

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.

Edna Nahshon is Professor of Theatre and Drama at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City and Senior Associate at Oxford's Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies.

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Jewish Responses to The Merchant of Venice

Edited by

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To our families – past, present, and future

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the Israel Science Foundation for her research project, “Triangulation: Jewish Cultural Markings in German and American Theatre” (2005–9); and, together with Eckart Voigts, from the German Lower Saxony-Israel Joint Project for their current research project, “Hyphenated Cultures: Contemporary British-Jewish Theatre” (2016–19).

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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 life-long 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.¹ 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.”²

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.

¹ Howard H. Ehrlich, “The Swastika Epidemic of 1959–1960: Anti-Semitism and Community Characteristics,” *Social Problems* 9:3 (Winter 1962), 264–72.

² Leonard Lyons, “Lyons Den,” *Chicago Defender*, January 27, 1960, 11. See also Hedda Hopper, “Looking at Hollywood,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 20, 1960. Quoted also in Morris U. Schappes, letter to the editor, *New York Times*, February 4, 1981, A22.

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 Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, with the same actor, F. Murray Abraham, starring as both Shylock and Barabas.

³ Martin Morrow, "The Merchant of Venice's Shylock is Realigned for a Modern Audience," *Globe and Mail*, August 16, 2013, available at www.theglobeandmail.com.

⁴ Karin Wells, "Shakespeare in Court: Shylock's Appeal Heard at Stratford," *CBC News*, January 5, 2014, available at www.cbc.ca.

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.

⁵ Kunal Dutta, "Howard Jacobson Takes on 'Anti-Semitism' in Rewrite of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*," *Independent (London)*, September 9, 2013, available at www.independent.co.uk.

⁶ Quoted in Geoffrey Himes, "Coming to the Folger: The Merchant of ... D.C.?" *Washington Post*, May 26, 2016, available at www.washingtonpost.com.

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

⁷ Howard Jacobson, *Shylock Is My Name* (New York: Random House, 2016), 191–92.