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The Merchant of Venice: ‘Set’ in Germany, 1938.

As Bill Gelber writes in his review in August 2016, “it is inconceivable to stage Shakespeare’s comedy today without acknowledging that it relies for its happy ending on the fall of a member of maltreated people” (Gelber, *Early Modern Studies*). My chosen time and place of *The Merchant of Venice* brings this ancient, massive weight to the table, along with a multitude of matters to consider. In placing *Merchant* then and there, one then must ‘sidestep’ the concept of Nazism as the exclusive source of antisemitic prejudice and abuse. World War I’s ‘leadup’ and desires for homogenous ethnic nations in their own designated lands carried over into the interwar years. By the end of the 1930s, “one of the practices used to form a unified nation was the invention of (the various ideas of) the Other”, often using ethnic or racial divisions as the ‘line’ between peoples and their separate nations (Imre, p. 214). In eastern Europe, the “fearful outside Other, represented by the Western powers and the new neighboring states” and the newly invented “fearful inner Other” must both be expelled and defeated to form a unified nation (Imre, p. 214). These nations developed the idea of “the thesis of Jewish occupation” that led to their losses in World War I, and that “the social expansion of the Jews” should be prevented through proactive, extreme, exclusionary measures from the federal level downward (Imre, p. 214). Many of “the writings on *Merchant* after 1945 pretended as if Jewishness and antisemitism had existed only in the past, especially in Shakespeare’s England” (Imre, p. 220).

Antisemitism is an ancient yet contemporary, international issue that rises and falls out of public awareness or common knowledge. The Allies of World War II, for example, did not magically erase centuries of prejudice, segregation, and abuse towards Jewish people through their defeat of the Third Reich or absolve themselves of any prejudice moving forward. Antisemitism is on the rise in the 2020s and while ‘Jewish Joy’ exists, the continuation of struggles based on ‘what ethnic group belongs where’ makes the emphasis of non-Aryan antisemitism crucial to understanding and conflict resolution. Jessica Walker discusses Shylock in concert with the Black Lives Matter movement, asking what are the ‘expected’ or ‘allowed’ forms of protest from groups that have been horrifically abused for centuries. She shows how Jesus Christ and Martin Luther King Jr., as idealized figures that fought oppression, have had their “radical acts of resistance erased, [both] become passively suffering icons, held up as examples to whom Shylock and [Colin] Kaepernick are unfavorably compared to in order to dismiss their complaints” (Walker, p. 46). Her argument begs for people to genuinely attempt emotional understanding of ‘different’ peoples, as each group should be able to resist in equal terms to the force or ability of their oppressors. Theatre, among the most powerful tools of emotional understanding, can utilize the known language of antisemitism (Nazism) and expand into matters that are unfamiliar, but applicable and important.

I wish to construct a framing narrative around a production of *The Merchant of Venice*, where the frame is the actors that then portray those within *Merchant* itself. *Shylock '47* “is a Hebrew-language stage production presented by the Pargod Theatre in New York in 1947”, which featured a framing device that “interrogated the idea of producing *The Merchant of Venice* in the aftermath of the Holocaust” (Nahshon, p. 1). The three acts of this production centered on the actors in the external play combatting antisemitism, among other challenges, across time and

European location while putting on the play. I would like to do something similar, with the actors in the frame being British and/or American college students working within a university's theater department. As Judaism is a combination of an ethnic designation and a religious identity, this production will welcome the spectrum of ethnic, racial, and religious diversity but Shylock and Jessica's 'student actors' must be ethnically or religiously Jewish, as those two students will feel the full weight of persecution for their identity in their time *and* what the two face within *Merchant*. While many productions show "Venice [as] the site of such awful behavior" and Belmont "as a semi-paradise, untouched by weightier matters", I wish to merge the sinister escalation of Nazi policies and views with both locales, showing that there is not a safe space within the world of the play from this prejudice (Gelber). This can be shown effectively through Portia's portrayal as "who constantly displays her own prejudices, whether to Shylock's daughters or to her foreign suitors" (Gelber). The 'setting' of Nazi-influence is not my invention. A single production of *The Merchant of Venice* was put on within the Third Reich, with Jessica "as not the daughter but only as the foster-daughter of the Jew; race-political difficulties, therefore, are cleared out of the way" and German actresses could play Jessica without the shame or indignity of playing a Jewish character (Drakakis).

The 'inner play' of *Merchant* will become increasingly, visually and environmentally under the thumb of the Third Reich and its policies. Like other productions, Antonio will do "very little to arouse our sympathy, embracing his own prejudices completely" (Gelber). Swastika flags will increase in number in the marketplace, Shylock and Jessica will be dressed historically (or stereotypically) as Jewish and be physically out of place with the rest of the Venetians for the entirety of the play. Head coverings, carrying proper items for rituals or prayers, a different color scheme in lighting ensures the audience spots the 'othering' of the two

characters. Unlike the auditory experience in the production at The Globe that Boika Sokolova reviewed, the only music in the production will be Jewish folk music or ceremonial melodies or chanting, there will not be any modern or ‘Christian’ music before, during, or after this production (Sokolova, p. 137).

Additionally, there could be ‘visually Jewish’ extras in scenes that disappear throughout the plot, showing the gradual implementation of Nazi policies. This invites the interpretation that this production is simply working from stereotype (and is thus entirely offensive), but within Shakespeare’s day, Shylock was potentially marked (via a “fiery red wig”) as the treacherous Jew from a known work of Christopher Marlowe, working within easily spotted, stereotypical identification from the beginning (Drakakis). The newer component is calling out the stereotype, or the ‘traditional’ vision of Jewish people as shown through Shylock and Jessica. The ‘student actors’, then, will remark on cementing stereotype and confining the persecution of the Jews into the Nazi setting, while they are prevented from entering spaces freely on their university campus for being ‘othered’ as Jewish in the severe polarization of the Israel-Palestine war. Such scenes in the frame will emphasize the importance of putting on a play “which is fundamentally antisemitic” for the purpose of demonstrating continued prejudice and abuse within the setting of a supposed enlightened, open-minded, antiracist, western country’s university (Nahshon, p.2). As the students rehearse the play, the ‘bully’ individuals’ actions against the students will mirror the mentioned persecution of Shylock by Antonio. Scholars have long discussed the Shylock, “the usurer as the worldly antithesis of all humane Christian values” in a “network of social, political, economic, and theological” conversations that “fuel what we now recognize as displaced forms of racism” (Drakakis). With this awareness of what has ‘already been said’ about portrayal and interpretation of Shylock’s business dealings, this production would have to carefully toe the line

by demonstrating the avoidance of fueling the involved forms of racism through the scenes within the frame.

Aside from the construction of this framing narrative, the changes to *Merchant* go beyond time and place. minor to moderate alterations to the dialogue would be made to build the relationship between Jessica and Lorenzo (both being upstage on Antonio and Shylock's interactions would help) as well as portray both Jessica and Shylock simultaneously as complex, well-intending, and coping with Nazism's terrors in flawed but sympathetic ways. Lorenzo is not a part of Gratiano's womanizing efforts, as previous performances have elaborated on that facet of their kinship, but instead will be a German Christian that will suggest conversion, elopement, and leaving the country to safeguard Jessica's life. In making this change out of concern and necessity in Nazi-controlled regions, it aligns with pre-war moves made by 'mixed' European families and allows the important isolation of Shylock without Jessica despising her father or their shared blood. In this vein, Jessica's conversion and removal from her father's household will be handled more gently, Jessica will not don a blond wig or leather garments like in other productions to show her conversion (Sokolova, 139). In leaving Shylock's house, she will not possess the hatred for her blood or father, instead lightly 'assimilating' with the Christian folk in the play.

Racial policies based on blood entered legislation when the Nazis came to power in the early 1930s, and the ghettoization of Jews in German-controlled regions started in 1938. When Jews were ghettoized or taken to concentration camps, all possessions were taken from their homes, which can be ominously shown through the removal of Shylock's wealth as a facet of his punishment. While no one knew that these measures would devolve into the Holocaust, this time specifically can be used as a demonstration in the shift in policy, and moments throughout

Merchant's plot can be used to foreshadow Antonio's chosen punishment for Shylock. As conversion becomes a lesser option in Germany, it becomes clear that Shylock will be removed from his position in society, his assets seized for 'better use' in the Reich, and the presumed fate of captured Jews in Germany will occur after the curtain falls. Despite Shylock "employ[ing] some of the same techniques of successful social-justice movements: a clear airing of grievances and explicit demands for justice, stated before influential people in public spaces", he receives the social pattern of repercussions for resistance, "erasure and misinterpretation" (Walker, p. 47).

For the trial scene, lines 15-125 of the Duke, Antonio, and Bassanio talking at Shylock remain. Shylock's disposition in this scene, having faced continually accelerating persecution and his daughter fleeing the culture and blood that would have damned her as well, is part resigned, and part devastated. His replies to questions follow the traditional lines, but there is a different tonal impact due to the altered lens on his experiences throughout the play, the excessive show of Nazi power in the courtroom setting (through medallions and Nazi identifiers on everyone but Shylock, swastikas practically wallpaper the set, etc.), and the student actors of the frame influencing the interactions with their own experiences from putting on the play compounding into a poignant, dramatic, one-sided assault. With the Nazi setting of *Merchant*, the repeated labels of Shylock as a dog with "wolvish, bloody, starved, and ravenous" in combination with the letter of the law strictly enforced just to hurt *him*, the Jewish person in the situation, will strike closer to home with the 'well known' circumstance of the Third Reich (5.1.137). The contrast between Antonio, the repeatedly identified Christian, and Shylock, the Jew, is hammering home the point that the system is not for Shylock to use at all, even if he is attempting to do so within Christian society's terms.

This inner play setting was chosen with the knowledge of how the Nazis functioned, exploiting the law and ‘commonfolk’ of Germany to enforce deadly antisemitic policies. The presence of the ‘noble’ characters in this judicial process completely aligns with the bias and blurring of rules that the Nazis had with their fellow friends in power. Portia’s exact interpretation of the law can be questioned for its intent (would she have been so strict if Shylock was not Jewish) because proper German women were encouraged to be just as ideologically focused as the men and often ‘ran things’ in Germany once World War II was underway. All characters piling onto Shylock and demonstrating his lack of choice, freedom, anything in this regime fits in the original setting, but is additionally, heavily applicable in 20th century Germany. With the impact of Shylock’s earlier speech detailing his feelings towards the plot at large, in combination with the massive verbal assault against him in this court, creates the space which Shylock answers questions from in this scene. The exactness of the law, which is used to destroy Shylock in this case, was the only way that Jews and ‘rebel’ Christian neighbors were allowed to sustain themselves prior to the shift towards extinction actions, contextualizing Shylock’s resolve to be exact in his legal defense of himself and request for the execution of his bond. The ‘sideplots’ between husbands and wives in this scene would need to be altered, as Portia and Nerissa would not have to hide their appearances, but whatever form they take, the distractions and self-involvements occurring while Shylock is inching closer to obliteration at their hands is completely Nazi-German behavior. Collectors of Jewish possessions and prisoners would party at night, using what they stole from Jews, and personal friends and families of these perpetrators would live better lives through the process of Jewish devastation. This remains to force audiences to hang onto the dialogue, waiting for the worst to be decided and spoken.

The Duke gives Antonio half of Shylock's assets, estate, wealth, etc., but Antonio's following statement that can make 'who gets what' of Shylock's wealth unclear. In this production, Antonio will get his half and designate the other half as inheritance to Lorenzo and Jessica, a good German Christian couple now. This abuse of power feels like such in the original context, but within a setting of Nazi perversion of power and *clear* favoritism for proper, loyal Germans, it makes 'even more sense'. Additionally, the "mercy" rendered by Antonio including the word inheritance can establish how quickly that portion of the deal will come to pass – through the other facet of Antonio's punishment (5.1.374). Rather than forced conversion, which is increasingly unacceptable according to blood purity laws and social 'unity' in German purity, Antonio will cast Shylock out of town for his desired murder attempt of a good Christian German man of social standing. The phrasing of the rewritten dialogue is entirely up to someone with better Elizabethan language skills than me, but the intent is to have Shylock sent to the labor-turned-death camps in the German eastern territories, where death is practically pre-confirmed by the regime and the knowing German populace. Shylock's line, "I am content," cannot stand as is, with this death sentence following economic robbery and familial isolation (5.1.390). Whether it is the same words with a tone of anger but recognition of powerlessness in the national environment, or the words are crucially altered to reflect an unacceptance of this abuse, a drop in the genocidal bucket of German actions in this setting. Shylock is removed from the courtroom, either restrained by metal or the hold of Gratiano, Bassanio, and/or Antonio.

With the establishment of 'the rest' of the setting and implications of each character, the trial scene is the culmination of the escalation of horrors for Shylock and Jessica. Purposefully, the happiness of the plot's resolutions (the marriages or positive endings for the German characters) will contrast the last sighting of Shylock, who will not appear or be referenced again.

A minor scene showing Jessica and Lorenzo leaving Germany for their safety, now possessing their inheritance, may be added within act five to ‘resolve’ that facet of the plot, but the intention is for the audience to be *stuck* on the ‘ending’ for the Jewish characters. A mention of the factual circumstance that other nations (US and Great Britain included) banned Jewish people immigrating to prevent the ‘issues’ happening in eastern Europe, could prove necessary, but would be instantly resolved by the marriage and conversion to Christianity of Jessica prior to immigration. In Jessica’s final moments (Lorenzo waking ahead), she may “sing the mourner’s Kadish for her father” as has been utilized previously (Gelber). The frame narrative may end with moments of the student actors attempting to emotionally reconcile what they have been performing (thus assuming the traits and motivations of their roles) and what they have lived through at their university. The ending of the inner play and the framing device will both end unsettlingly by design, leaving the audience to think on the ‘true setting’ or ‘circumstance’ that allows and perpetuates antisemitism, whether ancient prejudices can ever be stopped and how, or how the modern environment of technology and online anonymity has allowed for an ‘open fire’ attitude on Jews and other minorities across the globe.

The Merchant of Venice, Germany 1938: Visual Portfolio (Stage)

Image Trigger Warning: Hitler, Nazis, Nazi activities, Jewish ghettos

Given that I've specified that the casting can be as flexible and diverse as the hypothetical director (if not me) wanted from the production (except Shylock and Jessica MUST be either ethnically or religiously Jewish), these images are about the setting or theater environment. Design elements for set pieces, lighting, sound production, and costuming are what is being demonstrated here as I've left most Shakespeare's words alone, except for tone and/or 'implications'.



Everything is high-level Germanic, with any additions of Shylock's house etc. being distinctly different. The 'major' set pieces need to be able to be swapped/moved to create the separate spaces within *Merchant* but also potentially removed to cater to the frame narrative's school setting but that mostly may occur with added dialogue and 'school props'. This image of a staging of *The Sound of Music* is for 'the vibes' of the grand, indulgent architecture that fits the German time and place.



While *Anastasia* is set a decade or so earlier, the flashback sequences serve as proper references to the type of ‘history’ that’s being built through costumes for the inner play, *Merchant*. This show also has insanely powerful light and sound design, which could be utilized to show Shylock’s isolation and literally show him and Jessica in ‘a different light’ as everyone else. There are techniques that can make light and sound menacing, welcoming, sympathetic etc.



This is an image from a staging of *Merchant*, and for purposes of ‘comparison’ between the modern frame and the 1930s inner play setting, I want certain ‘markers’ to be this on the nose. The spray painted, giant yellow Star of David is an example of the visual cues that will Other all Jewish characters at the beginning (Shylock/Jessica/extras) and then *just* Shylock by the end. If Shylock’s home is shown, it needs to be more run down and bare bones to mimic that he is only allowed to deal with financial affairs. By ’38, Jews have been fired/banned from jobs in practically every field (‘social death’ is the literal term from Nazi Germany).



Sorry, it's a literal picture of Hitler speaking at a Nazi Party Rally. But the grandeur, formality, exuberance is such a party of Nazi demonstration of superiority. By the end, there are facets of Nazi Party regalia and military regalia on all characters that aren't 'the Jews'. Student actors that happen to be ethnically German or happen to be Jewish (either ethnically or religiously) are going to have problems with the set and costumes, and that's part of the point. The abuse of a historically Greek symbol that meant 'good fortune' or 'well-being' to do "all this" is part of it all. All non-Jewish characters will be wrapped up in this imagery and complicity, as the Catholic Church was the only power strong enough to resist the Nazi Party in the 1930s, but it chose not to. The Nazis at large were anti-religion/thought they were better than that.



What 'common' Nazis looked like, the higher-ups adorned themselves in a multitude of military ribbons and medals that symbolize their good work for the Reich. Everyone will have at least the armband, those that directly abuse or antagonize Shylock or Jessica may have 'more' going on. Lorenzo could possibly not wear one, because I'm making him more sympathetic towards the heritage of the woman he loves, but it would be a cause of prejudice towards him by

other characters if that is involved. He could wear one, and then take it off after seeing Jessica's reaction to it, that's valuable to consider.



This is an image of the Lodz Ghetto in Poland. This is one of the only pictures I could find that showed the crowding that occurred without having countless dead bodies in the foreground. Ghettos are a problem. Underprovided for by German officers 'in charge', councils of Jewish men were used as the go-between for the Jewish population and the Germans in charge, put in the hardest position possible to save themselves and others. Shylock's residence would be in this type of visual location, the marketplace area where his deals occur can happen in this vicinity. If one wanted to make even more of a statement, he could be on one side of the barbed wire fence while Antonio and Bassanio are on the other. It's a very bad time, also providing the backdrop for Lorenzo and Jessica getting out quickly. The timeline on their mixed marriage/her conversion is a little off but for the play's sake, it needs to still be a component.



The Yellow Badges are in the shape of the Star of David and are embroidered with the word Jude or Juif (Jew, in German). Head coverings and modest dress is part of the Jewish faith, but once in ghettos and concentration camps, people were stripped/minimally dressed and heads were shaved to shame the Jewish people while they were put to labor for the Reich's benefit or

‘in line’ to be killed. As I have chosen to specifically not show Shylock after the trial scene, the badges should be the only applicable part. While this production is delving into the darkest elements of the time, place, experience, there is no reason to gratuitously show his capture, torture in this manner or anything else that follows his sentencing. Audiences get the ‘open ending’ as his assumed death shortly after. I appreciated Jonathan Pryce’s Shylock from one of the performance reviews who acted as if the Holy Water from his conversion was literally burning him like acid, that’s a cool idea, but I felt it was unnecessary to include anything like that in this version (I’d already chosen to do enough).

Works Cited

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