

# That Troublesome Jew

## *Shylock and the Corruption of The Merchant of Venice*

By Aaron Botwick

In 1947, the actor and playwright Maurice Schwartz rather audaciously rewrote *The Merchant of Venice*. The result, *Shylock and His Daughter*, is a radically philosemitic text, one that throws out most of Shakespeare's play and replaces it with a kind, Jewish moneylender surrounded by antisemitic, unforgiving Christians.<sup>1</sup> Comic villain had become comic hero. But only five years after 1942—a date that, like 70 CE (the fall of the Second Temple), will be forever seared into Jewish consciousness—this kind of project was not especially outrageous. Shakespeare is largely and rightly considered the greatest poet the English language has ever known, and yet, this sage dramatic personage produced an unquestionably antisemitic play.

Reconciling Shakespeare with Shylock is a Sisyphean task that I do not hope to accomplish. Instead I hope to rescue Shakespeare's play—and Shylock in particular—from the interpretative monopoly that followed World War II. In 1998, Harold Bloom wrote, "The Holocaust made and makes *The Merchant of Venice* unplayable, at least in what appears to be its own terms."<sup>2</sup> This resistance to staging an overtly antisemitic play on its own terms comes from genuine, heartfelt concerns for the good of the Jewish people, but the price is a comedic masterpiece. Furthermore, by transforming Shylock into a hero, we are scrubbing

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<sup>1</sup> Though often spelled "anti-Semitism," I choose, along with others, not to use the hyphen as a small act of political resistance against the notion of "Semitism" itself, which has at best dubious origins.

<sup>2</sup> Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), 189.

history clean. Should we not be aware that seventeenth-century England was not friendly to the Jews? A universally tragic Shylock is no better than *Huck Finn* excised of the word “nigger.” Emil Fackenheim famously stated that Judaism and its 613 *mitzvot* (laws) could not anticipate the Holocaust—and therefore a 614<sup>th</sup> *mitzvah* was required to address religiosity in its aftermath. Essentially: do not give Hitler posthumous victories by abandoning Judaism. In this tradition, I would like to propose a literary 614<sup>th</sup> *mitzvah*: do not give Hitler posthumous victories by leaving *Merchant* solely in the hands of post-Holocaust interpretations.

The issue of antisemitism was not one that at first plagued *The Merchant of Venice*, but instead a single component that would only later become a problem for its admirers. At the turn of the seventeenth century, hatred of Jews was on the rise in England and mainland Europe. Rumors that Jews poisoned wells and slaughtered Christian babies to use their blood for *matzot* fed into the conception of Judaism as a venomous, anti-Christian religion, and depictions of Jews such as Shylock on the London stage were not uncommon.<sup>1</sup> The character type—a brilliant but evil Jew—was likely borrowed from Shakespeare’s contemporary, Christopher Marlowe, and his play, *The Jew of Malta*. Barabas, the play’s eponymous character, is a wealthy merchant who finds himself penniless when the Ottoman government strips him of all his assets. Throughout *The Jew of Malta*, Barabas seeks his revenge on Christians. By the end of the play he is responsible for the deaths of many citizens, including his own daughter, Abigail, who Barabas poisons for converting to Christianity.

Although the play is a tragedy, the treatment of Barabas is rather lighthearted. He is a caricature, prancing around the stage hugging his moneybags and plotting murder, and his description of Jewishness proves a good example:

We Jews can fawn like spaniels when we please;  
And when we grin we bite, yet are our looks  
As innocent and harmless as a lamb’s. (II.iii.20-3)

This is the villain of children’s fairy tales, a two-faced seducer whose depth is negligible and whose intentions irrelevant. Though Marlowe does offer some reference to the persecution

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<sup>1</sup> Dundes, Alan, ed. *The Blood Libel Legend: A Casebook in Anti-Semitic Folklore* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1991), vii.

Barabas suffers—“they call me dog” (ibid., 24)—he is never given a real moment of sympathy. Instead, he confronts his fate (death) with a sort of shrugging acceptance, only concerned with making sure his enemies are aware of his crimes:

Know, Governor, 'twas I that slew thy son; I framed the challenge that did make them meet: Know, Calymath, I aimed thy overthrow, And had I but escaped this stratagem, I would have brought confusion on you all. (V.v.80-4).

Hardly an unsettling conclusion. In Ben Jonson’s *Volpone*, “the victims are merely inept versions of the villain,” and more or less the same thing is going on here.<sup>1</sup>

In contextualizing *Merchant*, Bloom summarizes the character perfectly:

Barabas is a kind of wicked bottle imp or Jew-in-the-box; he is always jumping out at us, the audience. We cannot help enjoying him, since his outrageousness is so cartoon-like. . . . Its [the play’s] Christians and Muslims come off far worse than Barabas, since they would be just as wicked if they could but lack Barabas’s genius for evil. Marlowe’s Jew is simply Christopher Marlowe gone all out into lunatic zest and diabolic energy, overturning all values and sending up everything and everybody.<sup>2</sup>

Shylock, on the other hand, has gone through many renderings in his four hundred years, from comic villain to absolute villain to heroic villain and finally to tragic hero. It is important to track the evolution of these changes and the reasons for various historical interpretations of the character in order to understand how we have reached our contemporary conception of him. The comic villain of Elizabethan England became something much darker to the Nazis, while post-Holocaust philosemites were quick to push depictions of the moneylender in a radically different direction. Unfortunately, the shadow of the Holocaust continues to fall on virtually every contemporary performance of *Merchant*, and no working director or actor seems interested or brave enough to return to the original material, to the character Shakespeare wrote. Certainly, it is not outrageous to restage *Merchant* in light of the Holocaust, the *pogroms*, or contemporary antisemitism—Shakespeare’s antisemitism needs to be addressed—the problem is that this has dominated *all* readings of

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<sup>1</sup> Simon, John. *On Theater: Criticism 1974-2003* (New York: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2005), 322.

<sup>2</sup> Bloom, *Shakespeare*, 174, 181.

the play; what was once a troubled Shakespearean comedy can now no longer escape the shadow of Auschwitz.

I would argue that the Elizabethans had it right, that Shakespeare's Shylock is in fact rather similar to Marlowe's Barabas: he is a "Jew-in-the-box," a clever schemer, and often a cartoon villain, albeit one constructed with more depth. Unlike Barabas, the audience is cut off from Shylock, never given the kind of asides that let us become complicit in his scenes. Nevertheless, the difference between the two is not the quality of character, but the quality of writing: Shylock is Barabas as conceived by a superior talent, a comic villain in possession of humanity. But they are in spirit the same type. Shylock's descent, then, into a monolithic political tool, and the play's transformation from Shakespearean comedy into Jewish tragedy, is itself perhaps the truly lamentable aspect of *The Merchant of Venice*. What is required to restore this classic is a re-appropriation of the play, a re-examination of Shylock and, finally, a liberation from monomaniacal theatrical interpretation.

There is no doubt that *The Merchant of Venice* is an antisemitic play: Shylock is an unmistakably Jewish, bloodthirsty moneylender, furious with Christian generosity and bent on seeking revenge; he knows no forgiveness and values his money over both his own life and possibly even that of his own daughter—furthermore, it is clear from the text that all these traits arise from his Jewishness. For the Duke, who represents the state of Venice by his office, there is no bargaining with the man, as he is

an inhuman wretch  
Uncapable of pity, void and empty  
From any dram of mercy (IV.i.4-6).

The notion of Christian generosity is wholly incompatible with Jewish selfishness. After Shylock demonstrates some knowledge of the gospels, Antonio warns his friends, "The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose" (I.iii.94), and, indeed, his unwavering malevolence does seem to be summoned from hell: like battling Satan, questioning the Jew is as fruitful as bidding the flood to "bate his usual height" (V.i.72). Despite appearing in only five of the play's twenty scenes and speaking a mere 79 lines (compare to Portia's 117, Richard III's 138, and Hamlet's 358), Shylock nonetheless steals the show, his searing intelligence and beady-eyed resourcefulness contributing to the misery of the Jewish public image for hundreds of years. As Philip Roth laments in his novel, *Operation Shylock*, "To the audiences

of the world Shylock is the embodiment of the Jew in the way that Uncle Sam embodies for them the spirit of the United States. Only, in Shylock's case, there is an overwhelming Shakespearean reality, a terrifying Shakespearean aliveness that your pasteboard Uncle Sam cannot begin to possess . . . Mr. Macklin [an English actor known for the part] would mouth the two *th*'s and the two *s*'s in 'Three thousand ducats' with such oiliness that he instantaneously aroused, with just those three words, all of the audience's hatred of Shylock's race."<sup>1</sup>

Still, it is important to contextualize Shakespeare's relationship with the Jews. It is unlikely, for example, that Shakespeare had ever even seen a Jew: the vast majority were expelled by Edward I in 1290 and would not be allowed to return until 1655, almost forty years after the Bard's death. It is possible there were small communities of Jews living in London at the time, but they would have had to practice their religion cryptically<sup>2</sup>—no parading of *kipprot* (skullcaps) and *tallitot* (Jewish prayer shawls)—and most common knowledge about the people would have come from blood libel folklore and plays in the vein of *The Jew of Malta*.<sup>3</sup> As Stephen Greenblatt points out, references to Jews in other Shakespearean plays prove particularly illuminating: in *Much Ado About Nothing*, Benedick declares his love by saying, "If I do not love her, I am a Jew" (II.ii.232-2); in *Henry IV, Part One*, Falstaff underlines the truthfulness in his story by declaring, "They were bound every man of them, or I am a Jew else, an Hebrew Jew" (II.v.163-5); finally, in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Lance, recalling his dog's callous response to his departure, jokes, "[He] has no more pity in him than a dog. A Jew would have wept to have seen our parting" (II.iii.8-10).<sup>4</sup> The point, then, is that "Jew" does not really refer to the people as they are, but to the people as they are depicted in popular fiction; it is a measuring device, used synonymously with the words *cruel*, *dishonest*, or *heartless*. Shylock is simply an extension, a more in-depth take on this

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<sup>1</sup> Roth, Philip. *Operation Shylock: A Confession* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 274-5.

<sup>2</sup> Greenblatt, Stephen. *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2004), 259.

<sup>3</sup> Blood libel folklore involves the belief, which persists in some countries to this day, that Jews kidnapped Christian children, crucified them, and then drained them of their blood, which was later used in the preparation of *matzot* for Passover. This practice was meant to be a deliberate sacrilege, an acknowledgement of the power of Christ and subsequent rejection of him; therefore, the Jews who allegedly engaged in this activity recognized the truth of Christianity but chose their anti-Christian religion.

<sup>4</sup> Greenblatt, *Will in the World*, 259.

identification device: his Jewishness tags him as a comic villain in lieu of a curly moustache. Rather than summoning a real identity, Shylock's Jewishness is a narrative cue.

Furthermore, a close reading of the text reveals that not only does Shakespeare generally treat Jewishness as a kind of pejorative, but also that his characterization specifically of Shylock also bears little resemblance to the reality of the people he supposedly represents. He is hardly a Jew.<sup>1</sup> Most importantly, Shylock blatantly ignores the fact that the act of taking another life is strictly forbidden by Yahweh in the Torah, in Exodus 20:13 and Deuteronomy 5:17 (both times, "You shall not murder"). But more subtly, we can infer that he is totally ignorant of the practice of *shechita*, the ritual slaughter of animals. Deuteronomy 12:23-4 reads, "Make sure that you do not partake of the blood; for blood is the life, and you must not consume the life with the *flesh* . . . you must pour it on the ground like water" (emphasis added). Nevertheless, despite his repetition of the word "flesh" (he says it seven times in the course of the play), Shylock never makes the connection, and he is completely floored by Portia's insistence that when cutting Antonio's flesh he cannot "shed One drop of Christian blood" (IV.i.307-8). Jewish law is obsessive about the shedding of blood (actually, Jewish law is obsessive about everything), and so a more religious man, no doubt, would have included both the words *flesh* and *blood* in the bond, as he does when he cries out, "My own flesh and blood to rebel!" (III.i.30). Portia's defeat of Shylock in the courtroom, then, is a double blow: it not only deprives him of his revenge, but also reminds him of his own lack of knowledge about the Hebrew Bible.

Additionally, it is important to note that while the Jews certainly don't get the highest recommendation in *Merchant*, Shakespeare's depictions of Christianity can hardly be called generous, meaning that his antisemitism is only part of a full-fledged satire of religion. Antonio, a supposedly good Christian, kicks Shylock like a dog and spits on him when he passes him on the Rialto (I.iii.107-8). This abuse is later elaborated upon by Shylock: "He hath disgraced me and hindered me half a million, laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned at my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies. And what's his reason? I am a Jew" (III.i.46-51). Further depictions of Christianity are no less forgiving: Gratiano, in his attempt to seduce one of Portia's genteel ladies, fakes piety by

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<sup>1</sup> A bit of contextualization: in the late sixteenth century, Jews defined Jewishness only with respect to religion. Cultural, ethnic, and secular Judaism were non-existent, and some of the most visible examples of contemporary Jewishness—Philip Roth, Woody Allen, Primo Levi—would not have been recognized as such. (See Sarna, "The Rise, Fall, and Rebirth of Secular Judaism").

carrying prayer books in his pocket; later, during the trial, he takes the particularly un-Christian position that the Jew should be executed for his crimes. All lessons of the day have apparently been lost on this follower, whose successive cries are, “Thou must be hanged at the state’s charge” (IV.i.364), “A halter gratis, nothing else, for God’s sake” (ibid.,376), and, finally, “Had I been judge, thou shouldst have had ten more, To bring thee to the gallows, not to the font” (ibid.,398-9). By the end, the line between the barbarous Jews and the benevolent Christians is very hard to locate: in a particularly sardonic moment, Shakespeare has the Jew react to his persecution in a Christ-like manner: “Still have I borne it with a patient shrug, For suffrance is the badge of all our tribe” (I.iii.105-6).

What, then, is this Jew, if not the fantasy of a wildly antisemitic culture? Or, more importantly, *what else* is he? Clearly, Shakespeare does not entirely subscribe to the wholesale condemnation of Jews practiced by some of his characters, so there must be more to Shylock. The answer: a comic villain, an antagonist, a foil who alternately reveals the virtues of the protagonists while at the same time exposing their hypocrisies. The play, after all, is not about Shylock. The eponymous Merchant is Antonio, and the central drama the love among Portia, Bassanio, and his mentor. Shylock exists to loan Bassanio the necessary money to woo Portia, and Antonio, in love with Bassanio, offers his life as collateral for the loan. If there is a real tragedy in the play, it is one of unrequited love. The first two scenes make this rather clear by introducing those pining for Bassanio, whether they know it or not, in almost identical language: Antonio, perhaps staring out the window, sighs, “In sooth I know not why I am so sad” (I.i.1); Portia, probably doing the same, laments to her lady, “By my troth, Nerissa, my little body is aweary of this great world” (I.ii.1-2). Sixteenth-century England was openly homosocial but not openly homoerotic, and Portia is the natural match for our bachelor, and Antonio’s self-pitying monologue—in which he speaks to Bassanio while facing sure death—rivals even Shylock’s “Hath not a Jew” speech: “Commend me to your honorable wife. Tell her the process of Antonio’s end. Say how I loved you. Speak me fair in death, And when the tale is told, bid her be judge Whether Bassanio had not once a love. Repent but you that you shall lose your friend, And he repents not that he pays your debt. For if the Jew do cut but deep enough, I’ll pay it instantly with all my heart” (IV.i.271-9). This kind of maudlin soliloquy reads like Antonio playing Romeo, and, in truth, once our author has left his villain and his characters have retired to their bedrooms, it is Antonio who remains alone. He does have that in common with Shylock: we half-expect him to repeat the

Jew's ironic, final line, "I am content." This position is not uncommon in Shakespearean comedy: the ensemble of *Twelfth Night*, for example, seem rather "content" at the play's close, but the clown's song—"Hey, ho, the wind and the rain"—reminds us of how ephemeral, and in fact how tenuous, these connections may be.

So if Shylock is in fact more peripheral than he at first seems, if he is the comic villain and not the tragic hero, what are we to do with him? After all, the character's presence demands more space than he is given. Played more as the text suggests, he would be an elaborate, ingenious but fatally flawed criminal: though he is perhaps smarter than any other character but Portia, his greediness and dreams of moneybags, in addition to his hatred for Christians, will be his downfall. Only two scenes before his eloquent chance at redemption—the trial scene, in which Shylock attempts to secure his bond, a pound of Antonio's flesh, but is ultimately defeated by the law and forced into conversion—Shakespeare reminds us of his buffoonery, with Salanio relating his reaction to Jessica's departure: "So strange, outrageous, and so variable, As the dog Jew did utter in the streets. 'My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter, Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats! Justice, the law, my ducats, and my daughter!'" (II.viii.13-17). This is not the dialogue of a villainous hero like Richard III, but the straight-faced outcry of a comic villain who conceives of his life as a tragedy, made ever more comic by removing the line from Shylock's mouth and placing it in his enemy Salanio's. Malvolio, too, wounded by his role, would probably tell you *Twelfth Night* is a serious drama, but if we clue into the play as a whole, we can see this is ridiculous.

This take on Shylock is problematized, however, by the "Hath not a Jew" speech, the wrenching apologia in which the Jew protests his humanity and scathingly points out that his behavior is only an imitation of his Christian tormentors:

I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, heal'd by the same means, warm'd and cool'd by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, do we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. (III.i.58-68)

These lines have been seized by those who have turned the play into a tragedy as its most essential moment. What are we to do with this, and how does it fit into the comic mold? If we asked Harold Bloom, he might suggest we simply throw it out, or at least disregard it, as



“what he is saying there is now of possible interest only to . . . sociopaths.”<sup>1</sup> Still, it is worth examining. Shakespeare, after all, is a first-rate poet, and even if Antonio and Bassanio think of Shylock as a one-dimensional character, it would be hard to imagine the Bard doing the same. Malvolio once again seems relevant, since he is another villain who is constantly berated and put-down by what seems like his play’s entire cast. Yet, in the final act, we get a moment of surprising sobriety. Barging in on the nuptial celebrations, the old fool gets a moment to voice his own opinion: “Madam, you have done me wrong, Notorious wrong. . . . I’ll be revenged on the whole pack of you” (*Twelfth Night* V.i.334-5, 385). Considering what he has been through, can we really blame him? Shylock’s speech operates in a similar way and is thus entirely consistent with Shakespearean comic villains. Surely, he is behaving viciously towards Antonio, and the threat on his life is inexcusable. But his hatred is not blind and not without reason. By reciting the list of wrongs that have been done to him, Shylock reminds us that we should not expect a better reaction from such an abused man, Jew or gentile. Shakespeare’s own criticism of Christianity implies he would not disagree with Shylock’s assessment of their hypocrisy: “If you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge” (III.i.58-63). As in any other of Shakespeare’s “problem” comedies, we are not, to borrow Shylock’s word, “content” by the end. *Twelfth Night* leaves us feeling as if all its lovers are doomed in their hasty love, *Measure for Measure* does not give us much hope in the agency of women, and *The Merchant of Venice* leaves Shylock, and by extension the Jews, to rot. These are problems, but they are still, nonetheless, comedies: if we were to move beyond Shakespeare, we would see that most comedic masterpieces reveal a dark core. Whether it is the starvation of the Irish masses in *A Modest Proposal* or the hollow bourgeois lifestyle satirized by Evelyn Waugh, these works are serious but nonetheless indisputably comic.

How, then, does a sixteenth-century comedy with antisemitic overtones become a full-fledged tragedy by the end of the millennium? It certainly took more than a politically liberal re-reading. Following the ascension of the Nazi Party in Germany, Jewish

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<sup>1</sup> Bloom, *Shakespeare*, 180.

performers, directors, and authors were removed from the stage and replaced with pro-Nazi artists who produced explicitly antisemitic works: Eberhard Wolfgang Möller, for example, found a great deal of early success with two plays, *Der Panama Skandal* (1930), produced three years before the Nazis came to power, and *Rothschild siegt bei Waterloo* (1934). *Panama* premiered shortly after the Wall Street crash in the United States, and depicted the building of the Panama Canal in 1889 with a Jewish banker as its villain.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, *Rothschild* perpetuates the myth that Nathan Rothschild made a fortune speculating on the outcome of the Battle of Waterloo; its connection to *Merchant* was so explicit that one critic titled his review, “Shylock on the battlefield,”<sup>2</sup>

However, the Reichsdramaturg soon decided “blatantly propagandistic antisemitic works” were no longer desirable, as the Jewish influence in Germany had already been “completely eliminated.”<sup>3</sup> Therefore, plays along the lines of *Panama* and *Rothschild* were not only undesirable from a foreign policy standpoint: they simply weren’t needed. *The Merchant of Venice*, then, proved the perfect piece of propaganda: overtly antisemitic, but legitimized by its place in the English canon. Shylock was already a major presence in the German theatrical consciousness. In the nineteenth century alone, over one hundred German plays featured disparaging portrayals of Jews “in the tradition of Shylock” as “stereotypes of avaricious merchants and moneylenders abounded.”<sup>4</sup> Shakespeare, too, was an immensely popular playwright in the country, and the German Shakespeare Society (GSS), known in Germany as Deutschen Shakespeare-Gesellschaft (DSG), worked to naturalize him as an honorary German citizen: in 1936 the GSS president, Werner Deetjen, noted that his “doctrine of the state is clearly Germanic,” while one year later, the Gauleiter for South Westphalia, Joseph Wagner, declared, “We Germans still knowingly count him among our forebears, as by blood and by his nature he stands as close to us as any great German poet and thinker . . . We recognize in Shakespeare the same racial fundamental Nordic element from which we have learned to derive the highest values of our own people.”<sup>5</sup> Eugenics-

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<sup>1</sup> Bonnell, Andrew G. *Shylock in Germany: Antisemitism and the German Theatre From the Enlightenment to the Nazis* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2008), 130.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 139.

obsessed theorist Hans Günther went so far as to study the Droeshout portrait, one of two that are definitively identifiable as Shakespeare, noting that the Bard had a “perfect Nordic forehead” while admitting, unfortunately, that he had “Mediterranean eyes and hair and chin of a doubtful origin.”<sup>1</sup>

All that remained was a little tweaking. While a superficial reading of the play presented Jews as avaricious and soulless, there was still the matter of Shakespeare’s incidental sympathy and humanity. Portions inconsistent with Nazi philosophy were open to mutilation, and unsurprisingly, the “Hath not a Jew?” speech was unacceptable and was the first to go.<sup>2</sup> Jessica’s marriage to Lorenzo was first explained away as a tragic element to the story, with Günther observing that, as a Jew, she had a “paltry inner life,” as compared to Portia, who was noted for her “Nordic-German” qualities.<sup>3</sup> But it eventually became necessary to clarify her “true” relationship to Shylock: she was his “assumed daughter,” not a blood relation.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, her escape to Belmont is liberation from the Jewish tyrant. This mangled *Merchant*, which emphasized “less Shylock’s avarice and more . . . his lust for blood and power,” became a cornerstone of German education, being taught in both literature and racial science courses.<sup>5</sup>

The result was a masterpiece of manipulation. Unlike *Panama* or *Rothschild*, *Merchant* is not the product of a crazed antisemite, but a brilliant comedy by the most well respected dramatist of all time; furthermore, it was written by an Englishman, suggesting its views were not only endorsed by the Germans, but their enemies as well. By making only a few, mostly subtle changes, the German propaganda machine was able to take the play and turn it into a manifesto on racial purity and the pestilence of the Jewish people. This is no small feat, and yet it was executed with such swift effortlessness that it would not have been so easy to spot in context. Nevertheless, it was a significant contribution to the mindset that permitted the Holocaust,<sup>6</sup> and the power of *Merchant*’s antisemitism should not be underestimated: Goebbels demonstrated that in the wrong hands, it could prove fatal. Still, we are no longer

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>6</sup> Bonnell outlines this in great detail in his book, *Shylock in Germany*.

living in fear of a Nazi dictatorship, and the instinctual reaction to this kind of production—an explicitly philosemitic *Merchant*—has led to an interpretive monopoly.

Unsurprisingly, the most violent of these interpretations were on the Yiddish stage. Before and after World War II, Yiddish rewritings of the play became very popular. Often, *Merchant* was drastically cut to make Shylock the protagonist, and instead of being rendered as a comedy, these variations were meant to leave “the audience with the taste of persecution in its mouth.”<sup>1</sup> Many of the greatest Yiddish actors of the time were attracted to the role, and interpretations of the moneylender were often sympathetic: Maurice Moscovitch read the character as “a proud Jew,”<sup>2</sup> while Jacob Adler declared that Shylock was “a true Jewish Jew,”<sup>3</sup> and argued that he never expected to receive his bond, but instead, “The real revenge that Shylock contemplates is *not* to take the pound of flesh which is legally forfeit to him, but to show the world that his despised ducats have actually bought and paid for it.”<sup>4</sup> Perhaps Rudolph Schildkraut was truest to Shakespeare’s part, as he was unafraid to depict him as “dark and unsympathetic . . . [and without] a drop of Jewishness in him.”<sup>5</sup> Unlike the others, Schildkraut allowed the villainy in Shakespeare’s part to come to the fore.

But of all the depictions of Shylock on the Yiddish stage, Schwartz’s was likely the most bizarre. He considered the character “a quiet, peace-loving Jew, whose mainstays in life are his learning and religion,” and whose life is guided by “the loyalty to the memory of his wife, the abounding love for his daughter, and his inner dignity.”<sup>6</sup> Possibly because he could find no textual substantiation of this opinion, Schwartz’s rewriting of *Merchant, Shylock and His Daughter*, is an abysmal, philosemitic play that has fortunately been lost in obscurity: copies are hard to come by and performances nearly non-existent. Nevertheless, it proves another useful example of the way in which politics can radically alter Shakespeare’s text to suit various needs which are artistically irrelevant (though this is certainly not unique to Shakespeare): in 1947, it would have been hard to separate Shylock from the still open wounds of Nazi Germany.

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<sup>1</sup> Berkowitz, Joel. *Shakespeare on the American Yiddish Stage* (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2003), 178.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 197.

This does not, however, prevent Schwartz from hammering his point *ad nauseam*. As if the shadow of the Holocaust were not already draped across every single sentence, every single word in his play, Schwartz prefaces the published edition by reminding us of context of *Merchant*, noting that Jewish persecution occurred “during the famed Renaissance period, when art and science prospered,” and yet Jew-hating was not executed with “the same German thoroughness and technique of the Twentieth Century” (7). It is as if George Orwell were taking pains to point out that *Animal Farm* has an allegorical relationship to communism; not only is *Shylock and His Daughter* an insipid exercise in rewriting history, it is one that is written as if its audience had double-digit IQs and the interpretive prowess of a poodle. Still, it is a telling example of how *Merchant* has been manipulated by post-Holocaust artists.

From its opening scene, Schwartz’s rewrite stresses the absurdity of hatred towards Jews and the cruelty of Venetian Christians. Salanio, a guard to the ghetto, demonstrates unthinking prejudice when declaring, “I would not care if all the Jews, together with their Ghetto, vanished one fine morning” (12). Several scenes later, Portia, who, in this version is the loving wife of Antonio, poses a similar question: “Did you ever show a wrathful countenance to anyone? / To none, my dear, except to the Jews.” Enamored with him, she is ready to dismiss this as nothing but a “slight fault” (41). Portia is aware that antisemitism is wrong, but is too in love to hold it against Antonio. In turn, Lorenzo, renamed Launcelot, almost forcibly takes Jessica away from her father; in one of their early meetings, Schwartz describes her as “*helpless against his vehemence*” (34).

Shylock, given a second soliloquy bemoaning the suffering of his people, cries out, “While on the ship on the way to Rome, the Jewish girls all leaped into the sea. During the bloody Crusades, Jewish daughters stretched out their throats so their own fathers should slaughter them, rather than suffer to be stained by the murderers” (54). Here, Schwartz is synthesizing Jewish history, evoking the Holocaust—as Elie Wiesel did, for example, in his period piece *The Trial of God (as it was held on February 25, 1649, in Shamgorod)*—while illustrating Jewish history as a history of genocide; indeed, during the First Crusade, the killing of Jewish children by their parents was considered “the highest imaginable form of human heroism and the clearest possible proof of the veracity of the Jewish faith.”<sup>1</sup> This is

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<sup>1</sup> Chazan, Robert. *In the Year 1096... The First Crusade & The Jews* (Philadelphia: The JPS, 1996), 57.

particularly powerful imagery—especially when presented to an audience for whom this type of desperation is completely foreign—but it also points to Schwartz’s clear intent to radically shift the focus of *Merchant: Shylock and His Daughter* is not so much about Schwartz’s experience of Shakespeare, but of antisemitism.

Shylock himself, of course, is a beacon of the community, the essence of benevolence. While still a moneylender, the Jew is this time a generous one: Lorenzo urges Antonio to borrow from him as he is has previously been kind to those “in great need” (58), and Shylock, dismissing the merchant’s hatred of him, offers to loan the three thousand ducats gratis. It is Antonio who proposes the notorious bond, remembering that the same security was once used by “a merchant of Genoa, years ago” (73). While Shylock initially refuses, he eventually accepts, unaware that this money will be partially used to steal his daughter away from him: she is, in this case, his one precious possession, a girl so valuable that he does not trust her to any gentile. Instead of the conniving Lorenzo, he has in mind for Jessica a young student of the Torah, Morro.

It is not difficult to see what Schwartz is doing here. Under the guise of historical realism, he argues that the Jews of Italy (and Germany) were innocent victims, the Christians (and Nazis) mindless persecutors, evaporating the complexity of the Holocaust into a wholesale condemnation of Germans; the problem, of course, is that he has given his villains even *less* depth than Shakespeare gave to Shylock. Gratiano’s line, “[I hate them] because they are Jews” (14), is an unsettling parallel to Shylock’s, “I hate him for he is a Christian” (I.iii.38). Unlike *Merchant*, which ends on a relatively light-hearted note, *Shylock and His Daughter* pushes its moral weight onto the audience until the final curtain; this is a rather dangerous move, since this historical revision with a decidedly more serious ambition gives its Christian villains the same one-dimensionality as Shakespeare’s original Jew. His prejudice is more serious, then, because it is being wrought with far more conviction; whereas Shakespeare writes like an incidental antisemite, one who has not met a Jew and is simply inheriting his baseless prejudice, Schwartz has ferociously responded with the kind of black-and-white morality lesson we’ve just seen from the Nazis. Although his implications are never as violent, it is frightening to see such tonal similarities.

As in Shakespeare’s play, Shylock ultimately does not receive his bond. Before the trial, a local rabbi makes his plea: “Do you realize what a misfortune you are bringing on the communities of Israel? For generations and generations, Jews will not be able to free

themselves from this horrible accusation” (120). Here, as in an earlier comment made by a doctor—“I must restore the enemies of Israel to health, so that they can persecute my people” (58)—Schwartz is deliberately using a modern word. In 1947, at the time of the play’s premiere, the Jewish homeland was greatly contested, and the use of “Israel” instead of “Palestine” is a telling indication of Schwartz’s political goals, especially after his profession of historical veracity. In this context—that is, at the turn of the seventeenth century—“Israel” would refer not to a *land* but to a *people*. A subtle insertion, but nevertheless a glaring indication of the playwright’s intentions: this is not a play about Italy, not really even a play about Shakespeare, but one about restoring the Jewish image, about seizing an old text and using it for a political and not an artistic purpose.

At the end of the trial, in a moment of self-actualization, Schwartz’s Shylock drops his knife and cries out, “I cannot shed blood. I am a Jew!” (145), echoing Shakespeare’s line, “I am a Jew” (III. i.51) in the “Hath not a Jew” speech—notably, *Merchant’s* most sympathetic scene. Significantly, it is not Christian ingenuity that saves Antonio, but Jewish mercy. It is a heavy-handed ending, no doubt. Shylock’s closing lines are, “I praise thee, God, for thy loving-kindness. *Baruch dayan emer*” (146), the final prayer one that spoken at a time of great bereavement. Since, in the context of *Shylock and His Daughter*, this is actually a joyous moment, one in which Antonio and the Jew have finally reconciled after four hundred years of animosity, the tragedy Schwartz is evoking is not any that has occurred onstage, but most certainly the Holocaust.

Until 2004, there was not a single major English-language film adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice*. It is not surprising, then, that when Michael Radford finally broke the silence, the result was tonally quite similar to the Schwartz play. Before the action begins, we get a disclaimer:

Intolerance of the Jews was a fact of 16<sup>th</sup> Century life even in Venice, the most powerful and liberal city state in Europe. By law the Jews were forced to live in the old walled foundry or ‘Geto’ area of the city. After sundown the gate was locked and guarded by Christians. In the daytime any man leaving the ghetto had to wear a red hat to mark him as a Jew. The Jews were forbidden to own property. So they practised usury, the lending of money at interest. This was against Christian law. The sophisticated Venetians would turn a blind eye to it but for the religious fanatics, who hated the Jews, it was another matter . . .

The text is dramatically juxtaposed with shots of abuse towards Jews, all scored by a mournful female singer. Most notably, we see a pile of burning Torahs, encouraging a comparison to those *other* book burners. Radford's technique is a cheap underestimation of the audience, no better than Schwartz's preface if slightly more subtle; it is a frame that tells us precisely how we are supposed to feel about the movie's characters: Antonio is an angry bigot, Shylock a victim who has been pushed into his immoral behavior. In less than three minutes of screen time, we already know how unsophisticated and myopic this rendering will be.

As if this weren't enough—and in case we haven't quite got what he's after—Radford lets Shylock make the first appearance of all the play's major characters. Instead of entering with his famous line, "Three thousand ducats, well," he places the Jew two scenes early, opening the entire movie with a moment that is only alluded to in Shakespeare's play: walking on the Rialto, Shylock passes his enemy, calling out, "Antonio." Antonio responds, wordlessly, by spitting on him. This is another, "I would not care if all the Jews, together with their Ghetto, vanished one fine morning," different only because it is in the hands of a more talented writer. Nevertheless, it is unmistakably philosemitic propaganda, another seizing of Shakespeare's play to prove the same point about the victimization of the Jews and the antisemitism of medieval Christianity—the point, of course, needs to be made, but not at the cost of *The Merchant of Venice*.

Al Pacino is a first-rate actor, but his Shylock is soaked with twentieth-century Jewish blood, and his performance is more King Lear than Malvolio. He is a gray-bearded, wrinkled sufferer, not an ingenious schemer, and instead of relishing in the proposal of his bond, he just sounds exhausted. There is a lifelessness to the performance, even as he hits the high notes of the "Hath not a Jew" speech, and it is painful to watch as he mimes the pricking and tickling to underline language that needs no emphasis. When he asks his tormenters if he has "dimensions, senses, affections, [and] passions?" I am tempted to answer, No. Later, as he prepares to take a pound of Antonio's flesh, there is no joy at the prospect of revenge, but an indifferent carrying out of what is owed him. Finally, upon hearing his sentence, there is a raspy acceptance to his answer, "Nay, take my life," as if this was the result he expected all along. This is an utterance summoned by post-Holocaust hopelessness, and the dialogue is read like a survivor from Auschwitz unsurprised to find himself once again the victim of persecution. Which isn't to say it isn't powerful: Radford has put together a movie with



incredible emotional force. In the summer of 2010, Pacino would revive his performance in Central Park, and there his director, Daniel Sullivan, added a scene in which Shylock is brutally baptized, his *kippah* falling off his head each time he is shoved into the water. Wrenching, but unsubstantiated by the text.

How, then, would a comic Shylock be played? Like Bloom's "Jew-in-the-box," a comic villain who is the manifestation of Christian Judeophobia. Like Marlowe's Barabas, he is there to upset the Christian status quo, to challenge the heroes' conception of their generosity by forcing them to be brutal in their condemnation of him—though unlike *The Jew of Malta*, *The Merchant of Venice* leaves us with a more sobering conclusion: a dead Barabas shuffles off this mortal coil cackling at his tormenters, while Shylock exits a thoroughly beaten man. Although Shakespeare does not give Shylock the same connection with the audience as Richard III—arguably, "I hate him for he is a Christian" is his only aside—Ian McKellen's portrayal of the doomed king seems to me an excellent starting point. Richard Loncraine's 1995 film, *Richard III*, is fearless about finding the humor in the tragedy, and his ironic, 1930s soundtrack provides the perfect score for this examination of human failures. McKellen is given an opportunity to ham it up, and his giddy remarks to the camera allow us to collude in his plotting while remaining at a safe distance. Later depictions of Shylock could take a cue from his first aside: "Therefore, since I cannot prove a lover, I am determined to prove a villain and hate the idle pleasures of these days." Richard's death, sometimes played seriously, is here extraordinarily silly: after killing the king, Richmond smirks into the camera, picking up on Richard's playful asides and suggesting that his rule may not be so benevolent, that the two may in fact end up going "hand-in-hand to hell." McKellen's grinning fall into the flames, along with Loncraine's choice of Al Jolson's "I'm Sitting on Top of the World," recalls the frivolous ending to Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*; the green-screen descent is likely a quote of Slim Pickens' yee-hawing bomb drop.

As for "Hath not a Jew eyes," this speech was, strangely, best handled by Felix Bressart in Ernst Lubistch's *To Be or Not To Be*. Though the film is a comedy, mostly detailing an absurd plot against the Nazis, it nonetheless possesses a certain seriousness: the protagonists, after all, are Jewish actors, victims of the Reichsdramaturg, no longer allowed to perform onstage. One of them, Greenberg, always wanted to star in *Merchant*, and he quotes the famous monologue several times throughout the movie. The performance is oddly sublime. He allows the lines their own power, reciting them like a man who has been beaten down time

and time again. It is a somber delivery, a far leap away from Pacino's histrionics, and *in the context of an otherwise comedic play*, would be extremely affecting. When his colleague turns to him and says, "What a Shylock you would have been," I'm inclined to agree. Had we seen a complete performance, and were this speech coupled with the comic absurdness of Shylock's other scenes—the equal mourning over his daughter and his ducats, for example—it might have been the ideal rendering; it could work much like Nigel Hawthorne's Malvolio in Trevor Nunn's 1996 film *Twelfth Night*: a man who deserves some of what he has coming to him, but who can still evoke sympathy when he barges in on the play's closing merriment, a bald, hysterical wreck. After the Puritan, self-obsessed silliness that precedes it, the sharp contrast of his "I'll be revenged on the whole pack you" is not only affecting, but reveals an unsuspected dignity.

Ultimately, it is not wrong that *some* Shylocks are played as tragic villains, with *some* interpretations focusing on the play's antisemitism. History has certainly invited it. The problem is that they are *all* this way. There is a kind of artistic monopoly in place, as if political correctness necessarily informs our reading of the text. Like all of Shakespeare's masterpieces, *The Merchant of Venice* is a deep and rewarding work, and one whose potential should occupy us for centuries. By stifling the discussion and by playing the same note over and over again, from production to production, we are insulting the richness of Shakespeare's play as well as our own capabilities of understanding it. Although the Holocaust has and should always remain a part of *Merchant's* history, and although the play's antisemitism has and should not be ignored, we must nonetheless explore all the avenues this great work has to offer us.

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