

“From early modern devil to post-Holocaust victim: playing Shylock across the ages.”

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[Tile 1] Building on Dr. Franko’s astute analysis of the ways in which classical interests are transformed into early modern ones by Shakespeare, I want to think about the ways character -- especially the provocative character of Shylock, who I am currently playing in Quill Theatre’s production of *The Merchant of Venice* for the Richmond summer Shakespeare Festival -- metamorphoses over time and theatrical traditions, responding to its evolving social milieu and the shaping pressures of political context. It isn’t an academic exercise, any more than this is an academic talk. A critical element of my performance process, production history is a conversation I particularly attend to, since I also hope to add a couple of lines of my own as it continues on, chattering into the night (which is how I sometimes define acting). All classical actors, to an extent, perform in borrowed robes, hand-me-downs that we patch with new threads before passing them on to future generations. A few costumes, however, have changed their meanings so radically over the four hundred years since Shakespeare created them, that actors can become nervous about donning them at all. I confess to being one of those anxious actors when I was offered the high-risk role of Shylock.

All plays change over time, of course, and we can no more assuredly recover a first performance than we can recreate how it was first received. But certain of Shakespeare’s play -- the “tricky trio,” we might call them -- deal with the issues of sexism, colonialism and slavery, and xenophobia, which are acutely sensitive to

contemporary audiences. [I wonder if any of you know which plays I refer to?] *Taming of the Shrew*, with its scenes of domestic abuse deployed by Petruchio as a strategy to tame his wayward wife; *The Tempest*, in which the white European colonizer Prospero enslaves Caliban, a native of the island on which he has been shipwrecked; and *Merchant of Venice*, in which some nasty xenophobic stuff happens to a Jewish moneylender who seeks revenge by demanding a pound of flesh for an unpaid debt. I have to be careful how much of the plot I reveal here, since I don't want to ruin your viewing experience this evening. I must therefore walk a tricky line by discussing my character without giving away too much of the story or of the choices our production makes. [As a point of interest, how many of you have read the play, or perhaps seen it, or at least know something of the plot?]

Perhaps those of you who have seen *Merchant* will share contemporary critical discomfort about the play's classification as a comedy, a point Fred has already noted. Even though the plot fulfills the tenets of Roman New Comedy by having an older blocking character removed by young lovers from the path to marriage, scenes veer sharply between light and dark, comic and vicious. **[Tile 2]** The fact that the 1623 Folio, the first (partial) compilation of Shakespeare's works, classifies all the "tricky" plays as comedies -- rather than histories or tragedies, the other two designations used in the period -- suggests that this tension between genre and theme is, at least in part, at the root of our discomfort. Dramatizing such toxic social issues in a historical setting allows us to at least nominally view them as events that happened, and if tragic, as a non-judgmental representation of the human condition. But comedies, which require resolution, risk endorsing, or at least

appearing to endorse, the issues they dramatize. Shakespeare wrote another play set in Venice with race and bigotry as its subject. But *The Tragedy of Othello* is far more likely to be interrogated for its production history of blackface -- of white actors blacking up to perform characters of color -- than for the play's representation of racism because the outcome of such xenophobia is unquestionably tragic. Accusations of racism that some critics and viewers attach to *Merchant* are inevitably exacerbated by the fact that it's a comedy; its happy ending undermines whatever internal critiques and complexities it stages. And this generic sanctioning applies to all our tricky trio of plays. In *Taming*, in a troubling final speech to the audience (a soliloquy) Kate advises wives, and perhaps not just metaphorically, to learn obedience by placing their hands beneath their husbands' shoes. At the end of *Tempest*, Caliban, having been drilled in English manners, mores, and language, is deserted on an empty island, stranded between cultures. And in *Merchant's* final act, Shylock's daughter Jessica, newly baptized, celebrates a Christian marriage paid for by the proceeds of stolen heirlooms and a dowry of state-seized assets. That these final images raise the specter of the concentration camps and the Holocaust -- the defining horror of the twentieth century -- reinforces the reality that plays are sometimes overtaken by history. With comic endings like these, who needs tragedy?

Such comic resolutions more likely than not leave modern audiences feeling distinctly queasy, and have led some to argue that these plays are outmoded, offensive, and should no longer be performed. Rather than being banned, the argument (often made by liberal thinkers) goes, Shakespeare's tricky trio might be allowed to quietly fade into history, anathemas to be discussed in the classroom

rather than to be performed in public. While I, of course, would never condone the banning of plays, I have passively supported this position, while also safeguarding my liberal credentials, by simply not performing in these plays myself, by avoiding them at all costs. When the director Jan Powell approached me about Shylock, I immediately betrayed all this cultural and political anxiety in my first response: “You do realize that I’m not Jewish.” If she’d asked me to play Antonio, the merchant of the title, I doubt I’d have felt the need to inform her that I’m not Italian. I am, after all, an actor; it is my job to play people that I am not. And yet, had Jan asked me to play Morocco, the North African prince in *Merchant*, I would have most assuredly declined. But in playing Shylock am I not, as an esteemed colleague of mine gently insinuated, performing a kind of ethnic blackface? These are difficult, important questions that must be asked by an actor wishing to justly represent, even in a single figure, the suffering of an enslaved race, or an abused ethnic group, or an historically oppressed gender, while keeping true to the spirit of Shakespeare’s complex comic structure. And we can generally find answers, along with many more critical questions, in considering how previous generations and ages have confronted the challenge of performing and maintaining the relevance of Shakespeare’s darker comedies. Without their courageous efforts, and however bizarre some of their choices, Shakespeare’s tricky trio would likely never have survived.

So, to the beginning, or what we know of *Merchant*’s early modern performance history. We have no record of *Merchant*’s first performance other than that it took place around 1596-97. We can, however, speculate as to its popularity

since it was revived in 1605 for King James 1 at the Palace of Whitehall on February 10th and then again, at his request, two days later on Shrove Tuesday (which is, perhaps not coincidentally, the night of masques and revelry into which the eloping Jessica, Shylock's daughter, disappears with her lover, Lorenzo.) We then lose all track of the play until 1701, when one George Granville, Lord Lansdowne refashioned it into *The Jew of Venice: A Comedy*, featuring, according to a Prologue spoken by the ghost of Shakespeare, the punishment of a "stock-jobbing Jew." This unpleasant phrase describing a currency speculator perhaps suggests how Shylock fared on stage over the course of the seventeenth century (barring the interregnum of 1642-60, when the theaters were closed by the Puritans) but also locates him clearly as a usurer businessman, whereas our first written description of him on the frontispiece to the Q1 of 1600 **[Tile 3]** takes pains to contrast Shylock with the Merchant of the title, Antonio, while portraying him as an altogether darker figure: "With the extreme crueltie of Shylocke the Jewe / towards the sayd Merchant, in cutting a just pound of his flesh." It's also worth noting here that the publisher, for reason only known to him, classifies the play as "the most excellent / Historie of the *Merchant / of Venice*." Like the "based upon true events" byline of a movie, this description perhaps lends an air of credibility to a tale that has no factual basis.

These various early designations, however malleable, provoke fundamental questions for the actor. Is Shylock actually a Jew, and if so, what kind of Jew? Or, is he predominantly a businessman of the emerging capitalist economy, and if so, what kind of businessman? Or is Shylock rather -- as a Jewish professor friend of mine suggested when I asked her advice about playing him -- simply the outsider, what

post-colonialists would call the “other,” and if so, is he exotic or threatening -- the bogeyman? The answer to any of these questions will give the actor a sense of his character’s broader function: the object of hilarity, fear, anger, or pity.

The question of Shylock’s Jewishness might seem immaterial, since the title calls him a Jew, he calls himself a Jew, and just about everyone else, in various offensive modifications, calls him a Jew. But received wisdom argues that Shakespeare didn’t actually know any Jews, since Edward I banned them from England in 1290 and they didn’t formally reappear until the 1650s. Shylock, moreover, is an English name, meaning fair-haired. This Anglicization has led some commentators to suppose Shylock, who is strict in his morals, a rigid adherent of the law, and something of a killjoy -- “Let not shallow foppery enter my sober house” -- actually represents the growing Puritan pressure in London. **[Tile 4]** As such, Patrick Stewart, among others, has chosen to play Shylock as very English, an assimilator, part of the establishment (or at least desperate to be so).

By contrast, others, who see the play as a reflection of an inherently anti-Semitic society, have argued that the pale hair refers to an older tradition of performing Shylock in a “fiery red wig” and beard, aligning him with both Judas and Satan of the medieval Mystery plays. To these commentators, Shakespeare’s leading actor Richard Burbage, who likely played the part, would have presented Shylock as a diabolical monster perpetuating the myth of the Jew as a child-eating, well-poisoning, Christ-killing anathema. **[Tile 5]** As one critic wrote, complaining of, if admiring, Dustin Hoffman’s “painfully real” performance: “Shakespeare’s audience would have been amazed by a sympathetic portrayal of a Jew.”

While Shylock as clownish villain is not prevalent in the play's production history, he does appear in experiments to dial back the staging excesses of Victorian, proto-cinematic theater - what we might term Original Practices, or OP -- at both ends of the twentieth century. William Poel's 1909 production, staging a red-headed Shylock was perhaps more shocking to its audience due to its lack of sets. **[Tile 6]** But Richard Olivier's 1998 version for the Globe Theater, London's recreation of Shakespeare's outdoor playing space, stunned audiences with the manner in which it attempted to lighten the racial elements by having *commedia dell'arte* figures encourage the audience to hiss whenever Shylock entered, as if, according to one critic, "Little Red Riding Hood and the Big Bad Wolf were on the stage." *Merchant* would soon lose public acceptance when faced with what Arden editor John Dukakis calls this kind of "crude melodrama."

Fortunately, numerous clues in and around the text, and in the play's subsequent performance history, confirm the likelihood that Shakespeare based the character of Shylock on more far than just anecdote, malicious rumor, and scary nursery rhymes. For one thing, although they were few in number, Jews did in fact exist in England at the time, especially in London, and Shakespeare may well have encountered them. A small community of crypto-Jews, *conversos* from Spain and Portugal, called Murranos (we'd now think of them as Sephardic) traded in London. Although outwardly Catholic they retained many Jewish affiliations. Whether or not Shakespeare came into contact with any of these Murranos, he, along with the whole of England, would have known about one of them, **[Tile 7]** the Portuguese doctor Dr. Ruy Lopez, the Queen's physician, who was notoriously tried for treason for

attempting to poison Elizabeth, assuredly a trumped up charge in a deadly game of international politics. Shakespeare was more likely to have met descendants of a group of Italian Jewish musicians that had arrived in Henry VIII's time, since, like Shakespeare's company, they frequently played at court. Perhaps its only happenstance that the most celebrated of these families, the Bassanos, recalls the elegant refined lover in *Merchant*, Bassanio, whose name rings of musical instruments. Although Shakespeare's play follows a particularly nasty, albeit hilarious, earlier drama called *The Jew of Malta*, written by the celebrated and tragically short-lived Christopher Marlowe, and despite religious vitriol aimed at the Jews by Lutherans, who regarded usury as a sin, there is little evidence of an anti-Semitic stage tradition in late Elizabethan London, and plenty of textual support for playing Shylock as a real, if troubled, individual fighting to retain his cultural identity, his business, and his family in a city starting to turn against him and his "nation."

Once we view Shylock as a complex individual rather than a comedic villain, then the actor is inevitably tasked with deciding what kind of a Jew he is playing. 'Where does he come from?' and "What does he sound like?' are questions necessarily more critical to actors than to scholars, who sometimes question the validity of character in Shakespeare's plays. While it is widely accepted that Shakespeare, a hobbit from the shires, never left England's shores, preferring to travel in his mind, the Venice of his play is far more realized than the Epidamnus of *Comedy of Errors*, although the two ports shared a reputation for exoticism. A trading hub between east and west, run on relatively democratic lines, the Republic

of Venice operated under a sophisticated capitalist system that incorporated a large community of Jewish financiers who, while confined to living in two ghettos -- Venice coined the term -- were free to go about their business by day. While *Merchant* is no Fodor's travelogue, and dramaturgs debate the legality of Shylock employing a Christian servant and traveling by night, Shakespeare clearly benefited from local knowledge, [Tile 8] including, say, the fact that Portia crosses the water from her home in Belmont to Venice on the "local ferry," or "traject," an Anglicization of "traghetto." We might suppose that such information could be easily acquired from a Venetian trader over a free lunch or mug of ale on London's bustling dockside.

While twentieth century productions sometimes update the period -- [Tile 9] most commonly to a late Victorian period when anti-Semitism was once more taking hold in Europe -- few productions, however *avant garde*, change the setting: evocative, provocative Venice is a key character in the play's *dramatis personae*. However, although Shylock lives in Venice, that does not necessarily mean he is *of* Venice. Even if he were born there, as a Jew he retains the status of an alien, a critical designation in the final legal judgment against him. But there are indications in the text that he was born elsewhere, a fact that, critically, would affect how he speaks -- the most immediate pointer to a character's otherness on stage. Early in his first scene, in an aside that makes a critical connection with the audience, Shylock says of Antonio, "He hates our sacred nation," and later concludes, "Cursed be my tribe, / If I forgive him." Although these terms have Biblical roots, they might also indicate that Shakespeare was aware of the three Jewish communities, or

“nations,” operating in Venice at that time: the Levantine (or middle Eastern), the Ponentine (or western) nation, and the oldest German nation, comprised of Ashkenazi Jews. An actor who chooses to sound just like his fellow Venetians might rationalize himself as a Ponentine. **[Tile 10]** On rare occasions, an actor might even elect to play a Levantine, or “orientalist” Jew, as the South African actor Anthony Sher did in a 1987 Royal Shakespeare Company that sought to explore racial concerns beyond the anti-Semitic, although he risked accusations of “blacking up” or cultural appropriation. But a small detail in a throwaway line -- so characteristic of the minimalist Shakespeare -- seems to indicate that Shylock is not only of the Germanic tribe but from what we’d now think of as modern Germany. Bemoaning the theft by his jewels by his daughter, Shylock reveals perhaps his most valuable single item: “a diamond cost me two thousand ducats in Frankfurt.” In modern money, we estimate this single jewel to be worth more than a quarter of a million dollars. When we consider that Jews were neither granted passports nor the freedom to travel at will, then this biographical nugget suggests that Shylock once lived there, perhaps even came from there as a young man to make his fortune in the thriving and the newly welcoming Venice. I believe that his remarkable speech patterns confirm this reading.

How a character speaks is the *modus operandi* of the actor; more than clothing, setting, physical traits, make-up and hair -- although every portrait of Shylock offers varying versions of beard and head covering, as required of the Jewish faith -- in classical theater we convey most all of our character through vocal expression. And like every choice the actor playing Shylock makes, this is just as

politically sensitive. In his otherwise remarkable study of Shylock (required reading for all actors researching the part), John Gross makes the extraordinary claim that “there is nothing in the play to suggest that Shylock does not speak the same flawless English as the other characters” (Gross, 37). In his equally canonical study of Shakespeare’s metrical style, George T. Wright, conversely, celebrates Shylock’s “unmistakably individual speaking voice” (Wright, 249), while Brian Vickers, in his compendious study of Shakespeare’s prose, praises the rhetorical peculiarity of Shylock’s use of antithesis and parallelism: “I’ll buy with you, sell with you, walk with you, talk with you, and so following, but I will not eat with you, drink with you, or pray with you.” While such balanced phrasing might betray the mind of an accountant (a useful character note), Shylock is also enormously inventive with his language, and deploys metaphor -- the kind of linguistic abstraction foreigners often admire in the English language -- as if its going out of fashion: “Stop up my house’s ears,” he commands Jessica, before adding the clarification, “I mean my casements” [or windows]. And, as you watch the play, consider how Shylock uses the apparent metaphor of the pound of flesh with which he seals his bond with Antonio, and how another metaphor -- as in the shedding of a drop of Christian blood -- is turned against him in the court. Metaphor is deactivated when it submits to the letter of the law.

Add to this inventiveness Shylock’s endless repetitions, which Thomas Coryate, a contemporary visitor to the Jews in Venice described as “a very tedious babbling, and an often repetition of one thing,” and his not quite grammatically perfect English -- “a pound of a man’s flesh [...] is not so profitable as that of

muttons, beefes, and goats” -- and I suggest Shakespeare presents us with an ESL character, someone for whom the language is learnt, and whose first language was German. Contention lies in the fact that such a middle European accent is essentially Yiddish, the language of the Jewish diaspora to America and the communities of the lower East Side, who would understandably take offense at cartoonish impressions or insinuating parallels. (Alas, I don’t have time here to go into the ambivalent and uncomfortable production and reception history of *Merchant* in twentieth century America, and will merely acknowledge that it has been a rocky relationship.) I will let you judge how successfully I succeed in sounding what I hope is an authentic note in creating a Germanic Shylock and can only hope it promotes a Shylock who is both Jewish *and* an outsider.

Finally, let me touch on the equally gargantuan subject of commerce and capitalism in *Merchant*, and focus on how the Germanic question might offer some pointers to situating Shylock in the business world of Venice. Earlier in this talk, I quoted Shylock saying to Bassanio, “I will buy with you, sell with you,” a phrase that naturally leads us to one merchant is talking to another. But, as Gross points out, while the Ponentines and Levantines were foreign traders (a remarkable concession in the period), the German nation, the *Nazione Tedesca*, “were the only group permitted to practice money-lending.” If, in Fred’s evocative phrase, Antonio is a “venture capitalist,” with a particular interest in overseas trade, then Shylock is a currency trader, a banker who organizes loans and who profits from the circulation of money. And, I would suggest, that he has no alternative means of income, as he declares as the trial, when he appeals against the asset-stripping he suffers by

arguing, “ you take my life, when you do take the means whereby I live.” Without money, Shylock cannot make money; it is the only way he is allowed to trade. Facing a Lutheran Christian like Antonio, who “lends out money gratis,” or interest-free, and thereby “drives down the rate of usance [borrowing] here with us [the Jewish moneylenders] in Venice,” Shylock’s ancient grudge becomes more than personal; he is fighting for his way of life, his -- and his people’s -- very existence. Confronted by this kind of cataclysmic obstacle, the actor is able to construct powerful objectives in pursuit of his end goal: survival. The actor cannot choose between, or even favor, one of the designations I identified earlier in this talk: he is neither Jewish, an outsider, or a banker - he is all three. As such, he creates a triple target for his adversaries and a rich cluster of contradictory energies and personalities for the actor portraying him.

My fears about playing Shylock dissipated as soon as I began exploring his complex, compelling character and rehearsing with my fellow actors. And yet I am sorely aware that the reception might at times be rocky. While we have come to believe that the crash cuts between comic and tragic plots in the narrative actually enhance, or season, the meaning, *Merchant* remains an offensive play because it deals with offensive material, sometimes in an offensive manner. And the play’s issues are still offensive because they are still active, thorns pricking society’s skin. Only this week, my inbox or Facebook feed, has included **[Tile 11]** a newspaper article reporting a feminist critic’s call for the removal of *Taming of the Shrew* from the stage; **[Tile 12]** endless reports of a meltdown in financial money markets following the successful Brexit campaign; **[Tile 13]** internecine warfare in

Germany's far-right group AfD over a member's downplaying of the Holocaust; **[Tile 14]** and ongoing consternation in America's presidential campaign about plans to build walls and close doors to whole ethnic and religious groups. So long as *Merchant* continues to spit over the flames of an open fire, then, I hope you agree, it needs to be performed. Enjoy tonight's performance. I'll be interested to hear what you make of our efforts to honor its complexity.