

# Shylock, Our Contemporary

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**Abstract** Offering a personal reflection on the experience of seeing ‘seven Shylocks on a single day’ in Venice in the summer of 2016 this essay takes the form of an itinerary through three separate events related to the 500th anniversary of the establishment of the Ghetto of Venice. Footage of Laurence Olivier at the Doge’s Palace, the performance of the “Hath not a Jew Eyes?” speech in a “Mock Appeal: Shylock v. Antonio”, and the five Shylocks who appeared in Karin Coonrod’s production of *The Merchant of Venice* performed in the Ghetto, inspire a lively review and ironical companion piece to Sinclair’s posthumous anthology, *Shylock Must Die*.

**Keywords** The Merchant of Venice. Shylock. Laurence Olivier. F. Murray Abraham. Mock Appeal: Shylock v. Antonio. The Merchant in the Ghetto.

Believe me, I have no wish to revive traumatic memories, but even so I would like to draw your attention to the two last-minute interventions of the FBI’s James Comey in the 2016 US Presidential campaign.<sup>1</sup>

When Donald Trump hit the stump in the aftermath of Comey’s initial pronouncement on October 28, 2016, I fully expected this triumphant cry to issue from his lips: “A Daniel come to judgement: yea, a Daniel! O, wise young judge, how I do honour thee” (4.1.219-220). The very words, you shall recall, that Shylock utters when Portia – disguised as a Doctor of Law – appears to allow him his infamous pound of flesh. Likewise, when Comey finally announced – on November 6 – that there was no smoking gun after all, I was anticipating Hilary Clinton (or one of her surrogates) repeating Gratiano’s mocking words:

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“A Daniel still, say I, a second Daniel! | I thank thee, Jew, for teaching me that word” (4.1.336-337). Of course, no one said exactly that, but the not-so-distant echo of *The Merchant of Venice*’s climactic scene proved (to me at least) that Shakespeare remains – as Jan Kott put it – our contemporary (Kott 1964). Shylock too, I may add. Probably it escaped your attention, but it was only in 2012 that Florida struck the word ‘shylock’ from state statutes restricting usurious lending practices. I have to admit that as a Jew – albeit a bad one – I was very reluctant to cast Trump as Shylock, but try as I might I had to accept that it was the only way to work the parallel. As a matter of fact, my reluctance to allow Shylock his villainy reflects the wider problem of staging *The Merchant of Venice* in Venice, with Shylock as humanity’s ambassador – or, if you prefer, the goody. In this post-Holocaust age of ours it seems the honourable thing to do. But alas for the elevation of Shylock, the play has a fifth act, in which he is all but forgotten in the rush for reconciliation at Belmont. Like it or not President Trump is Shylock *redux*, and Belmont is the White House he usurps in this alternative universe of ours. From this point of view, his victory is Shylock’s revenge. Accepting Shylock as the baddie does allow us to better see Shylock as Shakespeare saw him. For him the Doge’s verdict, especially the forced conversion – which is wholly abhorrent to us – could well have represented an act of redemption, Shylock’s key to heaven. And what would Trump make of the twinning? Well, he would glory in his outsider status, but he would likely find Shylock’s immigrant status somewhat suspect, and would be happy to learn that the Jew was locked away every night – behind beautiful, beautiful walls – in the world’s original ghetto.

Last July I went to Venice to participate in the quincentennial commemoration of its founding, and to check out Shylock on his home turf. It is true that I had seen many Shylocks, over the course of several years, both in London and in Stratford-upon-Avon. But never before had I seen seven Shylocks on a single day. You could object that it was no accident, that I had been on the lookout; Shylocking around, so to speak. Even so you have to admit that it is a lot of Shylocks. Let me count them for you: the first was in the Doge’s Palace, notional scene of the infamous ‘pound of flesh’ trial, and its vexing conclusion; the second was in the Scuola Grande di San Rocco, an equally unlikely venue; while the remainder were all in the Ghetto, exactly where you’d expect to find a man like Shylock.

Taken together these three locations formed the stations of an extraordinary day for Shylock and Shylock-watchers: Wednesday, July 27, 2016; itself the climax of two summers of events, orchestrated by Professor Shaul Bassi of Ca’ Foscari University of Venice.

On March 29, 1516 the then Doge – Prince Leonardo Loredan – signed the decree setting aside an area designated to segregate La Serenissima’s ‘precious’ Jews (precious because of their necessary



**Figure 1** F. Murray Abraham delivers Shylock's "Hath not a Jew...?" speech. Seated: James Shapiro and Stephen Greenblatt. © Alessandro Grassani

role as moneylenders), at that time primarily refugees from the Iberian Peninsula. This may not sound terribly hospitable, but it was a big improvement on what Spain and Portugal had to offer. As it turned out the Doge's Palace was the best place to commence my crash course in Ghettoology, being host that summer to an exhibition entitled *Venice, the Jews, and Europe 1516-2016*. Shylock - impersonated on film by Sir Laurence Olivier, no less, from his National Theatre performance in London in 1970 - was an integral component, of course. Flickering on a screen - like some shade in Hades - he was condemned to endlessly repeat his most famous speech. And what a beautifully constructed thing it is, its architecture fully exposed by Olivier's precise intonation. First there comes anger, which apparently cools and mellows into a lesson on shared humanity, then fizzles up again into revenge with menaces: "The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction" (3.1.65-66). Better watch out Antonio!

Later in the afternoon F. Murray Abraham delivered the same lines - but in the flesh - in the Chapter Room of the Scuola Grande di San Rocco. His rendition - no less affecting than Olivier's - tended to emphasise its demand for equal rights, not to mention Shylock's religion:

I am a Jeeeeew. 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, healed by the same means, warmed and

cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is?  
If you prick us do we not bleed?  
(3.1.53-58)

A wise move, given that Shylock was present in the Chapter Room as the Appellant in a 'Mock Appeal' against the play's original verdict - no pound of flesh, no repayment; on the contrary, forfeiture of property and fortune, and forced conversion.

The location of the 'Mock Appeal' had been well chosen. The Scuola Grande di San Rocco was completed around 1560, four years before Shakespeare's birth. Shortly thereafter Tintoretto won the commission to decorate its inner walls. The canvases in the Chapter Room on the top floor were completed in 1581 (making them contemporary - give or take a decade - with *The Merchant of Venice*). There are three dominant paintings on the ceiling, each depicting a scene from the journey of the Israelites to the Promised Land. Surrounding them are numerous panels illustrating further dramatic moments from the Old Testament. Most pertinent to the present case is the near kinetic re-enactment of the Akedah or the Binding of Isaac. White of hair and beard old Abraham stands centre stage, his arms outstretched, as if posing for a version of the crucifixion. Except that his left hand rests upon the shoulder of his naked son, downcast upon the sacrificial pyre, and his right clutches a murderous blade. The latter is primed to deliver the fatal blow, only to be disarmed at the last by the gentle touch of an angel, a sort of Portia *avant la lettre*.

As is well known, *The Merchant of Venice* is always numbered among the comedies, but only because Portia says - as Shylock is about to make the first cut - "Tarry a little, there is something else" (4.1.301). One wonders what kind of God we would be worshipping had Abraham been permitted to proceed with the slaughter? And what kind of play would *The Merchant* have been had Shylock been granted his pound of flesh? Not a comedy, that is for sure. Let us indulge in a little speculation, a little re-writing. After Antonio's bloody demise Bassanio would likely have taken revenge by stabbing Jessica. What next? Well, if I were Shylock I'd have considered poisoning the wells at Belmont (or 'draining the swamp', if you prefer), which no doubt would have provoked a pogrom and the destruction of the Ghetto. Perhaps Portia did him and his fellow Jews a favour after all. This double-bind is yet another impediment to Shylock's up-grade: either he must surrender his fortune and his identity or become a butcher and - like Christopher Marlowe's Jew of Malta - a mass murderer. It would be interesting to see the judges dig him out of this hole. If they could...

While the ceiling belongs to the Old Testament, the walls are the province of the New, featuring episodes from the life of Christ. Thus, the Chapter Room itself is an emblem of one of *The Merchant's* major conflicts: between the religion of the Son, and the religion of the

Father. Another source of friction is, of course, that between mercy - a quality in which Shylock, as a Jew, is supposedly deficient - and justice. Greeting Antonio at the commencement of the trial the Doge (retitled Duke by Shakespeare) has this to say:

I am sorry for thee. Thou art come to answer  
A stony adversary, an inhumane wretch,  
Uncapable of pity, void and empty  
From any dram of mercy.  
(4.1.2-5)

Obviously, the large audience at the 'Mock Appeal' - it felt like a congregation - had come to hear a less partial consideration. Indeed, when the Justices entered at 5.00 p.m. and we were all instructed to rise, I could not help but remember those ancient days when I accompanied my father to Raleigh Close Synagogue on Yom Kippur (always sweltering in my memory) and we men (and boys) in our prayer shawls rose as our rabbi lifted the holy scrolls from the Ark and paraded them down the aisles. The jurists who marched down the aisle of the Chapter Room were almost worthy of similar respect. First among them was the Honourable (and diminutive) Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Associate Justice, Supreme Court of the United States. She was followed by four others: John R. Phillips, US Ambassador to Italy, Professors Laura Picchio Forlati of Padua and Richard Schneider of Wake Forest University, and finally Avvocato Fabio Moretti of Venice. They took their seats before a structure that looked strangely like the Ark of the Covenant.

A Florentine, Manfredi Burgio, represented Shylock. His chief weapon was anachronism, comparing the Alien Statute (Portia's invention, he concluded, having found no evidence for its existence outside the play) - under which Shylock is first sentenced to death for threatening the life of a native Venetian, then, when his life is spared, paupered (although in fact, half his wealth is returned to him) - to Mussolini's Racial Laws, which deprived Shylock's co-religionists of their rights, jobs, assets and lives. (Of 246 deportees from the Venetian Ghetto between December 1943 and August 1944, only eight returned). The judgement against his client, Burgio concluded, "should therefore be reversed *in parte qua*". Jonathan Geballe, speaking on behalf of both Antonio and Portia, would have none of this: "The Court needs to question the fairness of measuring the legal correctness of the proceedings in the 16th century court [...] by standards developed over the hundreds of years which have passed". Besides, he added, Venice was "markedly tolerant and accepting towards Jews for its time", permitting them religious freedom, albeit within the confines of the Ghetto. He pointed to the finale of Shylock's great speech and argued that the Appellant attended the trial with murder in mind. Why else, he asked, "whet his knife so

earnestly"? Mario Siragusa, lawyer for both the Republic of Venice and Antonio, was of a like mind: "My first comment is that it would not be appropriate to approach the matter with our contemporary sensibility, schooled by history to the atrocious outcome of anti-Jewish prejudice and persecution in the twentieth century". Instead, he proposed sticking to Venetian law circa 1570.

The aforementioned were the sort of smart-aleck legal minds (I mean this as a compliment) who make you change your opinion at every twist and turn, but when all was said and done, I felt that Shylock would be lucky to win the 'Appeal'. While the judges retired to deliberate, the platform was given over to two professors, James Shapiro and Stephen Greenblatt, who had twenty minutes in which to turn the spotlight from law to literature, from the court to the theatre. They proved to be a fine double act; if they wanted a stage-name they could call themselves 'Shablatt'. One - maybe Shapiro - asked us to consider Portia's motives once she has heard Bassanio - her new husband - declare that he would gladly sacrifice his life and that of his wife to save Antonio. Should she then abet Antonio's murder, thereby rubbing out a rival, but also running the risk of poisoning her marriage with the gruesome memory of his martyrdom, or should she rescue him, with the attendant danger of his continuing presence? Another - I forget which - referred to the anxieties contemporary productions of *The Merchant of Venice* still create, especially in the United States. He recalled an early rehearsal for the 2007 production in which F. Murray Abraham proved himself "one of the great Shylocks of our age". Entering the rehearsal room Shapiro or Greenblatt spotted a stern-looking man sporting a yarmulke and pegged him as a spy from the Anti-Defamation League, only to be disabused when he arose - pat on cue - and said: "Three thousand ducats, well" (1.3.1). This led to the recollection of a production by the Cameri Theatre of Tel Aviv, which was in rehearsal when Baruch Goldstein massacred nearly three dozen Muslims at prayer in Hebron, an act which prompted the recasting of Shylock as a West Bank settler who, becoming radicalised, turns both rabbinic and rabid. Jan Kott was right, as if there were any doubt. Shakespeare is our contemporary.

We all rose again when the Judges returned. Their ruling was unanimous according to Justice Ginsburg: the bond - the pound of flesh - was dismissed as a jest, one that no court in its right mind would grant; Antonio was ordered to repay his loan (though he was spared interest upon it); Shylock's fortune was restored; and his conversion revoked, on the grounds that Antonio, as defendant, had no right to demand it. What could I say? It was Shylock's lucky day. Furthermore, the court had a particularly harsh reprimand for Portia (though here there was one dissenting voice), perhaps because she acquired her doctorate in less than a week. Anyway, she was required to attend law school at the University of Padua, and further to pursue a Master of Law degree at Wake Forest.



**Figure 2** Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg presides over Shylock's 'Mock Appeal' with fellow judge Laura Picchio Forlati. © Alessandro Grassani

The proceedings were rounded off with an invitation from Arrigo Cipriani - owner of Harry's Bar - to endless Bellinis in the vast hall downstairs. This itself was a subtle act of reparation. Writing a brief history of Harry's Bar, Mary Hemingway recorded the following: "As it did to all European hotel and restaurant owners, World War II brought Cipriani [Arrigo's father, Giuseppe] varied and serious problems. Because visiting Americans and British had frequented Harry's Bar, local Fascists spread the word that Cipriani was anti-Fascist and painted a slogan on the building, 'Chiuso per disinfezione' (Closed for disinfection). To his dismay, he was ordered to put up a sign inside: 'Jews not welcome'" (Hemingway 1967).

Professor Greenblatt or Shapiro was right; any given production of *The Merchant of Venice* causes disquiet, especially when that production is in the Ghetto itself. On this occasion the fear did not concern possible charges of antisemitism, but actual charges by armed antisemites. To protect the audience, squads of soldiers were stationed at the Ghetto's entrances, while other teams patrolled its two squares. In addition, a permanent observation post had been established immediately before the Holocaust memorial, with its brick wall, barbed wire, and metal reliefs of humanity *in extremis*. Bleachers had been raised in the Campo de Ghetto Novo. To my mind the most notable feature of the production, apart from its setting (which itself was enhanced by the fading of day into twilight, and the merging of twilight into night, whereupon the chorus of cicadas ceased its chirping), was the fact that

Shylock's role was taken by five different actors. For once it almost made sense of Portia's question upon entering the courtroom, "Which is the merchant here, and which the Jew?" (4.1.170), because we were not 100% sure ourselves. Shylock's most famous lines were lent to Jenni Lea-Jones, who would have us believe that her character had been driven to breaking point, an impression confirmed when she discovered that her daughter had eloped with a Christian, and her keening caused lights to go on in the Ghetto's darkened windows. Explanations for the multiple casting were provided in the programme by various members of the playing company, Compagnia de' Colombari. Its dramaturg, Walter Valeri, put it this way: "We felt an almost 'natural' duty to commit dramaturgical heresy, to transfer Shylock into the body of five actors, make him slip out of his single, unique skin to underscore how each one of us is indeed Shylock". Personally, I would dispute that, unless Mr. Valeri knows something about me that I do not. But, in truth, such an objection was to miss the point of the production. Its director - Karin Coonrod - did not invite her audience to feel, or even to laugh very much (though the play is nominally a comedy, and - in this instance - included fine episodes of *commedia dell'arte*), but to think.

The performance concluded not with the traditional harmony in Belmont but with each cast member repeating Shylock's challenge: "Are you answered?" (4.1.61). Actually, an answer of sorts did appear - like the writing on the wall - spread across several of the Ghetto's tenements: the Hebrew word, *Rahamim*, whose meaning is Mercy. It was all very well for Portia (in this instance Linda Powell) to recite her beautiful lines on how "The quality of mercy is not strained: | It dropeth as the gentle rain from heaven" (4.1.180-181), but precious little of it fell upon this production's Shylock. Was there one law, then, for Christians, and another for Jews? Were we to be granted justice, but no mercy, because mercy is so alien to us? You could even argue, I think, that such a distinction inspired the very first ghetto, with its unique rules (including a curfew and locked gates). And now we were back there again, in some numbers, insisting that mercy is an essential component of Judaism. My contribution is Exodus 25:21, which places the 'mercy seat' above even God's holy writ.

Let our contemporaries take note, and let the theologians and the lawyers discuss the issue till the last dot of recorded time, the last hurrah belongs to Shakespeare (400 years dead), creator of the world's most famous Venetian.

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