

Wrong in a new way, in a wilderness of monkeys (Program Notes – The Merchant of Venice, SIR 2007)

Fifteenth century England, a barbarous backwater, produced no significant art, literature, exploration or science. Its usually self-centred militaristic kings – do I hear an echo to the south? – ended their failures with the degenerating Henry VIII's inability to conquer France. Then came Elizabeth, Great Harry's daughter, and in her time William Shakespeare, emerging from a burst of unprecedented creativity. Taking language shaped by minds preceding him, he remade it with his own enduring observations, combining old stories from many places with the spirit of his times and reshaping perceptions of humanity like no-one has before or since. **The Merchant of Venice** ("**Merchant**") was one of his lessons "for all time".

First of Shakespeare's "dark comedies", **Merchant** was written by 1596-7, just after **Romeo and Juliet** and its comic inversion, **A Midsummer Night's Dream**. The first scene's "*wealthy Andrew dock'd in sand*", refers to the San Andrés, a Spanish ship captured during the Battle of Cádiz of 1596. This news reached Elizabeth's court by July 30th, so **Merchant** must have been created after that date. **Merchant** has been one of Shakespeare's most well known plays, partly for its messages and partly because it has been one of the most continuously performed.

Like all of William Shakespeare's works, the play is less about place than people. In Harold Bloom's words, our man "invented the human" with his mastery of language and understanding. There is negligible evidence in the Bard's Italian plays that he ever saw that country. Elizabethans, awaking from the parochialism of their recent past, were fascinated by Italy, in particular Venice, but it mostly came to them. Mercantile vessels such as Antonio's had docked and traded along the Thames throughout the 16th century. Shakespeare's London had become home to Italian immigrant physicians, businessmen, restaurateurs and booksellers. Venetian *Commedia dell'Arte* troupes toured the country from at least 1546 and to some extent inspired while they contrasted with English drama. So why Venice specifically as the site for this play? The city was a longstanding successful center of European commerce, admired by newly Protestant Elizabethans as a modern anti-papal oligarchy. Antonio, the seemingly virtuous merchant of the title, is an exemplary Christian capitalist.

Venice of Shakespeare's era was a rat-infested, plague-ridden city of dark labyrinths, penumbrous alleyways and stinking algae-green waterways. Certainly it held splendour, mystery and romance, but our Will, although *the* master of language, mentions none of the city's features that captivated visitors then and now. It is implausible that he would have set two plays therein - (what other is set in Venice?*) – without a single mention of bridges, canals, gondolas, islands, the vast vibrant amphitheatre of the lagoon, or the sonorous bells of distant churches. Instead our playwright creates a "Venice of the mind" by concentrating on atmosphere and behaviour of his characters – and his audience soaked it up. Shakespeare's Venice is thus an illusion, one corner of the endless panorama of his imaginings.

Was Shakespeare, and is the play anti-Semitic? Bloom, hardly a slouch in Bard scholarship and wisdom, calls **Merchant** "a profoundly anti-Semitic work" and goes so far as to assert that "it would have been better for the last four centuries of the Jewish people had Shakespeare never written this play". But he doubts that our - and his - Will was anti-Semitic, as do I, as that would go completely against the character evident throughout his writing. And by the way he knew all about usury, as his own father – very likely a covert Catholic - had been charged twice with violating the law by charging interest rates of 20 and 25%, both "robustly illegal".

T. S. Eliot, as an aside irrevocably anti-Semitic himself, suggested that all we can hope for is **to be wrong about Shakespeare in a new way**. Most Elizabethans were deeply suspicious of Jews, associating them with money lending, usury, and worse, and regarding them as cunning,

devious and untrustworthy. Barabas, in Shakespeare's friend Christopher Marlowe's **The Jew of Malta**, one of six identifiable sources our great borrower used for **Merchant**, was an enormously wealthy "cartoon" villain, a treacherous doctor patient-poisoner ultimately boiled to death in a cauldron.

Anti-Semitism was hardly unique to Shakespeare's era. Jews had been under special protection of royalty, who needed their fiscal services, since the time of Charlemagne. English Jews flourished, traveled throughout Europe and profited through money-lending and mercantilism. Although Jewish bankers and financiers had competition from the Lombards and Templars, some owned great mansions, lived lavishly and ostentatiously in the middle of growing financial districts, and fairly bought the land of clients who frequently defaulted on loans. It has been estimated that this sector held a third of the nation's moveable wealth. They were, at that time England's wealthiest people, yet the most oppressed. Then they were "more or less" expelled from England in 1290 by King Edward I, forbidden on pain of death to return, not to be "more or less" readmitted until Cromwell. No contemporary chronicler took the trouble to explain why! England was in fact the first nation in Christendom to rid itself by law of its entire Jewish population...well almost, as Jews remained in small numbers, typically as "conversos" or "Marranos" (Jews in secret), banned from virtually all occupations except usury which in those times simply meant money-lending for interest. The latter was strictly forbidden to Christians under canon law, until that was eased in 1591, but loaned money was essential for commerce so a symbiotic relationship existed between the two groups, while popular wisdom remained laced with and polluted by anti-Semitic mythology and blame for everything that went wrong.

For throughout human history, in times of economic strain, it has always been convenient to direct blame, envy and rage at whoever is wealthier than oneself. Any objective student of contemporary politics and history will recognize this behaviour as the root of success of "leftist" philosophies and political parties, as well as that of a certain mid 20th century disaffected failed artist and housepainter whose real name was Alois Schicklgruber**. It is noteworthy that during the Third Reich the Nazis sponsored no less than 50 productions of **Merchant**, certainly with no motive of sponsoring inter-racial understanding...as antithetical to them as it would have been to the typical Elizabethan.

In the context of his times, although always careful to keep his personal politics and religion out of sight, Shakespeare demonstrated in **Merchant** liberal humanist philosophy, a counterpoint against the anti-Semitic majority bias. Consider Shylock's plaint in Act 3 Scene 1, the famous "Hath not a Jew eyes" speech. This admonition to what was virtually an entirely Christian audience, including royalty and those of influence, is about prejudice's ugliness, in this case directed against Jews. James Shapiro in **Shakespeare and the Jews** (1996) suggests that **Merchant** "scrapes against the bedrock of beliefs about the racial, national, sexual and religious difference of others...unrelentingly and...honestly.". But Shylock, although formidable and intelligent, was clearly intended to be an odious villain and in his mastery of irony, Shakespeare has Shylock illustrate Shapiro's point through hatred of the devout, likely gay Christian Antonio, while both struggle through their intrinsic sadness. But he wanted his audience to be uncomfortable with Shylock's suffering, however seemingly deserved, *because he was human*. In the end, he leaves the stage silently, in self-abasement. But we tend to forget that the play is intended as a comedy. Original audiences would have laughed at Shylock's forced conversion at the end, as this happened regularly to Jews, who then went on to practice Judaism in secret.

Until the 19th century, Shylock always wore a red wig, linked to pervasive belief as expressed in the medieval Mystery Plays that Judas Iscariot had red hair (while conveniently ignoring that Jesus was Jewish!). So was our Will anti-Semitic? Much as he was "for all time", our man was of his time, but **Merchant** is *almost**** the only effort in his canon with such taint. Shylock is *the* heartless vengeful exemplar of hatred and its results. Shakespeare utterly intends this, showing us by lacing Shylock's lines with hissing, satanic sibilants. Read his speeches aloud,

as they were intended, and listen to their sound and references to spit and venom. “*Th-th-th-three th-th-th-thousand-t-t-t ducats-s-s-s...*”. And if you are in the front row, be prepared to duck...or wear a hat, or if you are on Shylock’s side, a red wig, while using your ears to hear and re-thinking your politically correct sympathy for the nasty creep.

Irony pervades the Shakespearean canon, along with endearing bawdiness too often missed by contemporary directors – nudge nudge wink wink for “*Nerissa’s ring*”, and earlier Shylock’s “*wilderness of monkeys*”. He did it better than anyone before or since. And irony pervaded the life that so obviously he loved. (Talk to me one day about what did him in – not bad reviews!) Our Will was himself a moneylender at least once, terms recorded in a surviving pair of letters in the Stratford Corporation archives, in October 1598, the very year **Merchant** was registered as his own work.

* **Othello, The Moor of Venice**

** Hitler had the Nazi law defining Jewishness rewritten to exclude Jesus and himself.

*** Passing exceptions may be found in **Much Ado About Nothing, Richard II, 1 Henry IV, The Two Gentlemen of Verona** and **Love’s Labour’s Lost**, but in lines that are casual, incidental and almost gratuitous. See Greenblatt for much more on this.

**** It is commonly but incorrectly asserted that Miguel de Cervantes, inventor of the novel with his **Don Quixote**, also died on April 23rd 1616. Catholic Spain had already converted to the Gregorian calendar, so Cervantes actually breathed his last 10 days before the Bard. Feel free to drop that into conversation on your next evening out.

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