

## The Merchant *in* Venice: Shakespeare in the Ghetto

edited by Shaul Bassi, Carol Chillington Rutter

# Introduction

Shaul Bassi

Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia

Carol Chillington Rutter

University of Warwick, UK

Because he was still ten thousand florins short, he went to a Jew at Mestre and arranged a loan on the following terms and conditions: namely that unless he reimbursed the loan, before St. John's day in June, the said Jew could take a pound of his flesh from whatever part of the body he chose.

(Ser Giovanni Fiorentino 1558,  
see Mortimer 2019, 47)

The most famous bond in the history of literature originates in this short passage from Ser Giovanni Fiorentino's *Il pecorone*, written around 1378 and published in Milan in Italian in 1558. Adapting this novella into a play, *The Merchant of Venice*, some forty years later William Shakespeare famously made a number of revisions: Ansaldo became Antonio, the anonymous Jewish moneylender became Shylock, and the loan was converted to three thousand ducats. In historical reality, a more consequential change had occurred over this time. From 1516, any 'Antonio' needing a loan would no longer have to cross the lagoon and go to Mestre (the nearest town on the mainland) to seek the moneylender, because from that date Jews were authorised to live within the body of Venice as long as they remained confined at night within the site of an abandoned copper foundry called *getto* [/'dʒetto/], whose name would acquire a new spelling and pronunciation and become in time a synonym of urban and ethnic separation. Shakespeare does not mention the Ghetto in *The Merchant of Venice*, but the Ghetto is arguably presupposed in the text. While the playwright almost cer-



The poster for 'The Merchant in Venice' features a dark, textured background. At the top left, logos for 'Università Ca' Foscari Venezia' and 'COMPAGNIA DE COLONBARI' are visible. To the right are the logos for 'Città metropolitana di Venezia' and 'VENEZIA 800'. A small portrait of a man is in the top right corner. The main title 'THE MERCHANT IN VENICE' is in large, bold, white letters. Below it, smaller text reads 'from William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*', 'directed by Karin Coonrod', and 'music by Frank London'. A central image shows a man's face with white horizontal lines across it, and a red tear-like shape below. Below this is a map of the Ghetto Nuovo with the text 'Which is the merchant here and which the Jew'. At the bottom right, the title 'THE MERCHANT IN VENICE' is repeated in a stylized, red and white font. The bottom section contains production credits: 'Set & Lights Peter Ksander Costumes Stefano Nicolao Sound Design Andrea Santini', 'Dramaturgy Walter Valeri Voico and Text Gigi Buffington', 'Actors Andrea Brugnera, Michele Guidi, Ned Eisenberg, Monica Garavello, Adriano Iurissavich, Jerri Lea Jones, Matthieu Pastore, Elena Pellone, Hunter Perske, Linda Powell, Stefano Scherini, Paul Spera, Francesca Sarah Toich, Michelle Uranowitz, Sorab Wadia, Enrico Zagni', 'Black Angels Roberta Barbiero, Ziv Gidron, Emeline Mela, Alessandra Quattrini', 'Musicians Marcello Benetti, Frank London, Serena Mancuso, Alexandra Stoica, Nikole Stoica, Paul Vasile', 'Ring design by Giampaolo Babetto Perfume by The Merchant of Venice® Mask by Donato Sartori', 'Assistant Director and Stage Manager Nerina Cocchi Production Supervisor Mascia Pavoni Technical Director Marciano Rizzo', 'Assistant Dramaturg Davina Moss Assistant Stage Manager Martin Romeo Stage Photographer Andrea Messana General Management Jennifer Newman', 'Project Shaul Bassi, Università Ca' Foscari Venezia', 'Organization Fondazione Università Ca' Foscari Venezia', and the website 'www.themerchantinvenice.org'. Logos for the European Union and the Fondazione Università Ca' Foscari are at the bottom right.

Università Ca' Foscari Venezia

COMPAGNIA DE COLONBARI

Città metropolitana di Venezia

VENEZIA 800

image by John Conklin

# THE MERCHANT IN VENICE

from William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*

directed by Karin Coonrod

music by Frank London

Venezia  
Campo del Ghetto Nuovo  
26 July - 1 August 2016

Which is the merchant here and which the Jew

## THE MERCHANT IN VENICE

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Figure 1 *The Merchant in Venice* poster designed by John Conklin

tainly never visited Venice, he read and heard a good deal about it, and may have learned of that relatively new Jewish area in the city, as had his countryman and contemporary Thomas Coryat. In the most accurate description of early seventeenth-century Venice left by a foreigner (Whittaker 2013), Coryat made a point of visiting this space that had been legally constituted by the Republic and that enabled the social and cultural dynamics of interaction between the Christian majority and the Jewish minority that are central to Shakespeare's play – interaction unimaginable in Shakespeare's London. There no such spatial, never mind cultural, meeting place existed: Elizabeth I's commonwealth still, officially, excluded Jews.

Shakespeare, Shylock, Venice and the Ghetto came into historic alignment in 2016, a year that marked the coincidence of two historic anniversaries: 400 years since William Shakespeare's death and 500 years since the establishment of the Ghetto. A question began to take form. What better way to address the historic complexities registered in this coincidence than to bring them also into *physical* alignment, to stage the first performance of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* in the Ghetto that would have been (fictional) Shylock's (actual) home? The idea developed into a long-term, two-part project titled *Shakespeare in and beyond the Ghetto* funded by the Creative Europe programme and by generous private donors.<sup>1</sup> Its center of gravity was the site-specific production and its satellites a variety of public-facing academic symposia, lectures, spin-off performances and workshops devoted to *The Merchant* and its contemporary relevance. The essays brought together here focus on the activity 'in the Ghetto'.

Initially, the crucial encounter, facilitated by two Shakespeare academics, Kent Cartwright and David Scott Kastan, was with Compagnia de' Colombari, a New York-based theatre company whose name is Italian, casts are multi-ethnic, and vocation is to make *theatre* happen in 'surprising places'. If, as Susan Bennett has argued, "*The Merchant of Venice* tests the relationships produced in, for and among the inhabitants of the play, the spectatorship and the general population" (2016, 5), Colombari was the perfect partner for our project. Thanks to their visionary director, Karin Coonrod, Colombari brought to our collaboration not just a strong artistic vision but an openness to engaging with what else our project set out to achieve, a dialogue with and cooperation among scholars, local communities and Venice's civic and Jewish institutions. *The Merchant of Venice* became *The Merchant 'in' Venice*.

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**1** The partners in the project were Ca' Foscari University of Venice (Italy, Project Leader), Giorgio Cini Foundation, Venice (Italy), University of Warwick (UK), Queen Mary University of London (UK), Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München (Germany), and Tony Bulandra Municipal Theatre, Targoviste (Romania). An overview of the activities and outputs is available at: <http://www.shylocknotebook.eu>.



Figure 2 Daylight rehearsal in the Ghetto. © Andrea Messana

The production was premised on two fundamentals: to recognise the Ghetto as a palimpsestic site and to resist the nostalgic performance tradition that longs to make Shylock ‘authentic’. Aiming to set Shakespeare and his *Merchant* in the Ghetto, we were conscious of locating him – and it – within that “field of forces” and “genuine struggles” that Sonia Massai has observed are the play’s and playwright’s right location “in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries” (Massai 2007, 7). Her reference is to Bourdieu’s notion of the “cultural field” where “relations of power” play out “struggles for the preservation or the transformation of the established order” and where agency is ascribed to “new entrants”, outsiders who, getting a feel for the cultural game being played on the “field”, become active participants there (1993, 163). In the event, as several of the essays collected here document, Coonrod’s production staged the ‘cultural game’ being played in Shakespeare’s *Merchant* to devastating effect.

If Shakespeare is a global cultural field, the Ghetto is quite literally a field (*campo*, in Italian, is used for all Venetian squares except San Marco). However, once Pope Paul IV decided in 1555 to model all segregated Jewish quarters in the papal territories on the Venetian plan and to call them ‘ghettos’, the name extended in space and time to other ethnic enclaves and countless other physical, psychological, metaphorical forms of limitation and confinement. Today ‘ghetto’ has become, in sociological terms, a cognitive category and a global metaphor, a signifier that has long relinquished its original loyalty to its Venetian signified (Duneier 2016; Schwartz 2019; Cheyette 2020).



Figure 3 Masked Singers and Musicians. © Andrea Messana

To bring Shylock 'home' to the Ghetto – a slogan we occasionally indulged in – was, in this perspective, the opposite of an act of 'localisation'. What we planned, instead, was a creative collision between two global icons, two paradigmatic documents of Europe's tangible and intangible heritage. The larger ambition was to explore the potential of the play to reflect on the specificity of antisemitism and simultaneously on the translatability of prejudice and tolerance to other geopolitical and historical contexts.

As a palimpsest, the Ghetto today is a site where post-Holocaust melancholy and mass tourism interact with a multi-layered cultural and religious heritage in the context of an increasingly commodified Venice. The trauma of World War II is its most recent defining moment. Two Holocaust memorials (installed in 1980 and 1994) are the only monuments clearly visible at street level and they declare the public civic function of this area. The other historical evidence of the lives lived here is, by virtue of the strict rules imposed by the Republic of Venice in the sixteenth century, hidden from view, so that today in the Ghetto, poignantly but ironically, the deportation and death of Venice's Jews in the Nazi extermination camps are more legible to the public gaze than any record of the continuous Jewish habitation there over the past five hundred years.

To begin to understand the complexity of this Venetian history – a history that was urgently relevant to our project – one needs to enter the museum that has occupied a corner of the Ghetto since 1954, to read books, to unfold the many layers of Jewish presence in the city

and in much larger national and continental networks. The Ghetto then functions as a screen for the 'beyond'. Other ghettos, especially the deadly ones of Nazi Europe, are projected onto it by historians, museum curators, websites, tour guides, and even occasional visitors who offer different paradigms for interpreting it, paradigms that combine facts, beliefs, reminiscences, prejudices, emotions. A "lachrymose" paradigm (Baron 1964) sees the Ghetto as an alpha of segregation that ends in the omega of Auschwitz. In 2016, this was the narrative used by the few, vocal commentators who took issue with our project to stage what many consider the archetypal antisemitic play in the archetypal Ghetto. Another (apparently more benign but decidedly ambivalent) trope sees the Ghetto as a place of post-Holocaust Judeo-Christian solidarity and identity. This well-intentioned position which sometimes implies the notion of Jews as a model minority suitable for incorporation into 'Western civilization' – unlike, say, the violent, unassimilable African and/or Muslim migrants who have arrived in Venice in recent years – conveniently glosses over centuries of antisemitism expressed in tropes uncannily similar to those now used against the new target groups. The uncomfortable fact is that this interpretation is shared also by some progressive critics who categorise the Jews as European and White and place them unproblematically on the side of the West. A broader solidarity narrative argues for an intersectional paradigm, one that tries to establish an ethical or even historical link between all victims of racism. While these three paradigms focus on the Ghetto as a site of oppression and position its inhabitants primarily as victims, a fourth paradigm that could be termed the 'cosmopolitan paradigm' highlights the Ghetto's role as a contact zone, without in any way playing down the segregation it was designed to enforce. This paradigm stresses the cultural agency of Jews and the place itself as a site of intellectual creativity and resistance, one defined by a distinct local culture but historically capable of producing cultural phenomena that have travelled globally and that have had a significant impact on Jewish history, Jewish-Christian relations and minority rights, beginning with Leon Modena's *The History of the Rites, Customes, and Manner of Life, of the Present Jews* (1637) and Simone Luzzatto's *Discourse on the State of the Jews* (1638) (Davis, Ravid 2001).

*The Merchant in Venice* in 2016 wrestled with the legacy of this complex history by challenging the present to encounter Shakespeare's play in a location that would, to extraordinary effect, heighten its language, raise its stakes: a place where his words, echoing off the Ghetto's walls, would literally 'sound' different. The essays collected here document how our project rose to the challenge we set. They give an account of the preparatory stages of the production, of its performance in the Ghetto and its afterlife, of its reception and of how it spilled out as a cultural event beyond the first performanc-

es, told from the points of view of academics, critics, actors, the director, her production team, and a pair of distinguished journalists.

The first half of the book addresses the 'making' of the site-specific production. Shaul Bassi's "'Shylock is Dead': Shakespeare in and Beyond the Ghetto" frames the whole project. He renders an account of the historical context connecting Shakespeare and the Ghetto, a history, he argues, that found its original expression in the writings of nineteenth-century travellers such as William Dean Howells. He then considers the palimpsestic quality of the Ghetto to see how the paradigmatic value that has accrued to its name makes the location susceptible to countless interpretations. In order to do that, he compares Howells's point of view as an outsider to how an early-twentieth-century Jewish Venetian reader interpreted *The Merchant of Venice* and to his own critical perspective as a twenty-first-century Shakespeare critic inhabiting the same social and cultural space in a radically different historical context.

With this background in place, Karin Coonrod's "Gathering Strangers" turns the focus to the foreground. In conversation with Davina Moss, her dramaturg, Coonrod, the artistic director of Compagnia de' Colombari, discusses the process of making *The Merchant 'in' Venice*: production decisions, casting choices - including her decision to cast five actors as 'Shylock, the Jew' - and how her own personal aesthetic influenced the production. Coonrod and Moss discuss how the history of Venetian Jewry affected staging, costuming and linguistic choices, and how the script was adapted to tell the story that most interested Coonrod. Remarkable illustrations of her process - pages taken from her working script, storyboards - show Coonrod in the act of making her adaptation, writing 'back' to Shakespeare, one theatre-maker in conversation with another. She and Moss account for the production's life beyond its original Ghetto performances, playing to very different audiences in a high security prison in the Veneto and a theatre on a university campus in New York. These audiences, they reflect, looking and listening to Shakespeare's *Merchant* from their positions in 'cultural fields' unimaginably distant from each other, added rich layers of palimpsest to this production. Finally Coonrod and Moss reflect on how the experience of making this *Merchant* affected them personally, as Shakespeareans, as Jews (by birth or marriage), and as artists.

The other creatives whose collaboration they depended upon - Frank London, composer; Stefano Nicolao, designer; Peter Ksander, lighting designer - add observations which show that the Coonrod/Moss dialogue was, in fact, a much noisier conversation. It was their 'talk', translated through enactment into the business of performance, that spectators saw when actors were dressed as characters in front of spectators' eyes; or when music on trumpets, clarinets, cellos, a shofar underscored actions intensified by the sound; or when day sank into night,

and lighting cast nightmare shadows onto a house that would shortly be discovered to be monstrously abused, robbed of its human treasure.

The questions that occupied the creative production team are picked up and reformulated in various ways by six of the actors who rehearsed and performed Coonrod's *Merchant*. In "The Actors Speak", Francesca Sarah Toich, Michelle Uranowitz, Paul Spera, Jenni Leajones, Linda Powell and Michele Athos Guidi offer insights that illuminate both the intense work of preparation that went into the production and their overwhelming experience of playing Shakespeare's play in a place so deeply implicated by history. Coming from Italy, India, the USA, France and Wales, speaking five languages, these actors brought national, ethnic, linguistic and artistic diversity to the project, diversity that richly informed and complicated the performances audiences saw. In "Playing the Angles: Finding Shylock and Gratiano", Sorab Wadia expands his fellow actors' observations. He remembers stepping out onto the stones of the Campo de Ghetto Novo, making Shylock's voice heard in that place for the very first time: "Three thousand ducats; well". As one of Coonrod's original 'strangers' who worked on the project across all of its iterations, he gives a jobbing actor's account of this *Merchant* from pre-life to after-life, and from inside the work. For him, the most daunting challenge his director set him was to double Shylock, the dignified Venetian merchant banker of the opening scene, with Gratiano, the spitting Jew-baiter of the rest of the play. These two parts could not, for Wadia, be reconciled. But he discovered in rehearsing and performing them how they – and Shakespeare's play – needed each other.

In the second half of the book, the essays reverse the actors' gaze. They look at the production – and at a number of collateral events clustered around it – from the outside. Kent Cartwright remembers how profoundly Coonrod's site-specific production worked upon him as a spectator and reflects beyond his immediate experience to raise some key questions that emerged from it. In "'The Merchant in Venice' and 'The Shylock Project': Fiction, History, and the Humanities" he thinks back to Max Reinhardt's historic 1934 staging of the play in Venice – though *not* in the Ghetto – to ask, 'What does it mean to locate *The Merchant* in the actual place where some of its action might be imagined to take place?' Coonrod was staging a comedy famous for its antisemitic expressions in a place of symbolic significance to Jews, a place whose tragic history is a result of exactly such antisemitic sentiments as the play exposes in some of its scenes and characters. How, then, do we reconcile the experience of fiction with the claims of history? And what part do the humanities, what part do fictions play in facilitating our ability to talk "together, globally, about a better world, dreaming it into existence"?

In the following two essays, two distinguished British authors of Jewish background share their opinions of a play and a character who



has long haunted Anglo-Jewish identity and culture. In “Shylock Our Contemporary”, the late Clive Sinclair ponders the strange experience of seeing seven Shylocks on a single day in Venice – and offers some wry reflections on this multitude of encounters. The piece takes the form of an itinerary through three separate events: in the Doge’s Palace, an exhibition documenting half a millennium of Jewish history in Venice which featured looped archive film footage of Laurence Olivier playing Shylock; at San Rocco, the performance of the “Hath not a Jew eyes?” speech by F. Murray Abraham that was part of the “Mock Appeal: Shylock v. Antonio”; in the Ghetto, Coonrod’s production, that showed spectators five versions of Shylock. These encounters inspire a lively review and a very ironical companion piece to Sinclair’s posthumous anthology, *Shylock Must Die*, a collection of short stories informed by a stay in the city when the British Jewish author was Writer in Residence in Venice as part of a project aimed at ‘re-imagining’ the Ghetto in the new century. In “Shylock’s Mock Appeal”, Howard Jacobson, whose 2016 novel *Shylock Is My Name* adapted Shakespeare’s play to contemporary England, examines in more detail the high-profile event that was staged in parallel with Coonrod’s production and that was commented upon by Sinclair. This distinguished judicial side-show, presided over by U.S. Supreme Court Associate Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg and argued by practicing advocates, heard Shylock’s “Appeal Against Sentence” in the matter between himself and Antonio. This was, writes Jacobson with decided understatement, “no mere fanciful fringe happening”. Observing that Justice Ginsberg, in reaching her verdict, “found [...] for Shylock” – as “it was inevitable that she would” – Jacobson celebrates the success of Shylock’s “Appeal” which, for him, meant that an “ancient misreading of a famous play had been challenged”.

Carol Chillington Rutter is not so sure. In “Trying Portia”, she points to a curious aspect of this “Appeal”, which, while ostensibly a matter between Shylock and Antonio, it made Portia an appellee in the case, calling her into court to defend the role she had played in reaching the original verdict. What cultural, political, religious needs were being served, Rutter asks, by bringing Portia into court in 2016? Many of today’s spectators of Shakespeare’s play find Portia trying. Specifically, they indict her of failing to offer Shylock the very ‘quality of mercy’ she requires him to render Antonio. But does this signally misrepresent her actions in Shakespeare’s court and misunderstand the available mitigation of mercy? This essay thinks about justice and mercy, and about law, bonds, and love, asking in conclusion whether the verdict Ginsberg handed down simply recuperated antisemitism in misogyny.

Positioned among these essays that are thinking ‘beyond’ the Ghetto performances, Judah Cohen’s “Composing ‘the Jew’s’ Soundscape in Operatic Versions of *The Merchant of Venice*” nevertheless serves as an melodic companion piece to Frank London’s

earlier in the volume. As Cohen shows, London, adapting boisterous carnivalesque music at the top of Coonrod's production, then writing a minor-key signature tune for Shylock, was just the latest in a long line of composers who used musical shorthand to characterise Venice as *La Serenissima* – while positioning the Jew as aurally strange, living “on the margins of European tonality”. Cohen focuses on operas spanning a hundred years from the 1870s onwards to isolate five compositional strategies for characterising Shylock's Jewish identity “to show both internal anxiety and external alienation”. If, as Shaul Bassi's essay argues, Shylock haunts the political memory of Europe, Cohen's essay demonstrates how profoundly and persistently he echoes in the cultural memory a tune Europe cannot get out of its head.

Even as the lights came down on the final performance of *The Merchant 'in' the Ghetto*, the production and its legacy were moving well *beyond* the Ghetto. First, to the Casa di Reclusione, the high security men's prison located across the Venetian lagoon in Padua, where inmates, many of them lifers, saw a cut-down version of the Ghetto production that brought the trial scene into unsparing focus. In that performance it was twelve inmates who came onstage in the red stoles of the silent 'jurors' whom Coonrod's production cast as 'witnesses' to preside over the trial and Shylock's ultimate humiliation in court. Next, it went to the Theatre Festival of Bassano del Grappa, where the walls of the castello served as the backdrop to the action, offering a surface that captured the events of the play in light and shadow with thrilling clarity. Still later, after re-casting and re-rehearsing, performances on college campuses in New England took Coonrod's production to North America, the Ghetto 'remembered' in the metal police crash barriers placed on those New World stages. In Venice, those barriers had served functionally to mark out the playing space in the open-air campo. In New York, functioning as set, they registered symbolically. They 'remembered' exclusion. They marked a space 'set apart'.

Those crash barriers: in fact, in Venice they did much more than simply mark territory. As the production planted itself in the campo, as it grew day by day with boat delivery after boat delivery along the Misericordia canal, as sky-scraping lighting gantries reached higher and higher and sound boxes ran thick cables across the flagstones, as raked seating rose in metal tiers that seemingly turned their backs on the local community in a semi-circle that cut off half the campo, those barriers came, paradoxically, to stand as the interface between an 'intrusive' cultural event – time apart – and the busy daily life that had to skirt around it – time on-going. It was the children of the Ghetto who made the connection. It was they who were most affected by the intrusion. The campo is their playground: their football pitch; where they kick balls, ride bikes, flick water from the

*fontana*, chase rings round the *pozzo*, ignore shouts of ‘veni qua, veni qua!’ The barriers that divided their kingdom, that told them ‘keep out’, were an obstruction, an offense, an insult. So, the children did what children do: anarchically, they made over the intruder as a party in their own games. They smashed footballs onto metal as if they were proxy goal defenders – with satisfying howls of triumph when the barriers crashed against each other. Later, though, as actors began coming into the space to rehearse, the children grew curious. They draped themselves over the barriers, leaning into whatever odd thing was happening. Or they peered through the bars, staring at this strange ‘zoo’. Still later, during performance, they hung around the far back of the space, the notional ‘off stage’ space, where actors in costume stood waiting to make their entrances, engaging people called ‘Jessica’ and ‘Bassanio’ in lively chatter about who they were and what they were up to. Or they sat. Silent. Cross-legged on the stones of the campo. Gazing through the bars of the crash barriers that now served as a frame, looking into a world where a story was being told about something long-ago, but also about something that mattered now. If *The Merchant of Venice* is to have a future life for the next half-millennium, it must have a current life with the children of today. That is Laura Tosi’s argument in the final essay of this volume. She explores it in “‘Antonio, il Mercante della Nostra Storia’: Adapting *The Merchant of Venice* for Italian Children”. She offers a historicised account of the challenges and difficulties of rewriting this particular play in narrative form for child readers that casts back to the Victorians before discussing the meticulous decisions she made in adapting the story for Venetian, for Italian children today. In particular, her Italian translation might be addressing both the ‘boys in Venice’ who dogged Shakespeare’s Shylock through the streets “Crying ‘His stones, his daughter and his ducats!’” (2.8.24) and the children who passed through the Ghetto in 2016, stopping to hang over the crash barriers to watch Coonrod’s production. What, asks Tosi, are the questions Shakespeare’s play raises that are relevant to their lives?

That question is a compelling one to end on. For just as Shakespeare’s play meant something unforgettable *in* the Ghetto in 2016, so its meaning for the future rests with today’s children, in a place *beyond*.

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