Wrestling with Shylock

Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* occupies a unique place in world culture. The fictional, albeit iconic, character of Shylock has been interpreted as exotic outsider, social pariah, melodramatic villain, and tragic victim. The play, which has been performed and read in dozens of languages, has served as a lens for examining ideas and images of the Jew at various historical moments. In the last two hundred years, many of the play’s stage interpreters, spectators, readers, and adapters have themselves been Jews, whose responses are often embedded in literary, theatrical, and musical works. This volume examines the ever-expanding body of Jewish responses to one of Shakespeare’s most complex and popular plays.

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Wrestling with Shylock

*Jewish Responses to The Merchant of Venice*

Edited by

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To our families – past, present, and future
Contents

List of illustrations  ix
List of contributors  xii
Acknowledgments  xviii
Preface  xxii

PART I  INTRODUCTIONS

1 Literary Sources and Theatrical Interpretations of Shylock
   Michael Shapiro  3
2 The Anti-Shylock Campaign in America
   Edna Nahshon  33

PART II  DISCOURSES

3 Shylock in German-Jewish Historiography
   Abigail Gillman  51
4 Yiddish Shylocks in Theater and Literature
   Nina Warnke and Jeffrey Shandler  74
5 Lawyers and Judges Address Shylock’s Case
   Richard H. Weisberg  105

PART III  THE STAGE

6 David Belasco’s 1922 Production of The Merchant of Venice
   Mark Hodin  119
7 New York City, 1947: A Season for Shylocks
   Edna Nahshon  140
Contents

8 The Merchant of Venice in Mandatory Palestine and the State of Israel 168
Shelly Zer-Zion

9 Fritz Kortner and other German-Jewish Shylocks before and after the Holocaust 198
Jeanette R. Malkin

10 Evoking the Holocaust in George Tabori’s Productions of The Merchant of Venice 224
Sabine Schülting

11 The Merchant of Venice on the German Stage and the 1995 “Buchenwald” Production in Weimar 243
Gad Kaynar-Kissinger

12 Recasting Shakespeare’s Jew in Wesker’s Shylock 273
Efraim Sicher

13 Jewish Directors and Jewish Shylocks in Twentieth-Century England 291
Miriam Gilbert

Part IV Literature, Art, and Music

14 Zionism in Ludwig Lewisohn’s Novel, The Last Days of Shylock (1931) 319
Michael Shapiro

15 Jessica’s Jewish Identity in Contemporary Feminist Novels 337
Michelle Ephraim

16 Christian Iconography and Jewish Accommodation in Maurycc Gottlieb’s Painting, Shylock and Jessica 359
Susan Chevlowe

17 Shylock in Opera, 1871–2014 381
Judah M. Cohen

Part V Postscript

18 Shylock and the Arab–Israeli Conflict 413
Edna Nahshon

Index 424
Illustrations

Figures

1 Title page of the First Quarto of Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, 1600.  
   page 15
2 Charles Macklin as Shylock.  
   18
3 Edmund Kean as Shylock.  
   23
4 Henry Irving as Shylock.  
   25
   35
6 Title page of the English translation of Georgio Leti’s *The Life of Pope Sixtus the Fifth*, 1779.  
   39
7 Title page of *Biographia Dramatica*, 1812.  
   40
8 Title page of Isaac Gomez, *Selections of a Father for the Use of His Children*, 1820.  
   41
9 Title page of collected writings by Isaac Harby, published posthumously.  
   43
10 Jacob P. Adler as Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* (1903).  
    page 81
11 Aizyk Samberg as Shylock in Riga.  
    83
12 David Belasco, the “Bishop of Broadway.” *A souvenir of Shakespeare’s The merchant of Venice: as presented by David Belasco at the Lyceum Theatre, New York, December 21, 1922* (1923).  
    121
13 David Warfield as Shylock. *A souvenir of Shakespeare’s The merchant of Venice: as presented by David Belasco at the Lyceum Theatre, New York, December 21, 1922* (1923).  
    124
14 Donald Wolfit as Shylock.  
    144
15 Director Peter Frye in his study.  
    150
16 *Shylock and His Daughter* (1947). Handbill.  
    156
List of illustrations

17 Shylock and His Daughter (1947) at the Yiddish Art Theatre. 158
18 Aharon Meskin as Shylock, The Merchant of Venice, Habima, 1936. 170
19 Shimon Finkel as Shylock, The Merchant of Venice, Habima, 1936. 171
20 Aharon Meskin as Shylock, The Merchant of Venice, Habima, 1939. 172
21 Shimon Finkel as Shylock, The Merchant of Venice, Habima, 1959. 173
22 Avner Hizkiyahu as Shylock, The Merchant of Venice, Cameri Theatre, 1972. 174
23 Yossi Graber as Shylock, The Merchant of Venice, Cameri Theatre, 1994. 175
24 Yaacov Cohen as Shylock, The Merchant of Venice, Habima, 2012. 176
25 The Merchant of Venice at the Habima Theatre, 1936. The trial scene. 186
26 Fritz Kortner as Shylock in the 1924 Vienna production, directed by Max Reinhardt. 212
27 Fritz Kortner as Shylock in the trial scene of the 1968 Austro-German television version of The Merchant of Venice. 219
28 Rudolf Schildkraut as Shylock in a production directed by Max Reinhardt, 1905. 252
29 Albert Basserman as Shylock. 253
30 Ernst Deutch as Shylock, 1957. 257
31 The Merchant of Venice at the Weimar National Theatre, 1995. 266
32 The Merchant of Venice at the Weimar National Theatre, 1995. 267
33 The Merchant of Venice at the Weimar National Theatre, 1995. 268
35 Laurence Olivier as Shylock and Anthony Nicholls as Antonio. National Theatre production. 295
36 David Suchet as Shylock in the trial scene, watched by Gratiano (Arthur Kohn) and Bassanio (Jonathan Hyde). Royal Shakespeare Company production (1981). 300
37 Shylock (Antony Sher) is attacked by Salerio (Michael Cadman) and Solanio (Gregory Doran). Royal Shakespeare Company production (1987). 305
List of illustrations


39  Arthur Szyk illustration of Shylock in bed, attended by his daughter Jessica and her three sons.

40  Arthur Szyk illustration of Dona Gracia and Joseph Nasi.

41  Shylock gives Jessica the keys to his house, Act 2, Scene 3. Engraving, c. 1830s, anonymous.

42  Maurycy Gottlieb, Shylock and Jessica, 1876, oil on canvas, 150 × 115 cm, lost painting.

43  Gustave Doré, The Judas Kiss, from the Holy Bible.

44  Maurycy Gottlieb, Ahasver, 1876, oil on canvas, 63 x 53 cm, Laboratory Stock National Museum in Kraków.


47  Georg Goldberg, after Heinrich Hofmann, Der kaufmann von Venedig (The Merchant of Venice, Act 2, Scene 5), 1876, engraving, published in Friedrich Pecht, Shakespeare-Galerie (Leipzig: F.A. Brockhaus, 1876).

48  Ciro Pinsuti, Il Mercante di Venezia title page from the published score (G. Ricordi, 1875).

49  André Pernet as Shylock, in Hahn’s Le Marchand de Venise (Le Ménestrel, March 29, 1935, 3).

50  Shylock theme from the overture of Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco’s 1961 opera Il Mercante di Venezia/The Merchant of Venice (Milan: Ricordi, [1961]), 1.

Table

1  Opera Adaptations of The Merchant of Venice.
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images and illustrations included in this volume. Memory being fallible, we have undoubtedly failed to mention some who were a part of the collective effort that underlies this book; for those omissions we apologize.

On a more personal note, we wish to thank those closest to us. Edna writes: I thank my husband Gad for being there for me, and my son Ken and daughter-in-law Leslie for bringing to the world Zoe Nahshon. Born on December 22, 2015, she has enriched our lives beyond measure and brought us all much happiness and joy. Michael writes: my children, children-in-law, and grandchildren have brought me great joy and have helped me to keep my life in balance by reminding me of what matters most. My wife, Elizabeth, always my first reader, has for over half a century been my beloved and loving companion in so many ways that, in Lorenz Hart’s words, “If they asked me I could write a book.”
Preface

In 1960, a global wave of anti-Semitic incidents led Orson Welles, known for his daring Shakespeare productions, to cancel his plans to star in The Merchant of Venice even though playing Shylock had been his lifelong ambition. He had been thwarted twice, he said. First, “a man called Hitler made it impossible,” and now, again, he felt he needed to give up the project as “hate merchants started scribbling swastikas all over the place,” referring to the onslaught of synagogue desecrations that had begun on Christmas Day 1959 in Cologne, Germany. Welles stated that though he was “a Christian and not a Jew” yet again he felt that the time for performing Shylock “was out of joint.” Making a clear distinction between the written and the performed word, the actor stated: “until all the church walls are clean – and safely clean, too – I think Shylock, with his Jewish gabardine, his golden ducats and his pound of flesh, should be kept on the book-shelves until a safer epoch.”

Fast forward to 2013.

A highly favorable review of a production of The Merchant of Venice at Canada’s prestigious Stratford Festival begins as follows:

There’s a new Shakespeare play premiering on the Stratford Festival’s mainstage. It’s called The Tragedy of Shylock.

Or rather, it’s that old anti-Semitic comedy, The Merchant of Venice, skillfully reshaped by Stratford artistic director Antoni Cimolino and actor Scott Wentworth into a melancholy meditation on prejudice and ignorance.

Even if you don’t agree that *Merchant* is anti-Semitic, you still have to concede that it’s a comedy about anti-Semites in which the Christians rule the day.\(^3\)

A “re-trial” of Shylock, presided over by Chief Justice Beverley McLachlin of the Supreme Court of Canada, followed soon after the Stratford production. Sheila Block, a “seasoned litigator” who represented Shylock, argued that her client had suffered an injustice at the hands of the justice system, which put him “in the company of other famous cases of people wrongly convicted.”\(^4\) The journalist concluded: “Anyone expecting a learned ruling from the judges on an issue that has split theatre-goers and legal scholars for 400 years was out of luck. This is a decision that would take time to work out – perhaps another 400 years.”

The character of Shylock and the role of *The Merchant of Venice* in channeling and promoting anti-Semitism have engaged Jewish discourse for over 200 years. The wide range of arguments has been bracketed by two contrary opinions: those who have regarded the play as eliciting anti-Jewish sentiments, and those who have downplayed the anti-Semitism accusation as ethnic hyper-sensitivity. Regardless of one’s position in this matter, the historical constancy of the debate demonstrates the issue’s relevance and poignancy.

As this book shows, *The Merchant of Venice*, which is inextricable from its extensive baggage of literary and theatrical interpretations, has been a flashpoint that activates the sensitivities, fears, memories, and hopes encompassed in the Jewish experience as a minority group within a larger, primarily Christian society. The Jewish wrestling with Shylock is therefore always reflective of a specific time and place.

*The Merchant of Venice* has stimulated intense engagement by Jewish writers, directors, actors, and critics. In addition to offshoots, prequels, and sequels in an array of genres, Shylock has also been commented on by means of juxtaposition. In an enlightened Germany the play was twinned with Nathan the Wise (1779), G. E Lessing’s play that features an idealized Jew; in New York in 2007 it was shown back to back with Marlov’s *The Jew of Malta*, with the same actor, F. Murray Abraham, starring as both Shylock and Barabas.

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A subversive strand developed in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s when anti-fascist playwrights used the Shylock tale to counter an increasingly anti-Semitic climate. Best known among these is Walter Mehring’s *Der Kaufmann von Berlin*. Staged in 1929 by Erwin Piscator, the production played while the SA patrolled in front of the theater building. After the Holocaust the play was reinterpreted and revised perhaps most radically by George Tabori and Peter Zadek to reflect the recent Nazi past. In 2016 the British writer Howard Jacobson, a notable figure in English letters and a Jew, published *Shylock Is My Name*, a novel issued on the occasion of the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare’s death. Jacobson explained the impetus for the book:

For an English novelist, Shakespeare is where it all begins. For an English novelist who also happens to be Jewish, *The Merchant of Venice* is where it all snarls up. “Who is the merchant and who is the Jew?” Portia wanted to know. Four hundred years later, the question needs to be reframed: “Who is the hero of this play and who is the villain?” And if Shylock is the villain, why did Shakespeare choose to make him so?”5

A similar sentiment was expressed by American director/playwright Aaron Posner, who in 2016 prepared a radical rewrite of *The Merchant of Venice* for the Folger Theatre in Washington DC. He explained: “If you’re a Jewish director of Shakespeare, as I am, it’s inevitable that you’re going to engage with ‘The Merchant of Venice.’”6 The play, titled *District Merchants*, takes place in Washington circa 1870. It focuses on issues of gender, race, and class, and its characters are primarily Jews and African-Americans.

Numerous books and learned articles have been written about *The Merchant of Venice*, but none has focused exclusively on the responses it elicited from Jews, the people who were most directly affected by it. Not aspiring to compile a reference guide to Jewish responses to the play, the editors of this book chose to focus on a selected number of works created in response to the Jewish aspect of *The Merchant of Venice*. It is our hope that this collection of essays will inspire the study of other works created by Jews who felt compelled to address the Jewish aspect of this play in a variety of styles, genres, and languages.

Addressing Leah, his deceased wife, Howard Jacobson’s latter-day Shylock elucidates his unique position in Jewish life:

These Jews, Leah, these Jews! They don’t know whether to cry for me, disown me or explain me. Just as they don’t know whether to explain or disown themselves.7

It is this very existential and open-ended discourse this book wishes to address.

Edna Nahshon