

The Merchant ‘in’ Venice and The Shylock Project: Fiction, History, and the Humanities

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Abstract The 2016 production of *The Merchant of Venice* staged a comedy famous for its antisemitic expressions in a place of symbolic significance to Jews, whose tragic history has resulted from exactly such sentiments. How, then, do we reconcile the experience of fiction with the claims of history? Certain of the production’s values created the sense of an aesthetically self-contained artifact, yet the performance also took place against the looming, inescapable realism of the ghetto itself – a tension that can be felt, too, in activities related to the production. Illuminated here is the power of humanities public events to reinvigorate, through questioning, the life of the human community.

Keywords Aestheticism. Antisemitism. Fiction. Ghetto. History. Humanities. Mercy.

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1 The Play of the Moment

On July 26, 2016, in the soft light of early evening, before an expectant international audience packed to the hilt in temporary tiered stands, *The Merchant of Venice* was performed in the Jewish Ghetto of Venice for the first time ever.¹ The occasion for the production was the happy convergence of the 400-year anniversary of Shakespeare’s death with the 500-year anniversary of the

1 For an important and richly detailed review, see Rutter 2017.

Ghetto's founding. A play famous for its expressions of antisemitism thus confronts the site whose existence and history manifest the effects of those views. So, to attend was to wonder. What does it mean to perform *Merchant*, charged with antisemitic language and characters, in the real Ghetto where a part of its action might be imagined to occur? What influences do history and aesthetic fiction have on each other? What difference is made by a production of *Merchant* with a multi-ethnic and international cast? And what might this event teach us about the contemporary role of the humanities?

At *Merchant's* opening performance, the excitement was almost palpable, with spectators greeting each other, animated by the sense that they were sharing a memorable event, one significant for Venice, the Ghetto and the fraught performance history of this drama. On the fringes of the very public playing area, there was curiosity, too. Tiered seating and stage lamps are unusual sights in the Ghetto Novo (the older and larger of the site's two campos), where the performance took place, and, consequently, tourists and strollers were pausing to gawk and chatter, while a few knowing locals watched out of windows and a sprinkling of customers about to be dispersed from a nearby café lingered attentively. Expectation was in the air.

Perhaps all the more so because the production was the culmination of two years of academic work and of various well-attended public activities, the whole enterprise conceived and organised by Professor Shaul Bassi of Ca' Foscari University of Venice (with an international supporting cast of Italian, British, German, Romanian and American institutions and individuals). A graduate-student two-week summer school, *The Shylock Project*, was taking place concurrently with the production, with a similar month-long summer school having been run the year before. Altogether, over fifty graduate students from Europe and across the globe and some forty international scholars participated – American, British, German, Italian, Hungarian, Israeli and more. Venice's magnificent Cini Foundation, located on the nearby island of San Giorgio Maggiore, collaborated in *The Shylock Project*, opening its doors for the summer school and for many associated events (overseen by Dr. Maria Ida Biggi). In concert with the two summer schools, a wealth of lectures, performances and exhibits, including an exhibition at the Ducal Palace on the Ghetto's history, were made available to Venetians and visitors to the city. The Ghetto production of *Merchant* was mounted by the Italian/American acting company Compagnia de' Colombari, founded in 2004, under the direction of Karin Coonrod (also a theatre professor at Yale University).²

² The participation of the Colombari company was facilitated by Professor David Scott Kastan of Yale. After its premier in the Ghetto, the Colombari production played else-

This project, then, had value at the educational, scholarly and public levels; a build-up over a period of years and weeks sufficient to attract notice and to create impact; an international reach; a variety of main and satellite activities; and a culminating event both daring and urgent (see Bassi 2017, 73). It thus brought into being a public-academic network of individuals, happenings, places and objects, a network, as we shall see, that also extended across space and time. The undertaking was public humanities on a large scale and at its best. *The Shylock Project* and its *Merchant 'in' Venice* should serve as an inspirational model to all who seek to advocate for literature and the humanities. At a painful historical moment when humanistic disciplines seem easy to ignore, they might well reassert their civic role by making themselves freshly vibrant and visible, irresistible. In this instance, the promoting of humanities content also effected a shift in the understanding of locale, for Venice, that mecca of international tourism, was transformed now into a meeting place for global cultural thinking and the exchange of ideas.

Everywhere, it seems, *The Merchant of Venice* has become the Shakespearean comedy – perhaps the Shakespearean play – of the moment. As Coonrod's Shylock was traversing the Venetian Ghetto, Jonathan Pryce's Shylock was triumphantly striding the boards in New York, in a production, directed by Jonathan Munby, that had originated from Shakespeare's Globe in London. *The New York Times* hailed it as "brooding, powerful" and "eerily attuned to the current troubles that roil the world" (Isherwood 2016). Pryce's *Merchant* visited New York as one of its stops on an international tour that included not only Great Britain and America but also China and Italy. Venice's prominent Goldoni Theatre hosted the Pryce production in October, 2016, to large crowds, barely three months after *Merchant's* Ghetto premier. The play seems to be omnipresent, and not just in the West but also in the post-communist East. Numerous productions of *Merchant* have taken place in recent decades throughout the former Soviet bloc, as Boika Sokolova pointed out in a talk at the World Shakespeare Congress, held in Stratford-upon-Avon, August, 2016. The resurgence of antisemitism in the West before and after the Ghetto production – with neo-Nazi marches in America and Germany – only increases the interest in what we can learn from *Merchant*. This play calls to us.

where in Italy. It was later performed 19 September-1 October 2017 at Montclair State University; 19 June-23 June 2018 in the courtyard of the Yale University Law School; and 26 June-28 June 2018 at Dartmouth College's Hopkins Center for the Arts. See <http://www.shylocknotebook.eu/>.

2 History and Lyricism

But not quite to everyone. Within the Jewish community in Venice, there was general acceptance of the project, despite one member who vocally opposed the idea of staging a potentially antisemitic play in a revered Jewish site. After all, a memorial plaque mounted just yards from the performance space in the Ghetto recognises the Nazi deportation, between 1943 and 1944, of more than two hundred Venetian Jews to death camps, mostly to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Bassi won consent for the project from Jewish leaders by arguing that the strongest response to the play was not repression but confrontation and engagement. Notwithstanding, in the very week of the Ghetto production, an opinion essay by an attorney, Steve Frank, appeared in *The Washington Post*, which called for *The Merchant of Venice's* banning from the stage (Frank 2016). Where Bassi and other scholars consider *Merchant* to be more about antisemitism than antisemitic in itself, Frank disagrees (invoking Harold Bloom). Despite the play's acknowledged popularity, Frank insists that *Merchant's* language, with the single, insufficient exception of the "Hath not a Jew eyes" speech, exposes a fundamental antisemitism. To attempt to convert Shylock into a sympathetic or universal figure is to ignore the actual words that characters apply to him: "Every time it is produced, the play introduces new audiences to vile medieval tropes of Jew-hatred" (Frank 2016). That a major American newspaper would dedicate precious column inches to a non-scholar bent on denouncing the play testifies to the power, and the imagined danger, of *The Merchant of Venice*.

The play's "tropes of Jew-hatred" certainly pulsed like shock waves through the Ghetto performance. Actors emphasised the offending words vocally – "devil incarnate", "villain Jew", "currish Jew" – making the language, in that setting, shocking to hear. To its credit, the Colombari production refrained from efforts to sanitise the play or its language. At a panel with three of the actresses during the play's run, Elena Pellone, the production's notable Nerissa, observed that in performance she was self-conscious of *Merchant's* antisemitic insults, for it felt to her as if the Ghetto walls were listening. Speeches acquired, that is, a certain resonance from the façades of the campo, giving Pellone the impression that the Ghetto was bouncing the characters' taunts directly back at the actors, as if the walls were, as Diana Henderson puts it, "a ghostly, echoing character" (2017, 167). For some performers, then, speaking antisemitic tropes in the historic Jewish quarters induced inward cringing, a potentially Brechtian condition in which the actor's relationship to his or her character becomes part of the theatrical experience. Inescapably, the ghastly irony of vile language affronting a quasi-sacred place registered on spectators, too, creating an irregular rhythm of small aural jolts. In this place, simply speaking certain words could have a meta-dramatic effect.



Figure 1 Salanio (Enrico Zagni) and the five Shylocks. © Andrea Messana

The Colombari performers took their relationship to Venice and the Ghetto as seriously as they took their craft. The summer before, actors had spent two weeks doing preliminary rehearsals in Venice at the Cini Foundation, and otherwise getting a feel for the city's history and its daily life. They even put on brief impromptu pop-up performances of scenes at public sites and outdoor restaurants around the city. A sense of locale found its way into some of the production's theatrical effects, such as when a *commedia dell'arte* performer (the mesmerising Francesca Sarah Toich, playing Lancillotto, substituted for Launcelot Gobbo) led the percussive, carnivalesque, snake-like opening procession of musicians and singing actors – in a city famous for *commedia*, for *carnevale*, for music, and for colourful, winding processions on the Grand Canal. The Colombari production made other allusions across time and space. The processional entrance was followed by a prologue in Venetian dialect (Veneziano) adapted from an early cinquecento farce by the important vernacular playwright Angelo Beolco (known as Ruzante) from nearby Padua, thus putting *Merchant* in conversation with the history of Italian Renaissance comedy. From a more modern angle, original music was composed for the occasion by Grammy award winner Frank London, who accompanied on the trumpet. London's music and Toich's riveting choreographics continued throughout the performance, helping to give the play its own internal dynamic and aesthetic.

That intelligent conjoining of – and sometimes tension between – the historically resonant and the aesthetically self-contained characterised the evening. The music, dance and other staging values quickly



Figure 2 Portia (Linda Powell) in in Nerissa's (Elena Pellone) lap. © Andrea Messina

established the production's lyricism, signaling that we were no longer in conventional time and space, and the performance continued to draw attention to its theatricality. Black-clad 'black angel' production assistants helped actors change costume on stage. Characters intermittently delivered lines and phrases in languages other than English - including Italian, Veneziano, French, Spanish, Latin, Hebrew, German, Yiddish and Arabic - reflecting both the determined multiculturalism of the production and, at a distance, what must have been Renaissance Venice's - and within it the Ghetto's³ - mix of languages spoken by travellers, foreign businessmen and residents. Acting styles varied, too, from the genially conversational Portia of African-American actress Linda Powell to Stefano Scherini's unfortunately bombastic Antonio. Not only multi-racial, the cast was also international - Italian, British, American, French, Australian, Indian - apparent in its noticeable polyglot of regional accents and different rhetorical manners. Thus, the production's stylising was also its globalising. Coonrod seemed to be using the performance's strongly registered lyricism, then, to hold together the company's centrifugal elements.

3 In Cinquecento Venice, the forced inhabitation of the Ghetto by Jews of Ashkenazi, Sephardic and Levantine heritage would have created its own special sonic jumble of languages and accents. Bassi notes that the group of Jews confined to the Ghetto in 1516 was composed of "mostly newcomers and refugees" (2017, 67).

Thoughtfulness showed, too, in the management of narrative, such as in the well-etched relationships among many characters, especially Jessica and Lorenzo (the sympathetic duo of Michelle Uranowitz and Paul Spera), the former brimming with naïve goodness and the latter interweaving genuine affection with opportunism, typifying the play's moral complexity (Lorenzo, brusque and crude in the elopement scene, became a more sensitive character in Belmont, perhaps under Jessica's influence). Thoughtfulness appeared, as well, in Bassanio's moments of disarming honesty with Portia. It showed further in the way characters, likeable on initial encounter, became self-compromising as the action progressed without their alienating entirely the possibility of our goodwill (or, in the case of Lorenzo, vice versa). Likewise, Coonrod gave us moments when meaning was deftly held in suspense: for example, in the trial scene, after Portia makes her rabbit-out-of-the-hat interpretation of the law – flesh but “no jot of blood” (4.1.302)⁴ – and Shylock suddenly recognises that he is defeated, the action hangs still and hushed for a moment, frozen in anticipation, until Shylock starts quietly to laugh, as if it had always been a joke, and the laughter spreads to the Venetians and grows, all tension released – exactly recapitulating the nervous laughter when, in 1.3 he, Antonio and Bassanio had originally agreed to the bond – with the money now ready to change hands, before Portia just as suddenly redirects the course of events with “Tarry, Jew” (342), two possible endings placed in collision.

But the production's most moving effects focused on Shylock. Shylock was played by not one but five performers (one for each scene), four men and one woman, who also doubled in other parts, including the Duke (Jenni Lea-Jones) and, unnervingly, the loud, race-baiting Graziano (played effectively by Sorab Wadia). There is some danger in making Shylock so much the centre of the production, although, as noted, Coonrod carefully developed other aspects of the story. Each Shylock wore an outsized bright yellow sash wrapped around his waist, reminiscent of the yellow badges or headgear that early Venetian Jews were obliged to wear and of the later yellow stars mandated by the Nazis. In general, the costuming for the production was crafted but minimal and suggestive, a vest here, a jacket or tunic there, as nods to characterisation; Lancillotto's trim white costume was embroidered and padded, prominently so in the genital region. Colours were generally white, off-white, or grey. The musicians (whose instruments included drums, violins, a cello, a horn, an accordion and a keyboard) were outfitted variously in black trousers, shirts and tunics. Thus, the bright yellow of the sashes made a statement. It was never far from our eyes and demanded attention,

⁴ Quotations are from Drakakis 2010.

in contrast to the actors' otherwise color-neutral dress, the centuries old 'stigmata' of the Jew here aestheticised into lavish folds of vibrant, beautiful fabric.

The five Shylocks implicitly reduced the distinction between the persecutors and the persecuted, since any given actor might slide instantly in or out of each role, Jew or Jew-baiter, judge or judged – sometimes with a sudden vehemence, as if the transformation were disturbingly easily. We are all potential Shylocks, Coonrod seemed to be saying, and all potential antisemites, too (and it may not take much to pull the trigger that activates our prejudices). The effect was especially jarring in the case of Wadia, who enacted the First Shylock of the bond scene as a pleasant-enough businessman with the hint of a Yiddish accent – Rutter terms him “urbane” (2017, 85) – but who also gave us a loud and increasingly repugnant Graziano. Coonrod's five-Shylock device made the notion of character fluid and permeable in a way that invited wondering about linkages. Did something of Shylock's repressed hatred subsequently flow into Graziano? Likewise did qualities drift from Andrea Brughera's comic Gobbo to his “commedia” Shylock (Rutter 2017, 86), or from Ned Eisenberg's cool Tubal to his controlled Shylock? Yet such potential uncanniness was less the case with another role that doubled with Shylock and enforced contrast, for Adriano Iurissevich played Arragon with “charming” humour (Henderson 2017, 171) but then became, as Shylock, a distant but fretful father obsessed with locked doors. Having five different actors play Shylock makes impossible a perfect consistency in, or full realisation of, the character. Shylock's nature shifts and opens itself to new possibilities – urbane, “tetchy”, grieved, comic, self-assured (Rutter 2017, 85-6) – reflecting the choices of each successive actor, with gains and losses to the audience's experience. The sequencing of actors through the role gives the character a dynamic range impossible otherwise, as different actors respond in their own ways to new circumstances, but the tactic loses the shifts and modulations in voice, tone, posture, gesture, and movement that register deepening emotion or changes over time when a lone single actor plays the part. A hybrid Shylock cannot develop. That opaque five-figured character will lack the possibility of a Stanislavskian inner life; we will know him, rather, by his function in the story and by his free-standing and variable expressions of feeling or passion.⁵ Hence the inference that we are all potential persecutors and victims comes to the audience more as information, prompted by the director's continual

⁵ A rejoinder might be that Shakespeare's characters are not always internally consistent and that dividing Shylock by five only makes manifest what is implicit in the text, so that a rejection of realism offers up other possibilities for theatrical experience and meaning.

substitutions, and less as the distillation of our engagement with the character. The effect is of a piece with the intellectual craftedness and Brechtian self-consciousness of the production.

The device of doubling roles thus exemplified the universalising of Shylock disparaged by Steve Frank in his *Post* op-ed piece – and there was indeed something awkward about universalising this character in a production set so confrontationally in a place that bears witness to the exclusion, persecution and murder, not of an abstract Other, but of a community of real, living people who had made their homes in the very campo where the play was performed. Yet this tension between artifact and context was the Colombari *Merchant's* fundamental and productive condition: how does a play speak for, and to, the past? Indeed, as Henderson questions (2017), what exactly can be the past or the place of the past addressed by the performance, since the Ghetto is palimpsestic, layered with history and experience, and since even quotidian present history – ball-playing children, barking dogs, whispering tourists, sirens, cicadas – finds its way into the performative experience? We cannot quite recover here the scene of our sins, be they the confinements of 1516 or the deportations of 1943.

Yet grief and remorse are still possible. For me and surely everyone else, the evening's most powerful and unnerving moment came hard on the elopement of Jessica and Lorenzo. As the couple disappears into a crowd, the five Shylocks emerge together from it (an action inserted into the play before scene 3.1 in which Shylock is taunted by Salarino [Hunter Perske] and Salanio [Enrico Zagni] and meets with Tubal). Of the five actors, the strong-voiced Jenni Lea-Jones (subsequently the Duke) steps forward as Shylock from the back of the acting area and, perhaps driven to the brink of despair by the loss of the daughter, unleashes a cry that starts as a kind of keening but that becomes a prolonged, harrowingly pained, animal howl. With that sound of raging frustration and inconsolable grief, any remnants of a conventional comedy lay in tatters. The howl's immediate provocation is Jessica's repudiation of her home and father, but the sense of loss and betrayal is deeper, greater, more encompassing finally than any proximate cause.⁶ It is an unlocalizable grief, a grief like longing, beyond the reach of full articulation, accessible only emotionally and aesthetically. Shylock's searing wail manifested the anguish not only of the moment and the man, but of the ages, too, and here the universalising of Shylock reached a transcendent apotheosis.

⁶ Bassi saw in the howl “both empathy with Jewish suffering and [...] a more generalised identification with persecuted minorities” (2017, 75).



Figure 3 Hunter Perske as Salarino. © Andrea Messana

3 Mercy and the Ghetto

The play closed with the five Shylocks emerging again onstage to re-deliver the Jew's "I have possessed your grace" speech (4.1.34-61) from the trial scene, with different actors reciting different lines, and with "Are you answered?" repeated at the end, as a refrain, by all of them, lined up aggressively downstage, confronting the audience. In the play's last action, as the words "Mercy" (English), "Misericordia" (Italian) and "Rachamim" (transliterated Hebrew) were projected against the Ghetto side wall, Jessica broke away from the other characters, dashed to the front of the playing space, turned toward the Ghetto wall, and threw up her hands as if in desperation or as if to link the audience with the actors before the now-semiotic stones. The refrain, "Are you answered?", was defiant and dramatic, but it left me, for one, a little uncertain about what was meant and how it fit. Shylock's speech comes before the trial commences and is prompted by the Duke's call for the Jew's "commiseration" with Antonio, whom even "stubborn Turks" and discourteous "Tartars" might pity: "We all expect a gentile" - that is, Gentile - "answer, Jew!" (4.1.29-33). Shylock's response issues from a position outside society, Gentile or Jewish, refusing any restraint by communal norms:

But say it is my humour. Is it answered?
 [...]

 So can I give no reason, nor I will not,
 More than a lodged hate and a certain loathing

I bear Antonio, that I follow thus
 A losing suit against him! Are you answered?
 (4.1.58-61)

He replies, that is, by behaving exactly like a hard-hearted “wolf” (72), marshalled only by his “passion” (50), having turned himself into something worse than what the Venetians had already imagined him to be. In what sense, then, is that behavior any kind of ‘answer,’ as the actors, now less characters and more the Brechtian voice of the performance, confront the audience with a challenge?⁷

But to challenge the audience with “Are you answered?” implies at the most literal level that the audience as a whole had asked a question, which it had not, outside of the implicit theatrical ones of ‘What next?’ and ‘Why?’ So, we must make a double guess: a question and an answer. Shylock’s flawed, monstrous inhumanity asserts itself as perhaps the final response to sustained antisemitic cruelty. The moment was powerful dramatically without being quite satisfying interpretively. Nor did it feel hopeful, for its implicit pessimism seemed out of sync with the spirit, energy and moments of joy in the production. In any event, perhaps the ending was meant to acknowledge the impasse to which our inhumanity threatens to take us, the place where we are answered by the results of our own cruelty. If so, a desperate call for an intervening mercy, in the languages of several nations, feels right.

4 The Ghetto and the Aesthetic Present

As the words for mercy flashing on the campo wall suggest, the real-life Jewish Ghetto was always vaguely present, even as the production created an aesthetic system internal to itself that was, for the most part, detached from the actual place (the production was conceived with the idea that it could travel). Thus, the dramatic effect of the Ghetto was suggestive but mostly indirect; it lingered in our visual background but was thrust only occasionally into the action. The downstage area incorporated the Ghetto’s water cistern, or *poz-zo*, used sometimes for sitting or leaning, while upstage receded into a pair of the campo’s tall, green trees. The acting occurred not on a platform but on the stones of the campo itself. The play was set, in the

⁷ Reviewing the staging of Coonrod’s production at Yale University in June, 2018, Steve Mentz notes of the “Are you answered?” reprise that “The acting collective stood for the Jewish identity that Shylock embodied both within the play and in the past four centuries of Western cultural history - but the speech they collectively spoke asserted, with Shakespearean doubleness, an individual’s refusal to submerge his particular selfhood in service to an ethically compromised public good” (2018).



Figure 4 Shylock #4 (Andrea Brugnera) and Tubal (Ned Eisenberg). © Andrea Messana

farther distance, against the differently colored walls of the Ghetto buildings, with the tallest façade, distinctive for its yellowness, in the middle. Someone familiar with the Ghetto Novo would know that we were looking toward the entrance to the Jewish Museum in one of those buildings, and, within that building, on upper floors to the left and right, rooms that had been converted to synagogues as early as 1528 for the first Jews confined to the Ghetto. You could watch the play from some of them.

On the audience's left, near the playing space, was a building with an old covered portico walkway and, above, a second-story window used for Jessica's elopement with Lorenzo. As the audience shifted its eyes toward that building in order to follow events, I saw there a woman, peering out of a half-lit open window, who hastened away from it as the characters in the campo approached the window to the adjacent room. For a moment, I thought that she was a spectator, someone who lived there and was gazing on the production (not an unreasonable idea, since there were still random spectators here and there in the campo), until I realised with a visceral shock that the woman in the window was actually Jessica, awaiting Lorenzo and then hurrying into the appointed room. The Ghetto had magically entered the play – entered along with Jessica's desire to escape it.

Outside of the elopement, however, the production made little employment of the Ghetto, which functioned more as a mute presence and a metaphoric envelope than as a theatrical set. I queried some Shakespearean colleagues afterwards about their experiences, and

they agreed that, except intermittently, the staging seldom drew their attention to the Ghetto. We were caught up in the play's actions, of course, and especially in the unfolding relationships among characters. The Jewish Ghetto brought momentousness to the event, and the production made oblique allusions to its setting, but the play's self-contained lyricism worked somewhat independently of the specificity of place. I was reminded of that fact during the panel with the three actresses from the production, who talked about their roles, the dynamics between characters, and the perspective of the director without once mentioning the Ghetto until it came up in the session's very last question.

While Henderson in her critical responses to the production wonders about the possibility of the performance confronting history, Rutter sees it as a complex expression of the play's internal thematics of love. The motif of love was registered at the outset by the opening procession's incorporation of a song by Ruzzante celebrating carnal love. In Coonrod's *Merchant*, if Lorenzo grows into love, Bassanio experiences it with sudden wonder, and Portia with surprise followed by whole-hearted surrender (Rutter 2017, 83). For Rutter, the production played out the thematics of love in the binary of Christian and Jew, too, with Wadia's 'urbane' first Shylock seeking sincerely to overcome division: "I would be friends with you and have your love" (1.3.134). Such variations on the theme cover carnality, romance, parenthood, and fellowship, and tell, on the one hand, of growth and joy, and, on the other, of loss and denial, the poignant possibility that fails to come into being. This theme draws history into the conversation as it echoes against the Ghetto walls, but its real locale is the aesthetic here and now – especially so in comedy, which has a present orientation (the philosopher Agnes Heller observes that comedy always takes place in an "absolute present time", 2005, 13).

Viewed differently, however, the production was profoundly, if implicitly, aware of its Jewish setting, as in the yellow sashes and the painful heightening of voices spitting out antisemitic epithets. A Jessica in this setting will likely experience belated regrets about leaving her father, as Uranowitz's splendid Jessica did. This play is in history, and it is not. That ambiguity was caught in the production's last word, "Mercy", a key term from Portia's famous speech within the play-world now projected as a sign of desperate hope against a wall that had stood during the Nazi's forced evacuation of the city's Jews. On one side, the brilliance of *The Merchant 'in' Venice* is that it actualised what we intuitively know, that, at the present moment, this work, metaphorically, can never escape the Ghetto. On the other side, the play in turn frames the Ghetto, even transforms it for a time, as much as the Ghetto frames the play, as the performance's self-conscious aestheticism insists. In that sense, this unusual production intervenes in history, even overrides it, and does so in a way

meant to have residual implications.⁸ The play tells its story back to the Ghetto walls, a story that, despite the moral failings of its principals, is now brought to life by a multi-racial and international cast, and has too much of joy, laughter, beauty, lyricism, and even love to forfeit entirely the possibility, however distant, of redemption. If you are seated there in the Ghetto Novo on this July evening, the light of day has now given way to the light of theatre, and the last image it superimposes on the ancient wall is “Mercy”.

5 2016 and 1934

The Colombari *Merchant* spoke not only to the present moment but also to the not-so-distant theatrical past. During the Shylock Project summer school, several speakers contrasted the Ghetto production to the famous Max Reinhardt’s *Merchant of Venice*, performed in Venice’s Campo di San Trovaso in 1934, staged for the city’s first Festival Internazionale del Teatro di Prosa.⁹ One can examine this site today (as I did soon after the Ghetto production) much as the German director found it. Reinhardt’s production used its historical site differently than did Coonrod’s version. San Trovaso’s somewhat L-shaped square contains the Greek-inspired Church dedicated to Saints Gervase and Protase (Gervasius and Protasius), adjacent to a grassy field and then a canal (the Rio d’Ognissanti). (Near the base of the campo, along the canal, sits a famous gondola boatyard, the Squero di San Trovaso, one of the city’s oldest still in operation.) At a right angle to the church, two *palazzi* form a corner of the campo, with the left palace façade featuring a useful balcony, and the right one leading to a bridge across the *rio*. Against that right façade, Reinhardt built out a portico, with a stage on top, reached by a staircase. With the canal and its bridge, Reinhardt could make use of local dramatic elements; likewise, across the canal, he employed one of the buildings, whose “majestic doors” became the entrance to Shylock’s house (Fischer-Lichte 2010, 226) – Venetians on one side of the canal, Jews on the other (perhaps alluding to the Ghetto). The canal also lent itself to pageantry, for a character such as the Prince of Arragon could use it to make a grand entrance by gondola like a real-life aristocrat. Spectators were arrayed in the San Trovaso Campo and on the *calle* (or street) running along the canal. The site

⁸ Bassi sees *The Merchant 'in' Venice* as “an attempt to reconfigure the Ghetto for the future [...] to retrieve its vocation as meeting place, creative arena, contact zone between cultures and place of interrogation” (2017, 78).

⁹ My description of Reinhardt’s Venice *Merchant* draws from Fischer-Lichte 2010, 226-9; Speaight 1973, 206-8; and other sources cited subsequently.

must have been crowded. With palaces on either side of the canal available for use as characters' homes, with the purpose-built structure and its acting platform, and with the dramatic bridge over the canal, Reinhardt had an expansive, three-dimensional staging area featuring different kinds of locales. Those elements in combination amounted to a maximal variation on the elaborate theatrical sets of Venice - palaces, bridges, revolving stages - that Reinhardt had devised for indoor performances of his *Merchant* in Berlin,¹⁰ which he had already produced many times since 1905, almost thirty years earlier. The Venetian staging gave full expression to Reinhardt's conception of a theatre that operates on a 'monumental' scale but that retains a physical closeness to the spectators, creating a "desirable immediacy between actor and audience", with performers even moving through the assemblage, so that spectators feel "involved" and theatrical effects are "heightened" (Kahane 1975, 325-6). As Douglas Russell puts it, Reinhardt sought to involve the audience "physically and viscerally" in a vision of total "aesthetic drama" (1985, 21).

Altogether, Reinhardt had located and augmented an eminently Venetian setting, one with architectural elements that could be showcased in performance, as if real Venice were turned into fantasy Venice. The production took place in the same city as the Ghetto *Merchant*, but metaphorically it was a thousand miles away. Reinhardt's version included dance, pantomime, music, singing, torch-lit processions and street noise, amplified by scores of extras. Reinhardt was known for his skill in using crowds, illustrated by the trial scene in which a Christian mob mills threateningly around an impassive Shylock. The costumes were lavish, and Reinhardt's practice was to extend them with tall headpieces and trains of fabric, the presence of the character made bigger by the costume, an effect quite different from Colombari's sashes. The production aimed at the vitality and spectacle of the Renaissance capital that lived in the imagination. If Reinhardt insisted upon an actor-centered theatre, as commentators say, it was one in which character could acquire fantasy dimensions. This San Trovaso extravaganza took place just a few years before Italy's Fascist government began to issue laws discriminating against and segregating Jews (starting in 1938), and just a few more years before Nazis in Germany devised 'the Final Solution' (1942). According to contemporary reports, the production was, in effect, a glorification of Christian Venice - although Reinhardt himself was Jewish.¹¹ The face of the real thirties city was there in Reinhardt's *Merchant*, but it became finally so overwritten with production values that whatever was gritty and historical was absorbed

¹⁰ On Reinhardt's designs for *Merchant*, see Tollini 2004, 59-64.

¹¹ Reinhardt apparently took the part of Tubal (Styan 1982, 61).

into myth and fiction, leaving little independent impression. The features of Campo San Trovaso turned into a kind of foil for theatrical staging in all its prodigal splendor. For Reinhardt generally, a production was “an artistic end in itself” where naturalism or “factual reality” gave way to the “vivid” theatrical “[t]ruth of atmosphere and occasion” (Hortmann 1998, 32).¹² Reinhardt’s *Serenissima*, moreover, held a society of “charming, light-hearted, carefree Venetian *nobili*”, but one essentially ‘closed’ to those outside its tight-knit community (Kahane 1975, 333). Although commentators credited the director with allowing the complexity of Shylock’s character to show through, the production was fundamentally a comedy, with Shylock as a socially discordant element in the most serene of Christian Renaissance cities.¹³ The Reinhardt *Merchant*, that is, co-opted its real Venetian setting, much in contrast to its more recent heir.

Yet for all their differences, the Reinhardt and Colombari productions shared an uncanny similarity, in that each inserted a pantomimed scene immediately after Jessica’s escape, a scene in which Shylock responds to his loss, although the two insets create different effects.¹⁴ We have noted that in the Colombari *Merchant*, as Jessica disappears with Lorenzo into a crowd, the Shylock quintet emerges from it, with Jenni Lea-Jones stepping forward with a wail of grief that becomes an animal howl, ripping the play from its comic moorings. Reinhardt’s interpolated scene begins with Shylock (Memo Benassi) emerging on the San Trovaso side of the bridge, heading home from his evening with the Venetian Gentiles. He reaches the top of the *ponte*, calls out for Jessica, receives no reply, and moves apprehensively across and into his house, where he ranges from room to room and floor to floor with increasing anxiety, calls out, mutters, staggers moaning onto a balcony, but mostly is heard by spectators in his rising cries of distress within the confines of the house in which he would have fast-bound Jessica. He then departs the *palazzo* and moves back across the bridge, rending his shawl. This Shylock, like Colombari’s, gives vent to the grief of loss and dispossession, if not

¹² According to Hortmann, Reinhardt had a special affection for Shakespeare’s comedies because of “Their romantic affirmation of life, love and joy” and “their imaginative playfulness”, which “coincided with his own philosophical convictions and artistic interests” (1998, 33).

¹³ Speaight (1973) offers a description of the production that is worth quoting: “Reinhardt played ravishing variations with light and water. The characters met and conversed on the bank of the canal, and arrived and departed by gondola, the Doge descending from his gilded barge for the trial scene in the piazza. In the last act a garden was improvised on the steps of the bridge [...]. The balconies of Portia’s mansion, the windows of Shylock’s house and the rim of a well which formed part of the natural site, were all used effectively” (208).

¹⁴ The details here regarding Reinhardt’s inset scene draw from Fischer-Lichte 2010, 226-7.



Figure 5 Morocco (Mathieu Pastore) and Black Angel (Ziv Gidron). © Andrea Messana

with the same transcendent horror and impotent rage as does the later incarnation. Reinhardt recognised fully that the cost of the Venetians' light-hearted and clubby charm came as callous repudiation of the outsider. Notwithstanding, Shylock's suffering here remains contained, played out largely inside the ironic house and thus distanced from the audience, a kind of set-piece. The 1934 *Merchant* was Reinhardt's last production of the play, perhaps because staging it in Venice constituted the apotheosis of his aesthetic vision of the work – or could it have been, even a little, because the pressure of the plot's contradictions had grown too dark, too vivid? In 1933, the year before Reinhardt's Venetian *Merchant*, the Nazis seized power in Germany, and not many months afterwards, the Jew Reinhardt (who had refused to be made an honorary Aryan) was dispossessed of his Berlin theatres. Had the realities of politics made the continued aestheticisation of *Merchant* untenable? One can only speculate. What we can say of Reinhardt's Shylock interpolation, however, is that it uses the theatrical values of the site both to invent an emotionally moving scene of Shylock's human suffering yet also to carefully circumscribe it.

The Colombari *Merchant's* relationship to its site, the Ghetto, was more ambiguous overall than was Reinhardt's to Venice, and the 2016 production granted the Ghetto its own mysterious ambiance, never attempting to swallow it inside a fantasy of the Renaissance's most mythic city. The production spoke across time to Reinhardt's memorable 1934 theatre-for-theatre's-sake incarnation, just as it aimed to speak to the contemporary global world of 2016 and to those con-

verging European cultures of 1616 and 1516. To Reinhardt, the Ghetto *Merchant* responds that we cannot ignore the dark history, past and present, that surrounds a fictional work; to the global world, it yet argues that it is impossible to understand history, or to envision a future, without fiction. The performers confront us: "Are you answered?"

6 The Creative Paradox

Shylock's wail and the mute "Mercy" answered, too, in their own ways, the *Washington Post* op-ed call to ban *The Merchant of Venice*. Yet, although the contemporary relevance of this play may demand that it be performed, directors also feel that they must shape their productions as adversarial encounters with *Merchant*, as Coonrod did by introducing Shylock's howl and other devices, or as the Pryce *Merchant* did by interpolating into the ending a mimed conversion scene for Shylock that sentimentalised him (an effect nurtured elsewhere, too, in the production). Simply offering a sympathetic Shylock hardly seems enough for current stage interpretations; an apolitical rendering of the play would surely be deemed a moral failure. Productions sometimes make Belmont a worse place than Venice, turn Antonio into a homosexual martyr (as in a 2015 Royal Shakespeare Company version, directed by Polly Findlay, where he drifted unfortunately towards parody), present the suitors exclusively as tawdry money-grubbers, insist upon Portia as a conniver who, yes, communicates the secret of the caskets to Bassanio through the *Where is Fancy Bred?* song (as Coonrod regrettably did), and end the play not with a semblance of harmony but with shouting matches and blows among the couples, who are all doubtless headed for the divorce courts (as, again, in the 2015 RSC's *Merchant*). Such productions can become, for me at least, more off-putting than engaging, as if the director were shouting over the top of the play.¹⁵ It is hard to establish the right attitude: do we dare, for example, to like Portia? The Colombari production tilted toward the negative but did not entirely lose its balance – and Powell's Portia showed a winning good-humour. Yet the play can strike many as so hazardous, as Frank recognises, that directors want urgently to condemn those elements in it that they consider vicious or hypocritical.

Condemnation was certainly the attitude of United States Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg towards Portia. As part of the per-

¹⁵ There are comic or quasi-comic plays, such as J.M. Synge's and Sean O'Casey's, whose realism allows for the representation of characters as deeply flawed mortals, even rotters; but the romance and fantasticality in Shakespearean comedy makes that approach difficult.



Figure 6 The trial scene at dusk. © Andrea Messana

formance week, Ginsburg presided over a mock appeal by Shylock, held in Venice's magnificent, baroquely ornate, Tintoretto-frescoed Scuola Grande di San Rocco.¹⁶ The indoor temperature was in the nineties – one of the lawyers joked that he himself had lost a pound of flesh that day from the heat – yet the hall was packed chockablock with hundreds of people watching in rapt silence as the diminutive 83-year-old judge, clutching a fan, dominated the proceedings with her legal brilliance. (The trial was proposed by Ginsburg, apparently at the prompting of *Washington Post* columnist Judith Martin.)¹⁷ In the public hearing, Shylock's Italian lawyers appealed against the Duke's judgment, with Portia as a kind of irregular co-defendant. We might regard this event as a semi-improvisational 'sequel' to the play, this time with another female, but here Jewish, avatar of justice, a third "Daniel come to judgement" (4.1.219). The festivities began with the celebrated screen and stage actor F. Murray Abraham reciting Shylock's two major speeches, and it featured the luminaries Stephen Greenblatt and James Shapiro interviewing each other while the international panel of jurors, a kind of world court, convened off-stage to decide its verdict. Justice Ginsburg at numerous

¹⁶ Subsequently, Ginsburg presided over a similar appeal at the United States' Law Library of Congress in June, 2017.

¹⁷ If only accidentally, the political world of Washington had other slight links to the production: Paul Spera (Lorenzo) is the grandson of Ginsburg, and Linda Powell (Portia), the daughter of former United States Secretary of State Colin Powell. The literary/theatrical and political worlds may sometimes be closer than we imagine.

moments made clear her disdain for Portia's "hypocrisy" and for the heroine's deficient sense of justice and understanding of law. Thus, it came as no surprise that Shylock's estate was returned to him and his forced conversion nullified. The terms of the bond were deemed no more than a "merry sport", with Shylock therefore denying any claim to "interest". For her part, Portia was remanded to the University of Padua for legal training (which, as a form of punishment, drew considerable laughter).

I was as enthralled as everyone else in attendance (despite the oppressive heat and humidity) but also felt a small residue of discomfort. What was most obvious about the event was its genial but preordained – although not thoughtless – weighting in favour of Shylock (which the opening speeches by Abraham made clear). The 're-trial' was good fun and good theatre, and it would have been ridiculous to expect anything but a verdict in Shylock's favor; the antisemitism that has been part of the play's performance history required no less. Likewise, the legal decision that the contract had been entered into only as a "merry bond" and that this condition could not be retroactively changed was a brilliant legalistic stroke. So, real life intervened to right the wrongs perceived in the dramatic fiction, and the present corrected the past.

But the small business of Shylock's attempting to use the legal system to commit murder was conveniently left out of the question (as was the larger issue of treating another human being as chattel, to which Shylock himself alludes in mentioning slavery). Thus, the decision to return Shylock's money and to restore the conditions *ante* the bond gives Shylock a pass (goodbye the legal principle that he who seeks equity must do equity) along with everyone else. Treating the trial scene as if it were a real legal proceeding brought forth a certain kind of justice but left out another, perhaps a little like the make-believe original that it critiqued. The re-trial advanced according to principles of law, which, albeit playfully managed, entailed their own silence regarding the moral nuances of action and character. Outside of the celebratory nature of the occasion, there lingered the sense that legalisms could not get at certain issues raised by drama any better than the drama could obey the strictures of a real legal setting – and such an impression was perhaps an unexpected value arising from the San Rocco event. That creative paradox, the interlocking relatedness of, but mutual resistance between, fiction and history, seems at the heart of *The Merchant 'in' Venice*.

Fiction weaves a tapestry of hypotheses and multivalent truths that are not the aim of historiography; literature is justified on its own terms. Even more, fictional works such as *The Merchant of Venice* are not static or socially remote; they intervene in history, refashion the past, express our sorrow, redirect our thinking for the future, marshal our good will and resolve. They facilitate our talking together,

globally, about a better world, dreaming it into existence – and even their deficiencies can serve that purpose. Indeed, they make it possible to submit a fictional trial to a virtual re-trial, to refashion the outcome, as in a sequel or adaptation. Because of the richness of his work, Shakespeare offers, again and again, one of the best places from which we can reason about our problems. At present, we are witnessing much excellent theorising about the value of literature and of the humanities; we need those defenses. But what Bassi's *Shylock Project* and *The Merchant 'in' Venice* show us is that subjects within the humanities can be not only thought-provoking for the academy but also compelling for the greater public when we present them with scale, imagination and boldness.

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