest responsibility was that of the police which worked within society. Therefore, the Ministry stresses that they banned the play in order to prevent a conflict that might happen/repeat among peoples. Considering their justification in the response letter of the Ministry, only the claim related to a probable conflict slightly mentioned in Sir Andrew Ryan’s *The Last of the Dragomans* and And’s and Halman’s similar accounts is verified through archival documents.

After all the correspondence and inquiry, the Grand Vizierate, which tried to sustain the Empire through diplomacy in its dissolution era, simply ignored the justification of the Ministry of Police. As the complaints of the Greek Embassy must have surpassed the probability of offending the Jewish community, it was decided that the ban on the performance was to be lifted. In this regard, the last known letter (BOA, ZB 46/102.1, R-24/10/1323) from the Grand Vizierate to the Ministry of Police

caused by religious matters. In relation to these religious struggles, Paul Dumont notes that “[i]t was usually at the approach of great Jewish or Christian holidays that accusations of ritual murder were made and riots broke out. During Easter week, the recital of the death of Jesus never failed to awaken the fury of Christians. At the least provocation, the ‘Murderers of the Savior’ were pursued, insulted and eventually beaten up” (qtd. in Shaw, 1990, pp. 1120-1121). For more detail on the conflicts between the Christian and Jewish groups living within the Ottoman boundaries, see Shaw, S. J. (1990) Christian anti Semitism in the Ottoman Empire. *Belleten*, 54(211), 1073-1150.

first states that “as the play titled *The Merchant of Venice*, one of Shakespeare’s famous works, has been staged in various languages in numerous cities of Europe several times, it was performed in Istanbul, too, by the Italian company last year”. It can be inferred from this statement that the Turkish policy-makers desired to put their Empire in the same category with European states in terms of rights and freedoms. If the play could be staged in different languages in European cities, it could be performed in Greek in another European city, namely Istanbul. Moreover, it is also implied in the letter that more complaints would be received if the officials did not lift the ban upon the request of the Greek Embassy on the grounds that it had already been staged in Istanbul the previous year. Therefore, in order to put an end to this duality in practice and prevent further complaints, the Grand Vizierate ordered the Ministry of Police to permit its performance.

The problem of censoring and banning *The Merchant of Venice* must eventually have been solved owing to the Grand Vizierate’s letter as there is no document dated a later time in the catalogues of the State Archives yet. As a matter of fact, *Meşrutiyet* (constitutional monarchy) was inaugurated for the second time around the middle of the same year, which brought about fundamental changes in the state structure, especially in the field of rights and freedoms, and the relatively-more-democratic atmosphere seems to have put an end to the conflicts and controversies in censorship practices (Lewis, 2002, pp. 210-213, 230-231). Nonetheless, if further formal documents and letters are discovered in state or private archives and personal collections later on, more can be added to the current knowledge available.

Conclusions

Considering the aforementioned official papers and other documents, it is possible to draw a variety of conclusions. First of all, publication of the translation of the *The Merchant of Venice* and the performance of the play might not have been banned as a consequence of the Sultan’s fear of death as Metin And and Talat Halman claim. The documents/correspondence clearly show that the play was banned due to the Ministry of Police’s intention in order to prevent a potential conflict among Christian and Jewish minorities in the Empire. The police considered the possibility that the degrading attitude towards the Jews in the play which was performed by the Christian Armenian and Greek players could have hurt the feelings of the Jewish audience.

The main reason why the translation and performance of the play were permitted for more than one and half decades may be explained by the fact that only a few censor officers were employed to inspect all the publications and performances within the Ottoman boundaries. Once the number the officers was increased, even formerly-published books –including *The Merchant of Venice*– were inspected in a short time. Apart from this, the translator’s resorting to self-censorship is another reason for the long-term freedom for the publication of the play. Hasan Sırrı’s political move, considering communal sensitivities, in removing derogatory expressions from the text helped the work to be available for eighteen years. The last point for consideration in this matter is the language of the performance. As most plays by the minorities were staged in Armenian, Italian, Greek and French, it is highly possible that censor officers and the Jewish community had not been able to understand the play until the publication of the translation. Thus, there was no need for a complaint by the community and a ban by the ministries.

Due to the humiliating portrayal of Shylock, the Jewish minority in Istanbul might have protested the play. On the other hand, having no part in the religious conflict between Christian and Jewish people, the Turkish audience seem to remain silent about the play. The Greek minority, however, insistently demanded to see a performance, and their demand was reported to the Turkish authorities by the Greek Embassy. In this regard, it is possible to put forward that the play was banned for the sake of public peace; yet, it was allowed again in order to avoid a diplomatic crisis with the Greek State.

The formal documents do not include any information about the Sultan’s being apprehensive during a performance and ordering a ban on the play. On the contrary, Metin And, who also claims that such an incident actually happened, notes that the Sultan enjoyed watching a performance of the play by Ernesto Rossi at Yıldız Palace. Therefore, if the archival documents are considered to be the utmost proof, Metin And and Talat Halman’s claim about the Sultan’s fear does not go beyond being a rumour.

Even though the conclusions above are reached through formal documents obtained from the Presidency of the Republic of Turkey Directorate of State Archives, it is not fully possible to offer a conclusive statement about the issue of censorship and ban of *The Merchant of Venice* in late Ottoman Istanbul due to the limitations of the study. Not all incidents may be included in official documents. Moreover, since the entire Turkish archive held at the departments of the State Archives in Ankara

and Istanbul has not been classified and scanned yet, new documents will provide researchers with new undiscovered facts and perspectives in the future.

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Summary

One of the essential problems of scientific and non-scientific studies dealing with the censorship of plays in the late Ottoman period in Turkey is the neglect of archival documents. This methodological issue leads to the emergence of many contradictory assumptions about the same subject. Similarly, studies on the reasons for banning Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice* suggest different views. What is known for certain about the ban is that it was censored and banned in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, a clarity about the reasons for this censorship and ban has not been put forward until now. Even Metin And and Talat Halman, the leading researchers on the subject, offer unevidenced views. One of the most expressed views is that Sultan Abdülhamid II, while watching the play in the palace theatre, suddenly grew frightened and ordered the play to be banned. To be more precise, the Sultan could not control his emotions while the actor playing Shylock was sharpening his knife and immediately banned the game as the scene implied torture. Another view is that due to several discriminative statements presented in the play, it was likely to cause a quarrel and hostility among the multi-ethnic Ottoman audience. The Ottoman audience included Christian and Jewish minorities as well as Muslim-Turkish majority. The plays staged by Christian Greek and Armenian theatre companies were watched by all these peoples. In such a situation, quarrels between Christian and Jewish citizens of the empire were also likely.

Subsequent studies prefer to benefit from the views of Metin And and Talat Halman rather than presenting a different perspective. Both possibilities about the reason for the ban mentioned above are presented in these studies, but more emphasis is placed on the Sultan's paranoia. One common aspect of the studies that take the former or the latter reason as a basis is that they do not apply to official documents. Different from the previous researches, this article approaches the subject from a historicist point of view. In this context, it acknowledges previous studies with a comprehensive literature review and uses archival documents scanned, classified and made available to researchers by Presidency of the Republic of Turkey Directorate of State Archives.

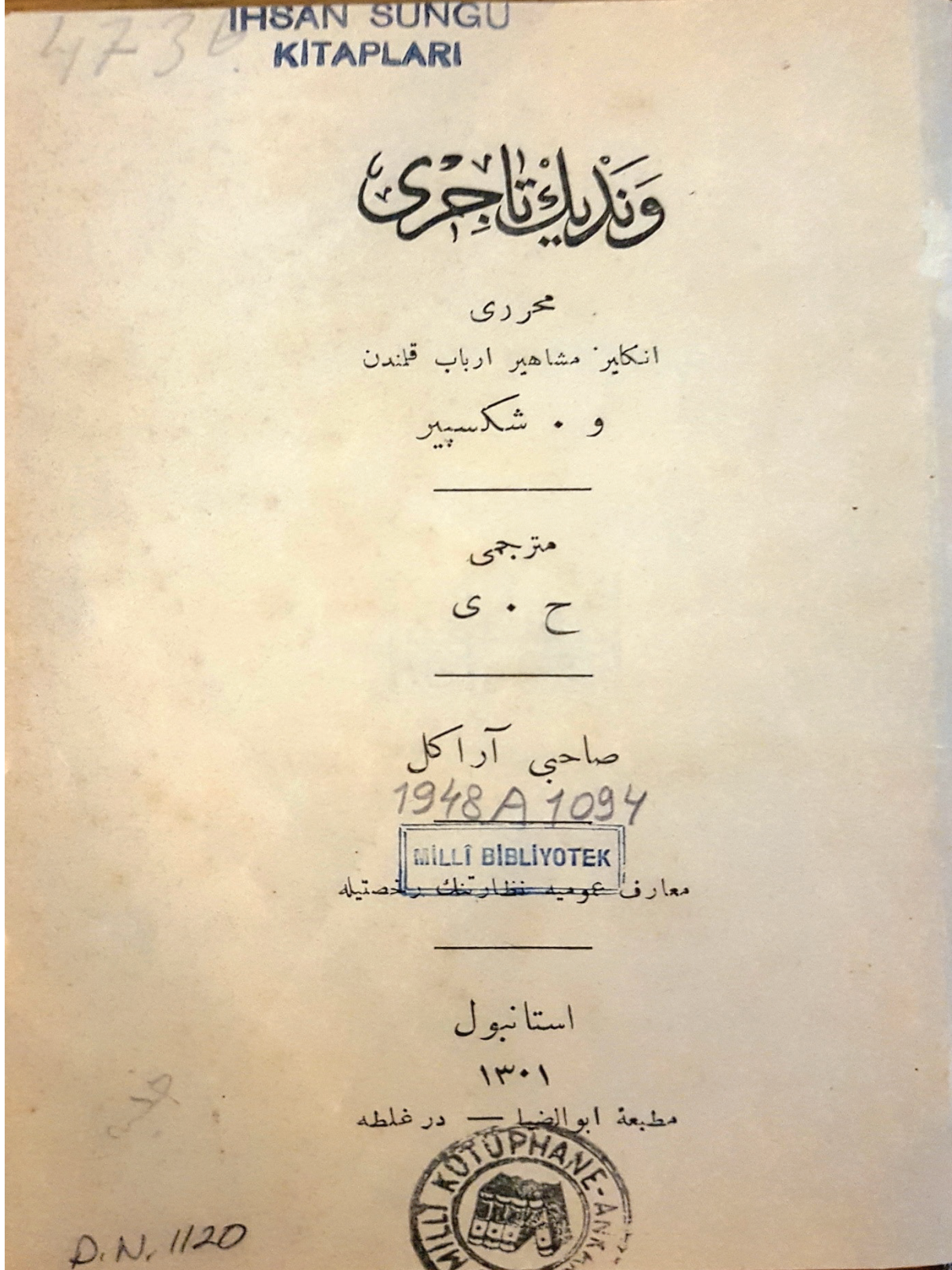
According to the research, the play was censored and banned in three stages. First of all, Hasan Sırrı, who translated the play into Turkish in 1884, did not find particular expressions in the play suitable for the civilised world and altered them thinking that they would offend some minorities. Especially, derogatory words referring to Shylock's Jewish identity are much less emphasised than in the original text. Thus, the first step of censorship was taken by the translator. Eight years after the publishing of the translation, censorship became more common in the empire and censor officers argued that the text of the play should be withdrawn on the grounds that the content of the play was inconvenient. Thus, some of the seized copies were destroyed, and some of them were sent to various government offices for preservation. However, the processes of banning the text of the play and banning the play from the stage were not carried out together. While Hasan Sırrı's translation was prohibited, the play could be staged in Armenian, Italian, Greek and French in different cities. But over time, the staging of the play began to be prevented by the police officers. When a Greek theatre company could not obtain official permission for a performance, the Greek Embassy wrote a letter to the Turkish government to learn the reason for the prevention. Following this request, the correspondence between various ministries revealed the official reason for the ban. According to these official documents, some behaviours and words in the play were found against humanity and civilisation by the Ministry of Police (*Zabtiye Nezareti*), and the play was banned in order not to cause enmity among people.

Findings in primary sources point to the protection of social peace as the reason for the ban. The absence of any reference to the Sultan's order to ban the play in archival documents strengthens the possibility that the Sultan's paranoia is only a rumour. In addition, some official documents and contemporary testimonies note that the Sultan watched the play and even rewarded the players.

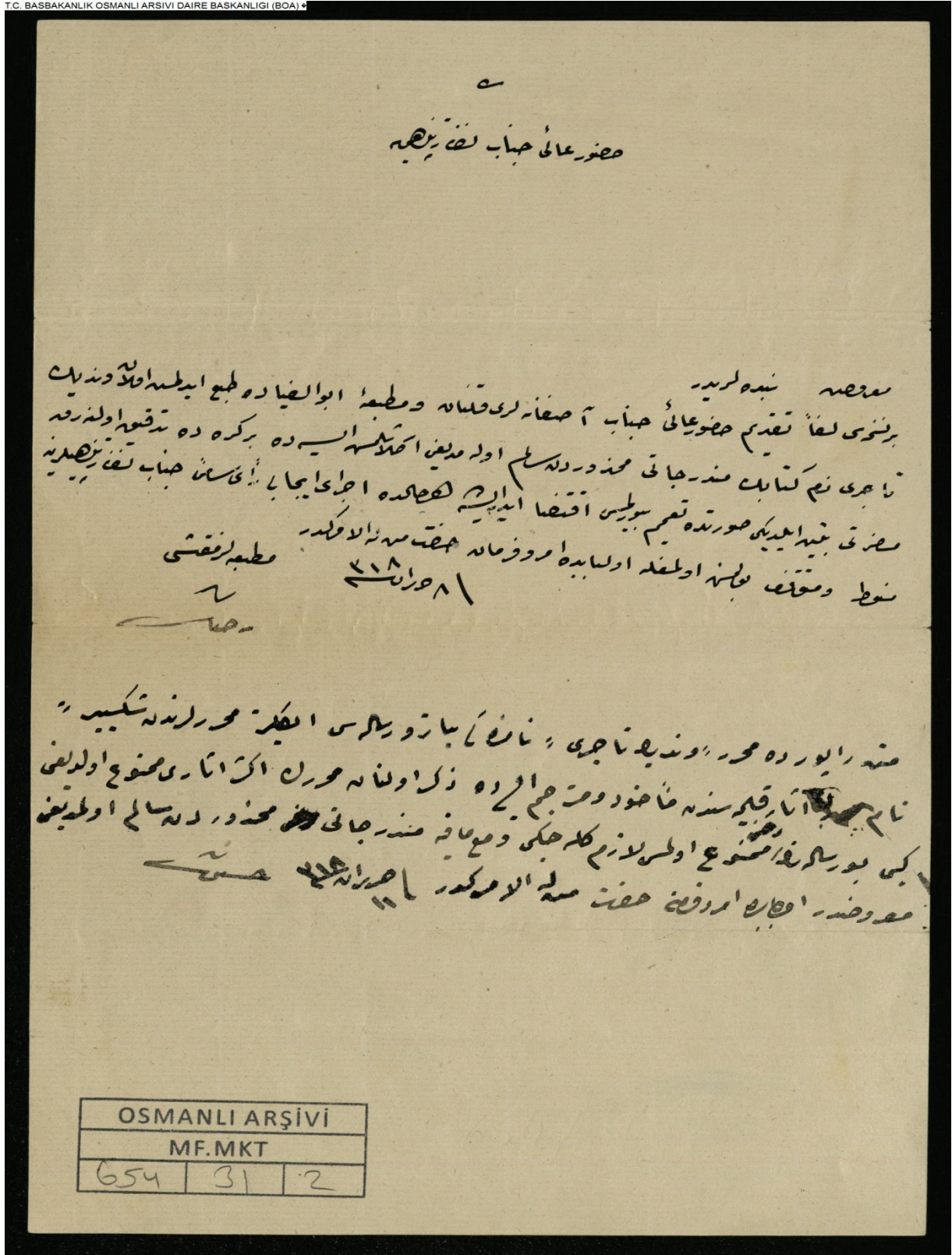
In conclusion, although this research article does not bring a completely new view to the doctrine, it supports one of the existing contradictory views with official documents. It also aims to be a guide for examining other cases of censorship objectively with the historicist method.

Appendices

Appendix 1: The inner cover page of *Venedik Taciri* (Sırrı, Hasan, trans. *Venedik Taciri*. By William Shakespeare. İstanbul: Matbaa-i Ebuzziya, 1301 [1884])

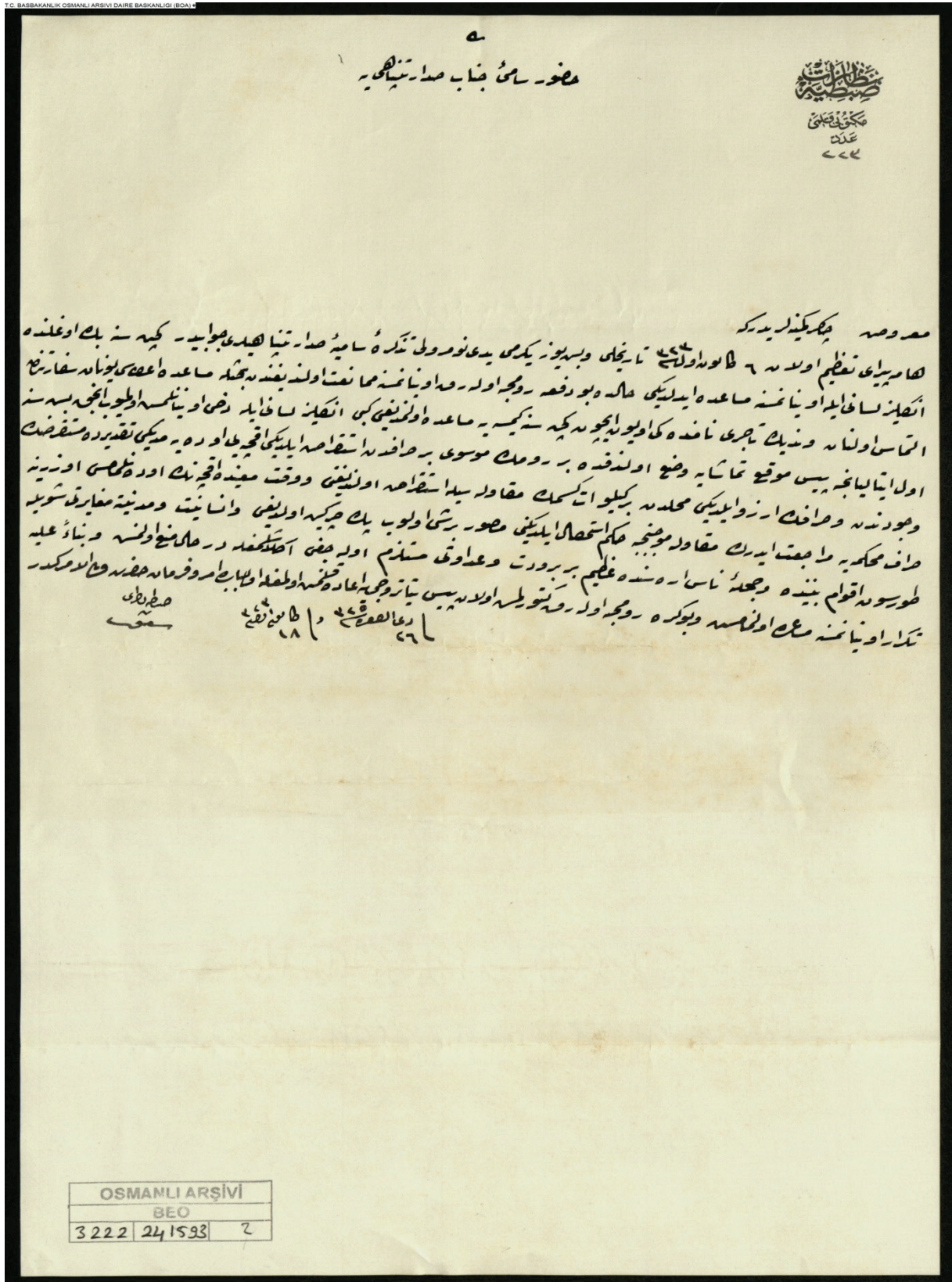


Appendix 2: The report submitted by Rıza Efendi and Hasan about the play, pointing to its harmful content (MF.MKT.654.31.2.1)



MF.MKT.00654.00031.002

Appendix 3: The response from *Zabtiye Nezareti* (Ministry of Police) to *Sadaret* (Grand Vizierate), explaining the actual reason for the ban (BEO.3222.241593.2.1)



BEO.003222.241593.002

Appendix 4: Mardiros Minakyan playing Shylock in 1879 (*Minakyan Efendi'nin Ellinci Sene-i Devriyesi Yadigarı*. İstanbul: Arşak Garoyan Matbaası, 1912. 13)

