

Seminar 21: New Perspectives on *The Merchant of Venice*:
Text, Performance, and Adaptation
Leader: M. Lindsay Kaplan

Jonathan Baldo, Eastman School of Music of the University of Rochester

“Art thou contented, Jew?”: Rival Economies of the Subject in *The Merchant of Venice*

The Merchant of Venice presents two models of the subject, roughly equivalent to the rival terms with which money is lent in the play. One model might be characterized as subjecthood without growth or accrual of interest: a stable, steady-state idea of the subject that the play associates with Belmont. Its word for fulfillment is “contentment,” and its object, the containment of desire. An opposing model runs parallel to Shylock’s practice of usury. Its signal word for fulfillment is “satisfaction.” Affectively, in this largely Venetian model, the subject is not satisfied to come out even, but rather pursues a measure of satisfaction beyond that of having evened the score. The Venetian subject expects a significant return on its emotional investments. These two models of the subject—the Belmontese, which defines fulfillment as contentment, and the Venetian, which measures fulfillment in terms of degrees of satisfaction—constitute the basis for the larger agon in the play, issuing from a breach internal to early modern English culture, one produced by an economy increasingly oriented toward the accumulation of profit.

Joel Benabu, University of Toronto

“*The Merchant of Venice* and the question of anti-Jewish sentiment”

My paper examines the question of anti-Jewish sentiment in *The Merchant of Venice*. It argues that if *The Merchant* is adduced as evidence of Shakespeare’s anti-Jewish sentiment, then he ought to be seen to be expressing an anti-Scottish prejudice in *Macbeth*, inferring in *Hamlet* that all Danes have problems in making up their minds, and demonstrating his racial prejudice in *Othello*. When all is said and done, Shylock is a character, and as such cannot be a Jew. A Jew is a person of flesh and blood, not a literary creation. The arguments I present relate, principally, to theatricality and to reading plays for the stage, not to biography or sociology. I begin with one question, and at the close, I hope to leave you with others.

Anthony Burton, University of Massachusetts Amherst

“*The Merchant of Venice*: The devil may be in the details, but so is everything else”

The first act of *Merchant* introduces the characters in a more complex and revealing manner than generally acknowledged. Stating the significant themes to follow much as we find in a musical composition, it introduces Antonio, Shylock and Portia successively in parallel but complex ways. In a very old fashioned close reading of the text, I will argue that casual remarks and on-stage companions of each in turn are no less important than the declared narrative theme; and I will explore briefly the way they anticipate and illuminate what follows, often casting doubt or at least new light on many received but superficial assumptions about characters and outcomes.

Sara Coodin, University of Oklahoma

“Jessica, Women’s Activism, and Maurice Schwartz’s 1947 *Shayloks Tochter*”

Maurice Schwartz’s critically acclaimed hit 1947 Yiddish-language adaptation of Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, entitled *Shayloks Tochter*, dramatizes the plight of Shylock’s daughter, a young, social justice-minded woman whose movement away from her traditional Jewish household into the world is tragically disrupted by the pressures exerted by both Christian and Jewish religious communities. I discuss how Schwartz’s play uses Jessica’s story to address the changing role of Jewish women in the North American diaspora, focusing on women’s emerging roles as social activists and labour organizers in the first half of the 20th century in North American cities like New York, Chicago, and Winnipeg.

Dr. Benjamin Fowler, University of Sussex

“New Perspectives on *The Merchant* in Munich”

This paper looks at a recent German production of a play pregnant with discrimination and the violent clash of ideological perspectives and projections. It argues that the very ambiguity of the text renders it an echo chamber for contemporary moral and mental situations. Nicolas Stemann’s 2015 production for the Munich Kammerspiele literally transforms the play into a series of textual surfaces that, working in constant counterpoint with the actors, cause multiple forms of exclusion to resonate (not least in the sections that present Shylock as a Muslim figure). Contextualising Stemann’s approach with reference to other directors’ attempts to resist the play’s textual anti-semitism from within, my paper explores the implications of Stemann’s strategies, aimed as they are at putting Shakespeare’s “comedy” itself on trial.

Marissa Greenberg. The University of New Mexico

“Adaptation and Ethics in *The Merchant of Santa Fe*”

The Merchant of Santa Fe, a radical multilingual adaptation of Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, was written and performed in 1993 amid a flurry of interest in New Mexican Crypto-Jewry—both historical *conversos* who continued to practice their ancestral faith and their modern-day descendants. The play dramatizes the performances of normative culture by which these hidden Jews adapted to their situation in Inquisitorial New Spain. In doing so, *Santa Fe* also presents the challenges to and prospects for authentic identity and peaceful cohabitation to which these cultural adaptations give rise. Taking my cue from Judith Butler’s discussion of Jewish geo- and identity politics in *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (2012), I argue that *The Merchant of Santa Fe* offers a model for ethical relations between Jew and non-Jew based in the Crypto-Jew’s adaptations to the dominant culture and of its grand narratives. This model, which emerges alongside the play’s overt and repeated displacements of *The Merchant of Venice*, does not resolve the longstanding tensions around land and identity in New Mexico; but it offers a way to think about adaptation, both theatrical and cultural, as a source of ethical cohabitation rather than disorientation.

M. Lindsay Kaplan, Georgetown University

“Canon and Civil Jewry Law in *The Merchant of Venice*”

While scholars have employed various bodies of law to interpret *The Merchant of Venice*, none have focused on the canon and civil codes regulating Jews. Given that these are primarily continental regulations, this is not surprising. Yet, a survey of Jewry laws nevertheless reveals how much their logic operates throughout and organizes the play. The Jew’s mixed status as both equal and enemy in canon and civil law clarifies the conflicted dynamics between Shylock and the Venetian Christians. An understanding of the canons proscribing Jews from employing Christian servants, promoting conversion and barring Jews from charging usury of Christians discloses how much these particular legal concerns correlate with the play’s portrayal of Jews. Viewed outside this legal context, the play appears to represent an unsystematic treatment of relations between Shylock and Venetian Christians; however, a consideration of the Jewry codes accords the action a powerful coherence. The proper application of the laws not only serves to protect Christians from Jewish threats but also achieves the goal of these regulations: the long-awaited, much desired conversion of the Jews.

Daniel Moss, Southern Methodist University

“Sirrah Launcelot: *The Merchant*’s Clown in Shakespearean Context”

Who, what, whence are the Gobbos? Of all Shakespeare’s clowns (pending Trinculo and Stephano), the rude father-and-son team of *The Merchant of Venice* most readily offends our liberal sensibilities. While the Gobbos have been marginalized or ignored by many of the play’s defenders, the *Merchant*’s detractors misidentify them as the gross offshoot of the more insidious anti-Semitism favored by the better-bred merchants, ladies, and justicers of Shakespeare’s Venice. Clowning, however, appears too integral to Shakespeare’s other comedies of the period to justify either escape-route, thus the Gobbos linger under-read. This is not to claim that Lancelot and his father are the structural equivalents to Bottom and Quince, but neither are the Gobbos as vestigial as Peter in *Romeo and Juliet* nor the short-lived, anonymous bumpkin of *Titus Andronicus*. For my seminar paper, I will extend my recent work on Will Kempe’s more highly regarded clown roles, to determine the historical and dramaturgical origins of the *Merchant*’s unpleasant clowns, as well as the diverse consequences of earlier audiences laughing at them and with them on the one hand, and later critics despising them on the other.

Katherine Romack, University of West Florida

“‘No Jew of Scotland’: Thomas Jordan’s ‘The Forfeiture’”

My seminar paper offers a sample of the material I have been compiling toward a book project about the transmission and reception of Shakespeare in the later half of the seventeenth century. *The Merchant of Venice* chapter examines the reprinting of the play during the resettlement debate of the 1650s, at Thomas Jordan’s ballad edition (printed in 1663), and at the 1701 Lansdowne adaptation (printed the year the Bevis Marks Synagogue in London was completed).

Here, I focus on Thomas Jordan's ballad version of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, "The Forfeiture: A Romance," first printed in his *A Royal Arbor of Loyal Poesie, Consisting of Poems and Songs. Digested into Triumph, Elegy, Satyr, Love & Drollery*. (1663). Though printed in 1663, the ballad's oblique reference to the scandal surrounding the Jesuit agent Thomas Ramsay, the Scottish "False Jew," suggests a composition date squarely in the resettlement debate of the 1650s. Jordan's ballad adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice* is suggestive of the political uses to which Shakespeare is put in the early 1650s. Jordan's conflation of the Jessica and Portia figures is the product of a commercial sensibility that aligned him with the English commercial faction that so ardently opposed Jewish readmission.

Michael Saenger Ph.D., Southwestern University

"Eichmann in Venice, or the Temporality of Jewishness"

In this paper, I suggest that ideas of gender identity and cultural normalcy are symbiotically constructed in *The Merchant of Venice*. On the surface, identities are presented in binary terms: One is either male or female, native or foreign, Jewish or Christian. But a middle zone, an illusion of equality, and the strategic perception of inscrutability are crucial. Socially articulated power confers the selective permission to transgress these binary arrangements and enact hybrid or ambiguous identities, and the laws of Shakespeare's Venice methodically exclude foreigners from that permission—more so, indeed, than the actual Venice contemporaneous to the play. These asymmetrical arrangements serve to re-engineer and recreate cultural fictions of monstrosity, nativity and generosity that are crucial to the ritual of blood comedy.

Philip Goldfarb Styrt, SUNY Geneseo

"Shylock of Venice"

In this paper I suggest that despite his cultural otherness and his eventual branding as an alien, Shylock conceives of himself as a Venetian. This argument will draw heavily on Shylock's rhetorical strategy in the trial, and especially the significance of his claims upon "the city's freedom," which I argue represents an appeal to a shared Venetian belief in the relationship between Duke's formal inability to deny Shylock's suit and the city's historical liberty from tyranny. I will also suggest that various elements of Shylock's character that have been much-discussed in relation to his Jewishness—the location of his house, his willingness or unwillingness to eat with the Venetians, and so on—also suggest that Shylock considers himself a member of the Venetian community. Finally, I will briefly relate this aspect of Shylock's personality to his daughter Jessica's perspective on Christian Venice, suggesting that his Venetian identity informs her own willingness to "marry out."

Jeanette Tran, Drake University

Abstract: "The means whereby I live": Deep Play in *The Merchant of Venice*

Jeremy Bentham defines deep play as situations where the marginal utility of what one stands to gain is less than the marginal disutility of what one stands to lose. I examine representations of deep play in *The Merchant of Venice* and argue that the play presents a metasocial commentary on the culture's ethos as it relates to risk that goes beyond the lead casket's celebration of hazard. Shakespeare presents audiences with two situations that qualify as deep play: the sealing of the bond between Shylock and Antonio, and the casket game. Both Antonio and Bassanio risk self-destruction by willfully participating in deep play, but their statuses and reputations as insolvent debtors gives shape to the disadvantageous, but ultimately legal, situations in which they find themselves. Their predicaments, and how they respond to them, shed light on a credit and legal system that exposes individuals to a host of financial, emotional and physical risks that demand the development of new instruments and attitudes to manage them. Antonio and Bassanio demonstrate a shared ability to dull themselves to the likely adverse consequences of their actions, and highlight the power and necessity of the illusion of self-determinacy in an emerging mercantile economy where individual profit and security are prioritized, but are also progressively riskier and more difficult to obtain.