

FOREIGN SHAKESPEARE

Contemporary performance

EDITED BY

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Victoria 3166, Australia

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Chapter 14: "Wilson, Brook, Zadek: an intercultural encounter" © Patrice Pavis

First published 1993

Printed in Great Britain at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Foreign Shakespeare: contemporary performance / edited by Dennis Kennedy.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 42025 3

1. Shakespeare, William, 1564-1616 - Stage history - Foreign countries.
2. Shakespeare, William, 1564-1616 - Stage history - 1950-
3. English drama - Appreciation - Foreign countries.
4. Theater - history - 20th century. I. Kennedy, Dennis.

PR2971.F.66F66 1993

792.9'5 - dc20 92-47235 CIP

ISBN 0 521 42025 3

PR 2971
F66 F66
1993

*For Ann
again and always*

*Transformations of authenticity:
The Merchant of Venice in Israel*

Avraham Oz

Rarely has a dramatic piece haunted a whole nation for centuries as *The Merchant of Venice* has the Jews. Shylock has penetrated the Jewish collective identity so deeply that no reader or spectator sensitized to Jewishness can approach Shylock without some sense of personal involvement. Discussing the play in a Jewish classroom often sounds like discussing the lot of an accused person awaiting his verdict in the next room. A few days after my own Hebrew version of the play was first produced on stage (1972), the Israeli Open University applied for the rights to include some passages in one of its newly written courses. That course, however, formed part of neither the drama nor the literature program: it was in Jewish history. More often than any other dramatic character, Shylock has visited the political columns of the Jewish press. A hard-line prime minister earned the name (by non-Jewish enemies) as a derogatory attribute; a Jewish guerilla fighter defended himself before a British court: "I am not a Shylock; I am a freedom fighter!"¹ An Israeli reporter in London compared the British press, urging pardon for John Damiuk (sentenced to death by an Israeli court for atrocities against Jews in a Nazi concentration camp), to the Duke of Venice asking Shylock to show gentle mercy for Antonio (4.1.17-34).² The reporter's title was "Legitimation for Antisemitism 1988," and her main concern was the production of *The Merchant of Venice* by the Royal Shakespeare Company, which she had attended that same week:

From the very outset of the play, under Bill Alexander's direction, it becomes clear that contending Judaism and Christianity are not perceived on equal terms. On the stage background one sees a yellow star-of-David, painted in coarse lines with dripping colour, beside a neat church window with stained glass depicting Christian saints. The Christians are handsome and clean, while Shylock is clad like an oriental Jew in dirty coloured robes, his hair and beard curled, his speech and accent grotesque and

detestable, and even the town's kids chase him, abuse him and spit on him. Antonio spits on him immediately after receiving the loan, and both lender and creditor are obviously enemies and Shylock has good reasons to wish for revenge.³

The journalist admitted that the 400-year-old Shakespearean text "does indeed present Shylock as a bloodthirsty, heartless persecutor," but she did not acquit the director of his responsibility for scenes prone to "legitimize antisemitism." She took particular note of the trial scene; Shylock (played by Anthony Sher, whom she did not forget to identify as "a South African-born Jew") ecstatically donned a *Talit* when about to cut his pound of flesh, and muttered the Hebrew prayer, "Pour thy rage over the gentiles who know thee not!" Knowing the Hebrew words, the journalist could not calm her own rage.

But whereas the reporter's rage sounded genuine, the same production was "scholarly," attacked an Israeli academic, professing "scientific objectivity." The writer, Eli Rozik, had attended what he called "an organized pilgrimage of the London Jewish community . . . to take part in some inexorably recurring ritual . . . to look again and again in the famous Shakespearean mirror and ask themselves again and again how are they reflected in the eyes of their host society."⁴ This anthropological observation did not stop at the audience: it was soon applied to Sher as well, who was identified as "a Jew, born to a family of east European origin," who happens to be "by a happy coincidence . . . also of South African origin," showing solidarity with the sufferings of his newly adopted "compatriots" (ironic inverted commas in text). Sher saw the production as an attack against apartheid, its silent accomplices (his own Jewish parents), and Jewish hypocrisy in general. "The former victims of racism turned racists themselves at their earliest opportunity," Sher was quoted as saying, while Rozik reached his own conclusion: "Surely the typical English reader was delighted to read these words." Having stereotyped the entire "host society" in phrases such as "the open consensus of the English society regarding racism," he noted that "the comparison with the Palestinians is not missing."

But Rozik's main argument had to do with the legitimacy of theatrical interpretation. The director's "line of interpretation" attempted to present Shylock as the victim of Christian racism, but this "is possible only if one abides by certain rules,"⁵ which Rozik

undertook to prescribe. Distinguishing between the presentation of "the play as it is" (an essentialist position taken for granted) and the director's deviations from it, he found the director guilty of "redistributing positivity and negativity between Christians and Jews, mainly between Antonio and Shylock," and diverting the original demonic, motiveless malignity of Shylock into a psychological reaction. The director chose, out of irrelevant historicist motivation, to present Shylock as "the oriental model" (namely, "a Jewish merchant of Turkish origin"). This anthropological model, Rozik argued, is alienated not only from the Christian society on stage but also from the audience: "undoubtedly, in my opinion, the natural tendency of the spectators is to identify with those who uphold the aesthetic and not with those who discard it." Thus the "oriental model" chosen by the director will not do, since racism cannot yield to psychological argumentation. Rozik would have preferred the mythical antisemitic stereotype to the insulting suggestion that "any historical Jew could act like Shylock." But there is still a surprising ending to his story, which seems to him bigger than life: contrary to all his theories, the London Jewish spectators did not protest. "Contrary to anything we know about communication, we were witnessing a miracle. The anti-racist message was taken in . . . without resistance!" It never occurred to the writer that his "rules" themselves contradicted "anything we know about communication"; that perhaps even the "oriental model" could raise some sympathy at Stratford. He opted for another explanation, one which involves conspiracy and magic at once: there is, he suggested, a silent agreement between audience and artists, both of whom "would experience the anti-apartheid message to the point of neglecting [the rules of] theatre itself."⁶

Authorial intention, so radically abused by our academic writer, still frequently haunts directors and audiences in the theatre. It often seems a convenient historical refuge from the high-handed dictates of synchronic contemporary interpretations, into which a good number of classical productions fall nowadays. Furthermore, it is held by many to retain some inherent clue of authenticity which, set against the reality of the present, may capture the *kairos* investing "the revolution of the times."⁷ Sought by both old and new historicists, intention is taken to shed some light on the particular discourse out of which a given work emanated.

It is against this background, then, that the question of "how was

Shylock intended to be" still matters to producers and audiences alike. This worn-out question seems to have embarrassed so many recent writers on *The Merchant of Venice*, that, if hardly able to escape its implications and consequences, they turn their backs upon its blunt wording whenever it awaits them at some dangerous corner. Others, who courageously address themselves to the question, are prone to blame Shakespeare for their own perplexities. Thus we are told by Francis Fergusson that "perhaps Shylock turned out to be more powerful than Shakespeare intended, for at that moment in his career he was not quite in control of the great characters that were taking possession of his imagination."⁸ What this assertion suggests is that there exists a certain measurable model on which an ideal Shylock should rest, and of which the product of Shakespeare is an unintentionally inflated replica. The desirable proportions of a Shylock are dictated by the nature and properties of the play (in this case, mainly by the play's generic classification);⁹ if the play as a whole, say, passes for a romantic comedy, then the character of the killjoy should spoil the fun only as far as the boundaries of romantic comedy will allow. Balance is all, as a good deal of the play's theatrical and critical history would seem to suggest: when Heine wishes to grant Shylock full tragic weight, he finds it necessary to attack fiercely every single member of Venetian society; and when M. C. Bradbrook describes him as a man reduced to a beast, she finds herself obliged to rehabilitate Bassanio from Heine's ferocious attack. This insistence on balance may of course be challenged by arguing for an intuitive attempt on Shakespeare's part to echo the imbalance characterizing the time in which the play was written, foreshadowing the notes of melancholy evident in the *dénouements* of *Much Ado about Nothing*, *As You Like It*, and *Twelfth Night*, or the sober realism that dominates the problem comedies.

The foregoing samples of conflicting interpretations are commonly based, however, on the belief that Shakespeare's view of Shylock and the play can be retraced and is to be taken into account if one wishes to make sense of, and do justice to, *The Merchant of Venice* on stage or in a critical study. But this position is in itself questionable. Even if one assumes that the constraints laid by the text upon the production are definable, it does not necessarily mean that these constraints can be identified with authorial intention. This point is driven home particularly, for instance, by that trend in the hermeneutic approach of which Gadamer is a notable

proponent: "understanding means, primarily, to understand the content of what is said, and only secondarily to isolate and understand another's meaning as such." The "other" referred to is primarily the author, and it follows that

The real meaning of a text, as it speaks to the interpreter, does not depend on the contingencies of the author and whom he originally wrote for ... Not occasionally, but always, the meaning of a text goes beyond its author.¹⁰

There are not many instances in dramatic history which may better illustrate the unbridgeable gap between "intention" and interpretation than the case of the stage history of *The Merchant of Venice* in Israel. Shakespeare could hardly have anticipated the possibility of his play being performed for a Jewish audience, in Hebrew, in a Jewish state: for him, the probability of such a contingency would barely have exceeded that of an audience of fairies watching *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in fairyland (and, presumably, in fairytongue pentameters). It would seem that in such a context the whole question of the author's intention matters little, if at all. It did matter in Israel, however, as the public controversies surrounding each of the four major productions of the play since the establishment of the professional Hebrew stage in the twentieth century attest.

What lends particular interest to this case of stage history is the continuous dialogue taking place between a developing national consciousness – one which at no point could assume indifference towards Shylock – and a hypothetical original intention attributed to the text. The period concerned was, obviously, crucial for the development of such a national consciousness, and it may be a unique instance in the history of Shakespearean influence where a play readjusted its meaning to take an active part within the framework of a *kairos* totally different from the one in which it originated. For the significance of a Hebrew production of *The Merchant of Venice* clearly transcends the limited realm of the theatre in an age when a totally new national Jewish identity had emerged; in Israel the play is loaded simultaneously with the terror of extermination and the dilemma of might.

The first Hebrew production of *The Merchant of Venice* was mounted in 1936 at the Habimah Theatre (later to become the National Theatre of Israel). The director, Leopold Jessner (1878–

1945), one of the major figures in the rich theatrical life of Berlin during the 1920s, achieved fame as the director of the Staatstheater and the Schiller Theater. A pioneer of German Expressionism, he exerted much influence with his productions of Schiller, Wedekind, and Barlach, as well as Shakespeare's *Richard III* (1920, with Fritz Kortner in the title role), *Othello* (which he directed twice: 1921 and 1932), *Macbeth* (1922) and *Hamlet* (1926, in modern dress).¹¹ He arrived in Palestine a Jewish refugee, intending to wander on to Los Angeles, after having started his enforced exile in London.

Fifteen years prior to his engagement at the Habimah, Jessner must have attended the colorful and vivacious production of *The Merchant of Venice* by his contemporary and compatriot Max Reinhardt at the Grosses Schauspielhaus, where Werner Krauss's flat-footed, boisterous, almost farcical Shylock retained almost no trace of dignity in the character of the Jew.¹² For Jessner, who always differed from Reinhardt in stressing the conflict of ideas inherent in the plays rather than their spectacular effectiveness, following Reinhardt's example would have been inconceivable, particularly in the Palestine of 1936. As he explained (and he had a good deal of explaining to do), the play was supposed to remain a legend, though one in which the legendary harmony was upset by the special weight of Shylock's role. His was not to be a patient Shylock, accepting his tragic lot quietly; rather he would be a long-struggling Shylock, who eventually falls victim to the treacheries of his adversaries. Not just one Shylock who was beaten in his battle with Christian society: he was to be The Jew.¹³

Much about the spirit of Jessner's production can be gathered from the musical instructions sent with the score by his composer, Karl Rathaus: the overture juxtaposed a decadent Renaissance world (Italian in color), approaching its end, with a long-suffering Jewish one. In the opening scene, set in a lively cafe – the social center of Venetian "golden youth" – a tenor sang a tune associated with the "Hep-Hep," the well-known antisemitic cry of abuse. As was his wont, Jessner made clever use of his famous *Jessnertreppe*, a stairway designed to connect various stage levels – an external parallel to the play's immanent structure. A typical employment of this device to stress a point of meaning in a theatrical manner occurred at the trial scene: the Jew, ridiculed by the entire court, his yellow badge attached to the back of his Jewish gaberdine, stood upright on a higher level than the judge, who sat below, speaking his

lines in a thundering voice while everybody froze as if suddenly hypnotized.¹⁴

Predictably, however, the play roused a public controversy. "In spite of Jessner's promises in all his speeches that his production was to stress only those points which will suit the Hebrew stage, most of the gentiles appeared almost as decent human beings," one critic typically complained. "Even Antonio betrayed that touch of somber decency invested in him by the author." Attempting to guide his readers to a better understanding of the spirit of Jessner's production, the same critic added:

Had our audience been more moderate and attentive, it would have sensed in Shylock something closer to us, to our feelings, and perceived that maybe even today (and perhaps *especially* today) the character of Shylock, as a symbol, is the expression of the Jew's contempt of those who despise him, be it for faults which are in him or such maliciously attributed to him. None of the many details in the play would overshadow the main point, namely that Shylock recognizes his right to detest his enemies, that he realizes his moral advantage over them . . . When Shylock is deserted by his daughter, his last comfort in life, and when he leaves the courtroom, broken and wronged to the core of his being, one gets the feeling that in this very moment his rightfulness pierces the heavens. Yes, they have trodden him under their feet; they have wounded his soul. Helpless, unable to utter a word, to perform even one graceful gesture to fit fairly the tragic moment, his fire of spirit extinct in a moment, he learns that there is no hope and crashes into the abyss opening before him. But the fiery spirit of rage which has left this broken Jew is to haunt the world for ages to come. That is what Shylock symbolizes – the humiliation of Israel, for which there is no pardon in the world for ever and ever!¹⁵

While these were the words of one of Jessner's defenders, others voiced different views. In a mock public trial, organized by the theatre itself and in which Jessner took part as one of the three prosecuted (the author, the theatre, and the director), Shakespeare, though acknowledgment was made to his greatness as a writer, was accused of writing "a play in which he invoked an anti-Jewish theme without being informed enough to treat his subject, in a way which produced a false, fictitious, impossible character, interpreted with a strong antisemitic approach, if not on purpose then at least erroneously."¹⁶

One of the witnesses for the prosecution, the writer Avraham Kariv, a hard-line Jewish traditionalist, went so far as to deny the Shakespearean character its Jewish identity. Shylock was the "hero

of revenge . . . [whereas] we, the Jews, in whom an ancient spiritual culture is coupled with the long experience of humiliation and suffering, cannot possibly be prone to such a wild and sadistic act of revenge as that which Shylock so wilfully wants to commit."¹⁷ Another witness for the prosecution, the well-known Communist poet Alexander Penn, reprimanded Jessner from a totally different stance:

Shylock and society – that is the question which was so utterly blurred by Jessner's interpretation . . . If in an age like ours a director such as Jessner wanted to shed a fresh light upon the Shylock problem, he had to shift his focus to the one real, substantial point in the play: Shylock the "speculator." This is the Shylock which was really to be defended. A pound of flesh – absurd! And absurd is being apologetic in front of the absurd! . . . Instead of apologizing, we have the full right to accuse . . . "You, who were angry at us for our success in accumulating money – *you* are to blame, because you never let us survive in any other way; you have turned us into usurers and profiteers."

In the recent history of Palestine, the year 1936 marks the outbreak of the Arab revolt. Penn, happy with the moderate reaction of the Jewish community at the early stage of the hostilities, did not shy from seasoning his reaction to Shakespeare's play with topical references. Addressing Jessner directly, he went on:

You have come to produce the play in Palestine! How did it not occur to you to disown hatefully anything which is fictitious in it? The way the Jewish community in this country behaved throughout these dangerous weeks, the very fact of its self-restraint is a decisive answer . . . And if for the rest of the world a production of *The Merchant of Venice* should have served as a straightforward accusation . . . for us, who came here in order to bring about a great spiritual–economical shift in our life, this show should have been a sharp reminder, an acute warning against all those petty Shylocks, those speculators and profiteers penetrating our country.¹⁸

The first production of *The Merchant of Venice* in Palestine, then, occurred at an heroic moment, where national pathos was a standard theme. Any attempt to deprive Shylock of at least some measure of his tragic pathos would have been self-defeating. On this occasion, reality proved stronger than the text in laying its constraints upon the limits of interpretation. The dictates of reality governed all facets of the production: the text bowdlerized, in the name of serenity, such vulgar references as Gratiano's "stake down" conceit in act 3, scene 2 and cut three-quarters of the same

character's final speech at the end of the play, and the music and scenery served faithfully the director's solemn approach to its moral dilemma. So did the casting: the two rival leaders of the company, Aharon Meskin and Shim'on Finkel, alternated in the part, both denying the character of Shylock any trace of its inherent comic potential. Meskin was an heroic figure, making use of his commanding physical stature and resounding voice; Finkel emphasized Shylock's spiteful bitterness.

Twenty-three years later, the heroic pathos characterizing Jewish reality in Palestine was considerably modified. The struggle for liberation over, the Israeli community was undergoing a process of stabilization in its eleven-year-old state. And though the Israeli national character was still precarious and highly vulnerable, and the memory of the Jewish Holocaust still fresh, one could now more easily risk a presentation of *The Merchant of Venice* where Shylock was to be exempt from carrying the full weight of Jewish history on his shoulders. This time it was a non-Jewish director, Tyrone Guthrie, who came over to the Habimah (where he had directed a much-acclaimed production of *Oedipus Rex* in 1947) to revive the controversial play. And although the same two actors again alternated the part of Shylock, a significant change of focus was generally expected. Said Meskin:

When I first played Shylock, I stressed mainly the national, pathetic element. This time I shall endeavor to portray a more human Shylock: he has got a measure of fanaticism – but he has his weaknesses as well. Guthrie has told me that at the beginning of the play Shylock is a thriving merchant, a kind of Rothschild. This has given me much help. I have even obtained a picture of Rothschild.¹⁹

In Guthrie's modern-dress production, Shylock did indeed physically resemble "a kind of Rothschild." If Jessner's fame as a Shakespearean director rested mainly on his productions of the tragedies, Guthrie felt more at home in Shakespearean comedy, and his production attempted to coax the play as far as possible into that realm. In a busy Venice, he devised a lively and rapid succession of entrances and exits, with Salerio and Solanio portrayed as a pair of American businessmen holding their umbrellas in the rain while passing comments on city affairs, with Gratiano constantly on the move in a dancing step, humming merry jazz tunes – a persistent association of decadent Renaissance Italy with modern American life.

In his approach to Shylock, however, Guthrie remained pretty much faithful to the apologetic tradition. For him, the focal center of the action is the duel between Shylock and Portia in the trial scene, at the expense of Antonio, who is saved from being a bore only when his homosexual relation to Bassanio (Guthrie used the term "irregular" or "tender") is carefully established. But even so, "when all is said and done, in the theatre it is almost impossible to make Antonio dominate the play."²⁰

In spite of the particular emphasis laid on the Shylock–Portia duel, Guthrie's actress for the Habimah production (Shoshana Ravid) failed to become an equal partner to the Jew. Anonymously referring to her in his introduction, Guthrie later described how her ineffectuality made him realize how important the part was:

Portia was entirely miscast – a sweet, motherly, young woman, the epitome of middle-class respectability. The more we stuck her with jewels and decked her up in pink satin, the more she resembled the Railway Queen of some remote junction; the harder she tried to be witty and sophisticated, the more she sounded like a hospital nurse reading a script prepared for somebody else.²¹

The scene, then, was left entirely to Shylock, and here Guthrie's excessive reverence for the Jew proved a major drawback. Guthrie's conception of Shylock in this production did not contradict his general view of the part, as his later commentary indicates:

It is my view that Shakespeare's portrait is not antisemitic, that the pound of flesh wager was entered upon as a jest and only turns to vengeance after Shylock has been robbed and his daughter abducted by young Venetians of Antonio's set. In fact, after the trial, and after Portia's great invocation of mercy it is the Christians who lack all mercy toward their enemy. The sadistic vengeance taken upon Shylock is as offensive to Christianity as it is legally outrageous.

And yet, as he realizes himself,

to say this to Jews in the present epoch is as useless as to beg the rain not to fall. There is a rooted tradition among Jews that the play is an antisemitic document, and it is indeed true that many Jewish boys at school have, through generations, been taunted and execrated as "Shylock" . . . the remedy is . . . to interpret it so that it becomes, *as its author intended*, a fantasia on the twin themes of mercy and justice . . . in which none of the characters is either wholly good or wholly evil.²²

Up to a point, Guthrie's colorful fantasia managed to work effectively. The problem of Shylock, however, proved recalcitrant:

in appearance reminiscent of "a liberal Rabbi, with a well-trimmed beard and a clever and pleasant expression,"²³ neither of the two Shylocks could avoid the pathos presumably remaining with them from the former production. Shylock's pathos stood in awkward contrast to the air of romantic comedy informing the production as a whole, to the detriment of the sought-for balance. Some of the problems of Guthrie's production anticipated the emergence of similar problems in Jonathan Miller's 1970 production at the National Theatre, London: can a liberal, fairly realistic modern-dress production accommodate the weird story of the pound of flesh and remain liberal and fairly realistic? Guthrie's production could not. It was removed from Habimah's repertory after a few months.

The next production of *The Merchant of Venice* on the Israeli stage occurred after the most significant experience undergone by national consciousness since the founding of the state in 1948: the 1967 war, which had a dramatic effect on the nation's mentality. The prevailing sense of persecution and self-defensiveness, so far an infinite resource for rationalizing any mistake made in the name of security or any moral conflict resulting from the rights, or "positive discrimination," of Jews in Israel, from now on had to allow for the manifest reality of occupation and might. The euphoric period which followed the war (at least until 1973) was characterized by growing feelings of national pride up to the point of vanity, not unlike those of the Elizabethans in the years immediately following the victory over the Armada. It was now reasonably safe to assume that the self-confident audience would be able to stomach a totally different, non-apologetic approach to the play.

This was the situation when, in 1972, an Israeli-born director addressed himself to the play for the first time in Israel. The "native view" permitted a portrayal of Shylock in the least favorable and most grotesque manner, as if coming directly from the heavily biased drawings of Jews in the Middle Ages. In Yossi Yzraeli's production of the play at the Cameri Theatre of Tel Aviv, everything was far removed from realism: Shylock, in a dark robe and a black bell-shaped hat, stood out among blonde Venetians, all clad in white, against abstract scenery consisting of a white back wall and a white rostrum. Tubal, in black, served only to underline the foreign look of the Jew, while Jessica (not unpredictably) wore a striped dress, with lines of black and white, following her conversion.

One of the major features which marked the production was its

persistent departure from the individuality of character. I have dwelt elsewhere on one example of this practice, the experimental doubling of Morocco and Arragon, both played by the actor playing Bassanio, and thus lending a reinforced unity to the choice of the three caskets.²⁴ If this device might still have been accommodated within the boundaries of realistic characterization (e.g., Bassanio eliminating alternatives in disguise), making all the Christians in Venice look alike transcended the boundaries of individuality to the point of rendering them, in some respects, as a collective entity. Typical of this approach was the treatment of Antonio in the trial scene: the stage was totally bare but for a black stool on which Antonio sat with a huge black cross fastened to his back. Thus made a type of Christ, Antonio himself did not become an object of empathy; the pathos and compassion evoked by the scene were directed to the figure of Christ beyond him rather than to Antonio in person.

The action was further circumscribed by a surrounding framework: the show opened with a Passion-like procession, with mummies in masks, and Shylock, his Jewish nose grotesquely prolonged, bending under the weight of the cross. Another symbolic procession followed the trial scene. But the most dominant element of this enveloping framework was the constant presence of a puppet theatre peering over the white back wall, reflecting, reverberating, and multiplying the action underneath by means of puppets in the likeness of the actual characters on stage. The puppet-show was used as a visual commentary on the action, sometimes comically imitating it, sometimes making visual interscenic connections, and occasionally even providing alternative action. The most outstanding example of the latter practice occurred when, as the background to Lorenzo's exhortation on music (act 5, scene 1), the puppet-play enacted a symbolic ritual in which Shylock was baptized by the Christians.

The production, though in many respects lively and entertaining, was considered an artistic (and box-office) failure, its symbolism much too obvious and far from convincing.²⁵ Predictably, much of the critical controversy focused on the portrayal of Shylock. Even though, in the final analysis, Yzraeli's interpretation was meant to render Shylock as the victim of a sterile Christian society, his intentions were thwarted, for much of the audience, by the Jew's repellent appearance and mannerisms. Unlike Jessner and Guthrie,

who chose for the part typically heroic actors, Yzraeli gave the role to a notable comedian, Avner Hyskiahu, whose style of delivery generally consists of a nervous staccato. Under the director's instructions, Hyskiahu played Shylock as "a shrewd old Jew, his posture, his gait, his manner of speaking reflecting a life spent making shrewd, furtive money deals, a man accustomed to abuse. He delivers his key speech ('Hath not a Jew eyes?') snarling at the two *goyim* [gentiles], practically spitting in their faces. He is a worm turned, but still a worm."²⁶ The controversy over the production once again served to expose the age-old prejudices concerning the play:

It is but natural that we Jews are practically allergic to a typical antisemitic interpretation, which blurs Shylock's cry of pain and protest, stirring the heart of any human being, be it a Jew, a Christian, or other. In this the play was deprived of its tragic power and poetic flavour which are, in spite of the various amusing moments abounding in *The Merchant of Venice*, the very core of the play.²⁷

This, however, was a fairly moderate reaction. Not surprisingly, the production in general, and the portrayal of Shylock in particular, were most fiercely attacked by the more radically nationalistic press.

Avner Hyskiahu repeated Shylock in yet a different production, in 1980, again at the Cameri Theatre, directed this time by a non-Jewish director from the Royal Shakespeare Company, Barry Kyle. In many ways Kyle's production was not distinguishable from any likely production of the play at his home theatre in Stratford. Set in no specific locality or period (Portia was dressed as a typical Renaissance lady while Launcelot Gobbo appeared on stage riding an ancient motorcycle), Christopher Morley's impressive scenery subtly captured the symbolism of the three caskets: a golden back wall (made of shutters typical of Tel Aviv verandas) and golden bridges, surrounding waters of silver hue, and a lead-colored central platform.

In his program note (entitled "Two Outcasts of Society: Shylock and Antonio") Kyle stressed the allegorical significance of the play, as his interpretation attempted to communicate it:

The money world, though bound by contracts and stamped by passion, must depend on friendship.

Kyle marked value as binding together the two stories of the plot: the value of friendship, of marriage pledge, and of money. Time has turned Shylock into a racist stereotype; yet in the play Shylock is

condemned not because of his Jewishness but because he lets money rule him. This condemnation has nothing to do with antisemitism, says Kyle, since it also applies to the Prince of Morocco and Arragon, as well as to the young Christians of Venice, including Bassanio. Shylock, whose world is stamped by gold and silver, ignores the quality of mercy. Once wronged, Kyle said in his initial talk to the actors, Shylock easily falls prey to revenge in succumbing to the logic and mentality of terrorism. Triggering one of the most charged terms in the life of the Middle East, Kyle allowed the tokens of local topicality to penetrate his conception of the play.

Such an attitude towards "a fellow countryman," however, proved an obstacle even for actors who took part in the production itself. At a certain point during rehearsals, Kyle was persuaded by some of the actors (though not before a thorough argument with many of the others) that in order for the message of concord and love to be accepted by the target audience, Antonio's first stipulation regarding Shylock's conversion had better be dropped. Thus, while in 1972 the ritual symbolizing Shylock's baptism was virtually enacted on stage, no mention of his possible conversion was made to the audience of 1980, polarized between cultural assimilation with the west and a fervent, often fundamentalist search for traditional roots. It was the radically nationalistic part of the audience who failed to notice Kyle's conception of Shylock as "succumbing to the logic and mentality of terrorism." Social, economic, and political circumstances in Israel in the 1980s, a second decade of occupying another people's homeland, have had their effect of the national consciousness. Looking back on the long history of Jewish suffering up to the Holocaust, many in Israel have made it a flag "not to be made a soft and dull eyed fool, to shake the head, relent and sigh, and yield to [gentile] intercessors" (3.3.14-16). For those, Shylock's cry of defiance, "My deeds upon my head" (4.1.202) was justified in context, since "Jewish" and "the logic and mentality of terrorism" had become mutually exclusive concepts. This strange mixture of resenting Shakespeare's alleged antisemitism and identifying with Shylock's motives lent special significance to a topical image of a terrorist act, which, in the political context of the Middle East, is hardly confined to any one-sided allegorical interpretation.

Even though Kyle's production failed to make its political point, it was a crucial step towards setting the play in the contemporary Israeli context. Kyle's attitude towards Shylock surely would have

antagonized the old historicist school, for the term "terrorism" could enter neither the discourse nor the supposed "master narrative" of the Renaissance. But there is another, more basic difficulty. From the stance of normative social order, terrorism must signify crime. Terrorism may not necessarily be politically motivated; but Shylock convinces neither the Venetian court nor the majority of Shakespeare's critics in his motiveless malignity. What is he, then? A political dissenter? And if so, what would be the moral position of a political terrorist in the Renaissance? Within the discourse of crime, the term "political terrorism," meaning the use of violence to press individuals or society to meet political demands, may betray a peculiar sense of moral (if not legal) legitimation. As Uri Eisenzweig argues, the physical reality of terrorism "appears to be dramatically unquestionable," whereas its actual legal content is missing from most judicial systems.²⁸ While terrorism must emanate from a logical procedure which stands outside the normative order, it draws for its validity on a different, meta-normative order, which recognizes the dominant ideology as only one of several orders competing in the sociopolitical consciousness. Such an extra-official validity has no place in any legitimate code of values, and thus it may exist exclusively in the realm of text. The performative nature of the terrorist text thus becomes indispensable in this process. It is the word of Shylock's bond which becomes the symbolic, hence the essential, meaning of the terrorist act he performs. The consummation of the act of terrorism is not the actual deed (such as the cutting of the pound of flesh), nor is its author's real identity (as a Jew, a money-lender, or a Pantaloon) of necessary significance at the crucial moment. This may explain the discrepancy between Shylock's prominence in the play and his relatively brief presence on the scene, as well as his much-debated absence from the play after the trial scene.

And yet the legal content of terrorism, missing from most judicial systems, does reside in Shakespeare's Venetian book of laws. Any play composed during the reign of Elizabeth could not ignore the constant danger of contrivance by strangers, which may explain the peculiarly anti-alien nature of Shakespeare's Venetian legislation that otherwise pretends to be liberal and egalitarian. There is no sense in which such a private assault contrived by one individual against another should be distinguished ethnically or nationally, unless that distinction between alien and citizen implies an act of political subversion, or, in other words, political terrorism.

Shylock does not belong with those precursors of modern terrorism, such as Brutus, who use violence against tyranny. Yet if Shylock does not take hostages illegally, his act of appropriating the law itself is not entirely devoid of ideological grounds. Hardly an Iago-like "motive-hunter," Shylock provides some solid reasons for his stubborn insistence on his bond, none of which has to do with ideology; and yet some tokens of ideological motivation are still betrayed in his behavior. To cite but one example, whether or not we are to believe Jessica's evidence concerning her father's initial intentions to harm Antonio, her reference to Tubal and Chus as Shylock's "countrymen" (3.2.284) is telling. We do not know which is their common "country" of origin, but this expression, together with Shylock's repeated references to his "nation" and "tribe," casts an ideological shade on his attitude throughout the play.

Beside the particular case of his Jewishness, Shylock represents a more generally subversive element within the dominant Christian, capitalist order in Venice. Together with Othello he belongs in the company of "aliens," whose danger to the ideological integrity of the Venetian ruling class is so menacing that special legislation had to be issued to curb their rights and activities within the liberal state. Shylock is no self-styled machiavel like Marlowe's Barabas, who defies the law entirely. Thus his complaint cannot find any institutional outlet until his specific function within the trade-capitalist process which moves Venetian economy is directly addressed. Significantly enough, this opportunity occurs when emotion is mixed with business: the financial implications of courting Portia belong to the subversive parts of "pure" love in the same way that Shylock the alien is a necessary constituent of the Venetian economic system. Once Shylock is allowed to interfere with the financial operations of Venice's prince of merchants, the subversive process of rebellion is set in motion.

Throughout the play Shylock is consistently urged to adopt a "gentle" attitude ("We all expect a gentle answer, Jew"). This is but another way of demanding that he embrace a "gentile" ideology, a demand which is finally imposed on him legally with the verdict of the trial, which suddenly turns out to be his own. Shylock's perception of the law of Venice is indeed "alien," since the use he makes of the Venetian constitution rests on the word of the law but contradicts its spirit. It is, in fact, the very essence of Shylock's terrorism: he consciously subverts the soul of Venetian order,

namely its book of laws, and turns it upon itself. The only counter-measure Venice could take against Shylock's act of legal terrorism is to subvert the spirit of language on which the law rests in order to re-establish the normal procedures of justice and social order by which Venice's mainstream ideology abides. And it is significant that this is brought about by an "alien" of a different order, a woman disguised as a man, a country feudal who comes from afar, in order and in time.

Unlike his modern counterparts, Shylock never dreams of instituting a new order, where the ruling authorities will emanate from below, equally representing all the town's residents. His imaginary example of abolishing slavery (4.1.90-8) remains a parable, without anybody knowing his own opinion on the matter. We do not even know for sure whether he would have pursued his murderous act to the very end, had not Portia's "tarry" stopped him at the last moment. Nor is it crucial for us, or even for Shakespeare, to know, since, as we have noted before, the terrorist act performed by Shylock is consummated on the textual or symbolic level. As Grant Wardlaw is not alone in arguing, "terrorism is primarily theatre."²⁹ The gist of this notion is nothing but an extension of the textual identity of the terrorist act, as it is often expressed by a note or a telephone call which brings it to public attention, into the performative ritual of the theatrical gesture. Shylock need not act further, since, as the play as a whole shows us, his function in the plot is nothing but that of a catalyst. It is, in other words, the reaction of normative society to an extraterritorial act that the play is about.

Without resorting to the critical fallacies of traditional historicism, *The Merchant of Venice* may still be made to show us the ways in which, by temporarily taking hostage the Venetian law, and while the entire audience of the theatre of terrorism hold their breath, Shylock manages to bring forth the very target of political terrorism, exposing the moral fragility of the dominant ideology. His act succeeds in undermining the notion of reality as integrated and rational, as appropriated by the dominant ideology. In his *Geschichtsphilosophische Thesen* Walter Benjamin tells us that only from the stance of the victors is history viewed as a unitary process. In this respect Shylock is a loser. But as a political terrorist he celebrates the losers' victory in naming the name of the game. In this he disappears as a Jew, or a Pantaloon, or even as an "alien" in the general sense. As the author and perpetrator of the "terrorist" text of his bond he

coerces the legal system to produce a counter-terrorist text of a similar nature, whereby it exposes itself, at least for one cathartic moment, to its own ideological limitations.

It is hard to predict to what extent the future stage history of *The Merchant of Venice* in Israel will reflect sociopolitical developments in the way it has been doing in the past century, or what course it may take. I believe that the intricate view of Shylock as representing the ideological complexities of terrorism, initially propounded in Barry Kyle's production, may shed new light on the age-old apologetic approach to the play, adopted in its stage and critical history by Jews and non-Jews alike. The easy transformation of Shylock from one form of minority affiliation to another renders the ideological content of the play more general. In a very peculiar way it is expressed in Rafi Bokai's film *Avanti Popolo* (Israel, 1986), which depicts the escape of two Egyptian soldiers through the Israeli lines in Sinai in the attempt to reach the Egyptian border. When captured by a group of Israeli soldiers one of the two Egyptians starts to recite Shylock's "hath not a Jew eyes" speech. An Israeli soldier comments: "He has changed the parts!" Has he, indeed? Portia, clad as a young male judge, opens the process of justice in the Venetian court, asking: "Which is the merchant here? and which the Jew?" (4.1.170). It is the very question that any judicious reading of the play must attempt to leave open.

NOTES

- 1 Anshel Spielmann, member of the Stern Group fighting against British mandate of Palestine.
- 2 Citations from Shakespeare are from the New Arden editions, unless otherwise specified.
- 3 Dalia Sharon, "Legitimation for Antisemitism 1988," *Davar*, 27 May 1988: 28 (Hebrew). For a detailed account of Alexander's production, see James C. Bulman, *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare in Performance (Manchester University Press, 1991), 117-42, and Russell Jackson and Robert Smallwood (eds.), *Players of Shakespeare 3* (Cambridge University Press, 1993).
- 4 Eli Rozik, "Apartheid in Venice," *Bamah* 111 (1988): 74 (Hebrew).
- 5 *Ibid.*, 75.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 84.
- 7 The present usage of the term *kairos* follows, e.g., that of Kermode; see Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 47.

- 8 Fergusson, in the introduction to the Laurel (1958) edition of the play; reprinted in his *Shakespeare: The Pattern in His Carpet* (New York: Delta Books, 1971), 113.
- 9 See Northrop Frye, in whose view the play "seems almost an experiment in coming as close as possible to upsetting the comic balance": *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton University Press, 1957), 165.
- 10 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1975), 262, 263-4.
- 11 See Herbert Ihering, *Reinhardt, Jessner, Piscator oder Klassikertod* (Berlin: Ernst Rohwolt, 1929); also Ernst Leopold Stahl, *Shakespeare und das deutsche Theater* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1947), 608-14 and *passim*. For a recent appraisal of Jessner's work, see David F. Kuhns, "Expressionism, Monumentalism, Politics: Emblematic Acting in Jessner's *Wilhelm Tell* and *Richard III*," *New Theatre Quarterly* 25 (1991): 35-48.
- 12 Stahl, *Shakespeare und das deutsche Theater*, 592. See also John Russell Brown's introduction to his New Arden edition of the play (London: Methuen, 1955), xxxvi.
- 13 Leopold Jessner, "On the Theatre in the Land of Israel and Its Vocation," *Bamah*, 10 (1936): 6 (Hebrew).
- 14 *Bamah* 11-12 (1937): 31 (Hebrew).
- 15 Ya'akov Fikhman, "On the Classical Theatre," *Bamah* 11-12 (1937): 8 (Hebrew).
- 16 *Bamah* 11-12: 24 (Hebrew).
- 17 *Ibid.*, 25. A similar line of argument was adopted, forty years later, by the Israeli Embassy in London, when given an opportunity by *The Sunday Times* to answer thorough research carried out by the paper's reporters into the practice of torture of detainees in the territories occupied by Israel. Rather than refuting the accusations point by point, the Embassy issued a statement to the effect that "the Nation of the Bible" was morally prevented from, and therefore unable to perform, acts of torture.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 26-8. Penn's is a typical reaction of a member of the pioneer groups who came to Palestine during the early 1920s, many of them strongly influenced by the ideals of the Russian Revolution, contrasting with the later "bourgeois" immigrants.
- 19 In an interview with Michael Ohad, *Dvar Hashavu'a* (Hebrew: February 1959). Guthrie himself opens his introduction to the play in *Shakespeare: Ten Great Plays* (New York, 1962) in the same spirit: "Who is the merchant of Venice? Shylock's part is the most striking and effective, and he is arguably a merchant." Reprinted in Guthrie, *In Various Directions: A View of Theatre* (London: Michael Joseph, 1965).
- 20 Guthrie, *In Various Directions*, 101.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 102.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 102-3 (italics mine).
- 23 Avitam, *Davar* (Hebrew), 6 Mar. 1959.

- 24 See Avraham Oz, "The Doubling of Parts in Shakespearean Comedy: Some Questions of Theory and Practice," in *Shakespearean Comedy*, ed. Maurice Charney (New York: New York Literary Forum, 1980), 175-82.
- 25 Originally, Yzraeli planned to set the play within a large cathedral, somewhere in Europe, where the townsfolk were mounting a Passion play with the local Jew forced to play the villain of the piece. This was abandoned during rehearsals, giving rise to a somewhat patched-up framework which eventually circumscribed the actual production.
- 26 M. Kohanski, *The Jerusalem Post*, 24 Mar. 1972.
- 27 Hayim Gamzu, *Ha'aretz* (Hebrew), 20 Mar. 1972.
- 28 See Uri Eisenzweig, "Terrorism in Life and in Real Literature," *Diacritics* (Fall 1988): 32.
- 29 Grant Wardlaw, *Political Terrorism* (Cambridge University Press, 1982), 38.