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On Mellowing *The Merchant of Venice*

That Shylock is “unpalatable” has been the ongoing complaint of Jewish communities faced with yet another (and always another) rendition of their *bête noire*, *The Merchant of Venice*. It is this play that at least five people chose in response to the topic of “the unpalatable” in Shakespeare plays. Even when focusing on another play, as in the précis of T.H. Howard-Hill on *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Nini Pal on *The Tempest*, and Eugene England on *The Taming of the Shrew*, *The Merchant of Venice* was *de rigueur* for comparison. Despite our best efforts at redirecting, refocusing, reconsidering the relative culpability of anti-alien Christian Venetians, or the possibility of Shakespeare’s attempts to teach us all to beware the bitter fruits of hatred, the danger of such arguments remains stronger than the possible benefits of seeing ourselves as others see us – and learning tolerance thereby. A member of our panel (Eugene England) phrases these moments succinctly: “Such scenes . . . can simply reinforce a simplistic or ‘defective’ moral perspective,” making them probably more dangerous than beneficial.

James Shapiro’s compendious volume on Shakespeare and the Jews provides repeated statements affirming and confirming the use and abuse of this play to visit indignities and physical violence upon the Jews. He points to clear, historical evidence of laws of the Seventeenth, Eighteenth, and Nineteenth Centuries that used *Merchant* to PROVE the venality of the Jews. Scholarly essays, he reports, were no more careful than fiction

to differentiate between Shylock the character in a play and the Jew as a living being. Indeed, the chronology of the chicken and the egg has been lost on subsequent generations that have accepted Shakespeare's creation as the basis for reality. The nadir of *Merchant* exploitation was, of course, its required reading in Nazi Germany as a textbook account of the un-human qualities of the Jew, and as an inspiration for deadly propaganda. Yet, even Shapiro, after a masterful treatise on the evil effects of MV, ends his book with the caveat that censorship of this play, or its removal from the stage, or even its modification, runs the risk of tampering with any good that it might occasion. What "good" has Shapiro shown us? He ends his book with this warning (quoted rather fully for clarity):

. . . much of the play's vitality can be attributed to the ways in which it scrapes against a bedrock of belief about the racial, national, sexual, and religious differences of others . . . To avert our gaze from what the play reveals about the relationship between cultural myths and people's identities will not make irrational and exclusionary attitudes disappear. Indeed, these darker impulses remain so elusive, that only in instances like the production of this play do we get to glimpse these cultural faultlines. That is why censoring the play is always (sic) more dangerous than staging it. *The Merchant's* capacity to illuminate a culture is invariably compromised when those staging it flinch from presenting the play in its complex entirety . . . (228)

Shapiro thereby makes *The Merchant* a scholar's study for insight into a culture, despite the sorry history he has reported. Suppose, however, that contemporary non-scholarly audiences react like too many playgoers in the 400 years of the play's performances, and fall into the same quagmire of viewing Shylock as THE JEW, instead of A JEW. Shall we ignore the burden of history for the sake of the historians? Shapiro's turnabout is the same intellectual game that we've all been playing.

"Yes," we say, "the portrait of Shylock is of a nasty man, but are we afraid to recognize that a Jew can be a vicious creature? Do we want to be guilty of joining the 'politically correct' in avoiding negative portrayals of ethnic characters?"

"No," I say, "that is not the issue. Yes, 'A' Jew can be nasty, but when we get into the mindset of 'THE' Jew as murderous, devilish (in its deepest sense), then we are in the realm of anti-Semitism."

"Play it as it is," is what Shapiro seems to be advising. But what do we mean by "as it is"? To rely on the term "Comedy" does not provide the full answer, since that genre may include "to teach and delight," but the balance is precarious, depending not only on presentation (as producers of MV prefer to believe), but on basic text, which may offer insurmountable barriers. Playing it "as it is" most often does not aim for insight into our culture, as James Shapiro would have it, but for sheer "enjoyment." While

the recent ART production described by our group's John Ford seems a masterful, imaginative treatment of the play, most are not.

Just last year, the Knightsbridge Theater in Pasadena emphasized the comic aspects of *Merchant*, and succeeded in creating a pleasurable experience for my students. Antonio was African American and young and handsome, therefore an attractive, sympathetic foil for a chronically bitter, middle-aged (though not bad-looking) Shylock. Gratiano and Friends were engaging young men, a little younger than Antonio, perhaps, but not much. The sympathies of the audience were evoked for these fun-loving, generous friends, who even invited their adversary to dine with them. How ungracious Shylock was to insult them while declining their invitation!

Yes [Shylock says], to smell pork, to eat of the habitation which your prophet the Nazarite conjured the devil into: I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you, and so following: but I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you . . . (I.3.33–38)

The Knightsbridge's Jessica was a sweet, fun-loving but unhappy girl who was being stifled by Shylock's strict way of living, unlike the BBC's "amorous Jessica" with perpetual scorn for her father. Following the text, however, in each case Jessica pronounced from the outset: "Our house is hell" (2.I.2), and found solace at home only in her warm relationship with the Clown, Launcelot Gobbo, who was also bent upon leaving that stingy household. Jessica was playful and cute in her boyish britches as she eloped with her Christian suitor, Lorenzo, stealing bags of her father's gold and jewels to enhance her "gentle" (hence "Gentile") image.

When MV is played with that emphasis on comedy, however, when are we invited to laugh at, when with a character? The Knightsbridge audience in 1998, like the ones at South Coast Repertory in 1981, at the Ashland, Oregon Shakespeare Festival in 1991, and at Shakespeare Orange County at Chapman University in 1997, chuckled during Gratiano's report of Shylock's reaction to Jessica's elopement ("My daughter, O my ducats, O my daughter" – 2.8.15), as well as at Shylock's ignominious defeat in the courtroom. When Portia deals Shylock blow after blow, only a truly creative approach, one that I have not witnessed so far, could provoke a negative reaction: most audiences see her as an avenging angel, and join Gratiano's gleeful laughter. In both cases, as in others, the ironies of the text overwhelm the bigotry of the characters and evoke the offensive laughter.

Granted: study and discussion serve to put the play's action in historical and dramatic perspective. The power of live performance, however, overcomes the most intense pre-performance study – at least for the duration of the play. Students who had shuddered at the anti-Semitism obvious in the BBC and Olivier versions confessed sheepishly that, at the theater, the denigration

of Shylock was lost in the midst of the fun and games, the caskets and rings, and clever courtroom antics. The anti-Semitic language and action were subsumed in the main action, as, indeed, the text demands. After all, Shylock appears in only five scenes; he is meant to be the usual killjoy of Shakespearean comedy, different from Malvolio in the extent of the evil he threatens, but still the dispensable alien. (In Malvolio's case, all concede that their persecution went too far; for Shylock, however, no one even suggests that he has been "most notoriously abused"). With Shylock's departure from the scene, the life of the community returns rapidly to its regular patterns of love and laughter, harmony and beauty, with nary a look backward.

How is it, then, that we are able to ignore the fact that Shylock is called by name only twelve times in the course of the entire play, while "Jew" is used some fifty-five times in direct address, as well as by reference? In the trial scene alone, he is called "Shylock" only five times, as against "Jew" twenty-four times, twice by the presiding Duke! This easy interchange of "Shylock" and "Jew" creates an easy interchange of "A Jew" with "The Jew," accompanied as these references are with such epithets as "scurrilous," "harsh," "currish," and such extended abuse as Antonio's eight lines describing nature's impossibilities – which culminate in the greatest of all: the expectation of softening that which is most hard, "[Shylock's] Jewish heart" (4.1.70–80).

Major actors from Edmund Kean in 1814 onward have tried to deliver a more sympathetic reading of Shylock's pleas for recognition as a human being, but the overall effect of the play has not been sufficiently changed to avoid its historical dangers. "Perhaps the only answer, then, is to change the point of view of the entire play," say the best-intentioned directors and actors, and they have tried – Lord knows they've tried, but can the "delight" be retained in those cases? In order to effect the modification of "The Jew," the rest of the characters and situations have to be adjusted as well – at least enough to demonstrate the sorry results of bigotry. The Christian Venetians must share responsibility for Shylock's abhorrent demand for that pound of flesh, preceded by his stated hatred for Antonio "for he is a Christian," and his urge to satisfy the "ancient grudge" he bears against Christians, the haters of his "sacred nation."

Shylock's undesirable attitudes and behavior must be modified by means of creative interpretations, interpolated action, or, in some cases, by judicious cuts. Patrick Stewart reports on the Nineteenth Century addition of that absent obligatory scene of Shylock's finding that Jessica has fled. Both Henry Irving and Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree had him crossing a bridge, with the sounds of revelry fading out behind him. Irving ended his scene with Shylock's walking down to the front of

his house and knocking at the door, while the curtain slowly fell. Tree's Shylock "found the door ajar, howled and rushed inside," then (in somewhat ludicrous fashion?) screamed and shouted at window after window for his gold and ducats, tearing his clothes. Finally he rushed back out on to the stage, "ripped his clothes off and covered himself in ashes" (173) (for his daughter or his ducats?). Lulla Rosenfeld's *Bright Star of Exile* reports a simple "calling for his child and throwing ashes on his head" (304) – thus eliminating the question of grotesqueness. In Jacob Adler's 1901 rendition for the Yiddish theater, the poignancy is unmistakable: Shylock opens the door of his house and calls for Jessica. After a few, increasingly frantic tries, he realizes that she is gone, and tears his garments in the Jewish tradition of mourning (Rosenfeld 305).

Yiddish theatrical groups, in their admiration and love for Shakespeare, strived to salvage this difficult play for their probably all-Jewish audiences, and were sure that they, if anyone, could do so. Jacob Adler's Shylock was presented as the dignified Jewish patriarch whose ability to sustain the usual affronts of a Christian society is overwhelmed by his shock at Jessica's elopement. Yiddish journals report, too, that, in many productions, an assurance, conveyed in some manner short of an outright wink, indicated that, despite Shylock's anguish, he never means to follow through with the cutting of the pound of flesh (a singularly un-Jewish act). He will frighten his adversaries; then, at the last moment, he will show his capacity for mercy by voluntarily withdrawing the threat. With even that tacit expectation of reversal, one Yiddish critic bemoaned Shylock's whetting his knife on the sole of his shoe. "It makes a bad impression" is his understated reaction (Gorin 15). Maurice Schwartz, the doyen of the Yiddish theater through the 1950s, in spite of his acclaim as Shylock, asserted that it was no use: *The Merchant of Venice* was an intrinsically anti-Semitic play (Lifson 320).

If the goal is to balance the lessons of the play with the pleasure, if we seek to deemphasize Shylock's five scenes, and allow the rings and romance to create the final effect, then what has the play "taught" the Christian characters, and the play's audiences? After all, everyone but Shylock is allowed to return to Comedy's emphasis on the Good Life, with invitations to dinner, games of romance, music by moonlight, and promised consummations of marriages. The Jew has provided a period of discomfort and even fear, but all that has disappeared with his defeat and departure. Still striving for balance, some productions have tried to offer a wordless reflection on the interreligious conflict of the play. Jessica, for the entire final act, back at Belmont, is sad during her banter with Lorenzo about unstable lovers, perhaps because of her own Jewish-Christian alliance. Then, her

subsequent rejection of Lorenzo's outstretched hand to join the other lovers as they leave the stage would suggest an inability to put her past behind her. Still, the only ones to be left with a residue of the play's conflicts are the Jewish characters, and perhaps Lorenzo – for his having married a Jew? (Recent renditions leave Jessica and Antonio alone on stage, he at one side, she at the other; each one sad, though each is reviewing a letter bearing what should have been good news: hers the details of her father's legacy, his the safe return of his ships. Some allow Antonio to repeat his opening line: "In sooth I know not why I am so sad . . .")

The salutary effects of *Merchant* have not seemed evident in the many versions that I have experienced or the copious reviews that I have read. I remain uncomfortable with Shapiro's unqualified insistence that the play be presented "in its complex entirety." I am willing to concede the complexity, but not convinced that the intrinsic textual difficulties can be overcome by any but the most creative directors. Interpolations, expressionistic stage devices – as in the reported ART production, and ironic settings – as in a 1978 "variation" in a concentration camp (Urist 32) – can surely help. (I look forward to another such treatment this next week at Cal Poly, Pomona, though it will evidently "take some liberties" with the text.)

"Shylock after Auschwitz" (to borrow Robert King's phrasing, 59) remains a challenge which all too many companies are determined to deal with, or too often to ignore in their eagerness to mount this play. Since not even the "political correctness" granted all other minorities seems to rub off on the frequent presentation of *The Merchant of Venice*, I certainly have to hope that impassioned, creative attempts to mellow this unpalatable play will serve to mitigate its insidious combination of Comedy and anti-Semitism¹.

References

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¹ The author of this essay saw the Cal Poly University performance of *The Merchant of Venice*: "as performed by the inmates of Theresienstadt concentration camp." Its format allowed for an exciting triple vision: the actors performing their roles, while, at the same time, interacting with the Nazi guards on stage, and playing to an audience of Jewish prisoners.

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