

Anyone for Venice? Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and Arnold Wesker's *Shylock*¹

Graham SAUNDERS

(Reader in Theatre Studies, University of Reading)

Harley Granville-Barker in his preface to Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* makes the often quoted remark that the play should be interpreted as a romantic fable, and that "there is no more reality in Shylock's bond and the Lord of Belmont's will than in Jack and The Beanstalk" (Granville-Barker: 30), in which case criticism of the play's racial prejudice against Shylock becomes an irrelevance.

Ever since Charles Macklin in the eighteenth century and his eschewal of the tradition of playing Shylock as the red-haired, crooked-nosed comic figure of his predecessors, successive productions of the play have rejected Barker's fairy tale allegory, striving either to portray Shylock as a flawed tragic figure, or else exposing the anti-Semitism of the Christians in Venice. These strategies became ever more dominant after 1945, following the mass extermination of European Jewry under the Nazis. For example, the theatre director Charles Marowitz cites these, and far earlier historical events, as the impetus for his own rewriting of the play, *Variations on the Merchant of Venice* (1977):

It is difficult, almost impossible, to come to a play like *The Merchant of Venice*, whose central character is an orthodox Jew without bringing to it all one has learned and read about the Jews in the last 2000 years. (Marowitz 1991: 24)

The poet W.H. Auden echoes these sentiments, arguing that in the knowledge of the Holocaust theatre audiences can no longer "ignore the historical reality of the Jews and think of them as fairy-story bogeys with huge noses and red wigs" (Auden: 223).

However, the playwright Arnold Wesker goes much further, in that while people such as Marowitz and Auden believe that

somehow altering the depiction of Shylock alleviates the reality of historical anti-Semitism, Wesker sees *The Merchant of Venice* itself as the problem, and a play “beyond embrace” (Wesker 1993: 9). Wesker came to this opinion in 1973 after seeing Jonathan Miller’s National Theatre production, with Laurence Olivier playing the role of Shylock: “I was struck by the play’s irredeemable anti-Semitism. It was not an intellectual evaluation but an immediate impact I actually experienced” (*M*: xviii)². While being able to fully appreciate the palliative strategies that directors since 1945 have used to lessen qualms for this most problematic of Shakespearian comedies, Wesker argues that ultimately these have done little more than ameliorate what for him is a play that, at best, is distasteful, and at worst, dangerous:

No matter with what heavy tragedy the actor plays the role, no matter how thuggishly or foolishly the Venetians are portrayed... the Jew is mercenary and revengeful, sadistic, without pity. (*M*: xvii-xviii)

For others, the main problem with the play is not the sum of its parts, but the character of Shylock. Edgar Rosenberg suggests that any damage to the reputation of world Jewry does not so much come from *The Merchant of Venice* itself as a play, but from the phenomenal power that Shylock as a character exerts. Such is Shakespeare’s achievement that his creation has lodged itself within the world’s consciousness as the archetypal figure of the Jew (Rosenberg: 33-4). John Gross outlines something of Shylock’s other life as a literary and mythic figure outside his creation in the play:

In the extent of his fame Shylock belongs with Don Quixote, Tartuffe, Sherlock Holmes, Robinson Crusoe. He is a familiar figure to millions who have never read *The Merchant of Venice*, or even seen it acted; he has served as an inspiration for hundreds of writers, and a point of reference for innumerable publications. There are times when one might wish it were otherwise, but he is immortal. (Gross: 187)

Edgar Rosenberg calls this phenomenon the *Shylock myth*, and points towards its more malignant aspects precisely because its mythical reputation is so pervasive:

The Shylock myth is not a continuous fact of literature, capable of evolving new and complex configurations and relationships, but a stable one, which different generations do not so much reinterpret for themselves as rehabilitate. Every so often Shylock is packed up, moved up or down the economic ladder, invested with aberrant religious motives or divested of his religion, and sent into the world as Rachub, Fagin, Nucingen Levy. The essential Shylock has always a knife and has always moneybags; he is always funny, and always horrible. (Rosenberg: 187-88)

Not everyone however agrees with this assessment of Shylock as simply being a malign figure. John Gross again, believes that in order to obtain such high recognition as a literary figure, Shakespeare's portrait of Shylock cannot simply be based on crude caricature:

Shylock would not have held the stage for four hundred years if he were a mere stereotype. His greatness is to be himself, to transcend the roles of representative Jew and conventional usurer. He is Shylock, with his own private history, his own vivid individuality. (Gross: 51)

After seeing Olivier's portrayal of Shylock, Wesker wrestled with the problem of how to respond to *The Merchant of Venice* in producing a figure of Shylock who would stand as a Jew that he could recognize rather than the personification of a sinister literary history. At first, Wesker considered directing the play as it stood, but he soon realized that Shakespeare's Shylock would still remain, however much the text was manipulated. Wesker's solution was to appropriate *The Merchant of Venice* in the hope that it would stand alone whilst at the same time offering a response in the form of rebuke to Shakespeare.

In the early stages of writing, Wesker soon came up against a structural problem that again touched upon the pervasive myth which *The Merchant of Venice* seems to contain. This concerned the principal source that Shakespeare used for his play, namely the

Renaissance Italian collection of stories in *Il Pecorone* (1558), where the merchant Ansaldo enters into a bond with a Jewish usurer, the forfeit of which being a pound of his own flesh. Wesker found this device of the bond a compelling but nevertheless “pernicious myth [that]... has saturated Western civilization and slithered snake-like through the barriers of other cultures” (*M*: 9).

Wesker’s account of the writing of Shylock provides some insight into how the process of appropriation might work. In this case, it came slowly out of a gradual process of shedding material from *The Merchant of Venice* until something new, yet related to the original work began to emerge. Wesker writes:

My first notes show that the characters were going to be completely reconceived and I sloughed off more and more of the original as I went along. For example I was going to handle the Lancelot Gobbo scenes, but in the end I dispensed with them entirely. (Wesker 1977: 22)

Another major reason why the influence of *The Merchant of Venice* began to recede during the act of rewriting came from Wesker’s research into dealings between Jews and the city of Venice during the Renaissance. This new material soon began to be incorporated into the new play. By contrast, John Gross observes that *The Merchant of Venice* is notable for its lack of historical or geographical detail:

A work of art must be taken on its own terms, and nobody needs to know much about Venice itself in order to appreciate Shakespeare’s Venice. But if one stands back, it is hard not to sigh a little over the gulf between the world of Shylock and the real world of his Venetian co-religionists. (Gross: 26)

Through his research Wesker made several discoveries, both about the city of Venice and the Jews who inhabited its ghetto. These not only broke the influence of Shakespeare’s play but exposed myths and half-truths from *The Merchant of Venice* that until then had been unquestioned. For instance, in *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock’s occupation of usurer is accepted as a given fact due to his race. His opening line “Three thousand ducats” (*MV*: 124)³ is all the exposition given at this point for Shylock’s background, character

and motivation. In *Shylock*, Wesker's rewriting of the play is based closely on the historical background of Venetian Jews, where Wesker discovered that usury was an occupation forced upon them.

Wesker's decision to ground *Shylock* within a historical context, as well as excising significant amounts of the plot from *The Merchant of Venice*, provides an interesting contrast to the director Charles Marowitz, whose *Variations on the Merchant of Venice* was produced in the same year as *Shylock*. Here, some of the more perceptive critics took issue with this theatrical experiment in that it had not been bold enough, and that too much of *The Merchant of Venice* remained to overshadow Marowitz's appropriation. Irving Wardle, for example commented, "In general, my disappointment is that too little has been done to transform the text... Marowitz is too often content to let the play follow along its usual course, making his own comment through pantomime and playing against the lines" (Cited in Marowitz 1977: 151).

During the course of writing *Shylock*, as well as concentrating on the historical background, Wesker also went back to the source story *Il Pecorone*, and it is possible to see in the final play how the content of this story and the retention of the principal Shakespearian names unites *The Merchant of Venice* and *Shylock*. Even in the use of names, Wesker's historical research succeeds in making us question the assumptions of Shakespeare's play. For instance, Wesker gives Shylock a surname in his play: Kolner. This was informed by an essay by Cecil Roth called *The Background of Shylock*. Roth has written extensively on the history of the Jewish ghetto in Renaissance Venice, and in the essay Roth speculates that Shylock would have been of German origin "since the occupation of money-lending, together with that of dealing in second hand clothes, were exclusive for the *Nazione Tedesca*, the Jews of the German "nation" living in the "Ghetto Nuovo" (Hedback: 236). In the play, Shylock outlines his family's origins and occupation in Venice:

I descended from German Jews you know. My grandparents. Grubby little things from Cologne. Came to Venice as small-time money lenders for the poor. But my parents – they tried a new profession. Very brave. Second-hand clothing! (*M*: 38)

Wesker also includes real characters taken from renaissance history such as the playwright Solomon Usque and Rebecca Da Mendes, whose name, whilst fictional, is based on a real person, Gracia Mendes, who, like her counterpart in the play, helped to set up places of refuge in various parts of Italy for the Marranos Jews, fleeing persecution in Portugal.

Wesker's reliance on historical sources to construct his play initiates other important deviations from *The Merchant of Venice*: one of these concerns the location and nature of the Venetian ghetto. This becomes apparent in the opening scene, where Antonio is a guest in Shylock's house. Here, we soon learn how the ghetto sees its relationship to the city of Venice, and more particularly to its laws and strictures. In *The Merchant of Venice*, the opposite takes place – Shylock, Tubal and Jessica are incorporated into the city, appearing to live and trade there normally. Wesker, by locating much of the play within the Ghetto Nuovo accentuates the Jewish community's "otherness" and its displacement from day to day involvement in the life of the city.

Glenda Leeming also believes that one further outcome of the historical methodology Wesker employed was "to make more adventurous use of long speeches and eloquent language" (*M*: xxiv). Leeming also believes the use of historical sources serves Wesker's predilection for naturalism in his writing, providing a framework for cause and effect in the socio-legal animosity that the city of Venice encourages between its citizens and the Jews. Additionally, it also allows Wesker to shed many of the ambiguities that are a feature of *The Merchant of Venice*.

One of these problems was the need to provide a logical motivation for the contract that Shylock and Antonio enter into, and the dangers this sets up in "their joint flouting of the majesty of the law" (*M*: xxxvii). Iska Alter believes that, by making the Jew and the merchant friends from the opening scene, the whole pivot on which the play revolves and its relationship to *The Merchant of Venice* changes. Alter comments, "the iniquity with which the characters must contend... is woven into the social fabric, the political arrangements, and the mercantile economy of imperial Venice"

(Alter: 537). Here again, it is interesting to compare Charles Marowitz's approach in his *Variations on the Merchant of Venice*. The personal animosity between Shylock and Antonio is retained, with Marowitz describing the former as "a cold calculating Talmudic stoic" (Marowitz 1991: 251), and the source of his animosity towards Antonio also goes well beyond personal dislike. Marowitz explained:

I turned him [Shylock] into a man with a passionate commitment to a political cause – which doesn't justify his violence or his terrorism, but gives him some motivation slightly more creditable than hating Antonio because he brings down the rate of usance in Venice. (Marowitz 1977: 15)

Wesker also changes the dynamics of the casket scene and the relationship between Bassanio and Portia, accentuating the latter's dissatisfaction with this form of bond. Similarly, Jessica's flight from her father to Lorenzo and the Christian faith is given motivation by virtue of the generation gap and the antagonisms between father and daughter, based on similarities of temperament.

By contrast, *The Merchant of Venice* is essentially abstruse, to the extent that some argue that it should be classed amongst Shakespeare's "problem plays" (Salinger: 19-31), while A.D. Moody comments:

No account of the play which offers to see it in terms of simple good and evil can hope to satisfy. It is too subtle and exploratory for that, and also perhaps, too ironic in its resolution. (Moody: 14)

It is these constantly shifting perspectives that Wesker seeks to expunge in his portrayal of Shylock, for he seems to recognize these are the very features in *The Merchant of Venice* that continue to allow critics and theatre directors to re-stage a play that Wesker believes to be reprehensible.

A Problematic City

As mentioned, *Shylock* concerns itself with a radical re-examination of Venetian and Jewish relationships, as well deconstructing the myth of Shylock as a universal bogeyman. Yet, if anything, the key concern of the play is the deconstruction of

Venetian justice that Wesker sees as the real source of conflict that in the end leads to the trial of Antonio and finally Shylock.

However, just as one could argue that Shakespeare's creation of Shylock is no more than a composite, based upon medieval caricatures of Jews, so too his depiction of Venice was coloured by pre-existing myths that had already grown-up around this Italian seafaring republic from accounts of travelers' tales and court gossip. As Jacob Burckhardt explains in his detailed account of the history and culture of Venice during the period:

The myth of Venice was made up of countervailing strands, for while it was believed to be a prosperous opulent place, which in turn bred decadence and political corruption, a counter-myth existed, depicting Venice as a piously Christian state; a self-governing republic with a system of law that was both impartial and judicious. (Burckhardt: 373)

Glenda Leeming sees Wesker's conception of Shylock as a "free spirit" who comes into conflict with a Venice whose laws are not impartial:

The free spirit is the supremacy of the human being over the state, over repressive authority, over that which aims to frustrate initiative, cripple imagination, induce conformity. Shylock embodies all of this. (*M*: xxxvi)

Ironically it is only within the confines of the ghetto that Wesker's Shylock is able to live out this aspect of his nature. Outside of its walls Venice entirely controls the way in which Shylock is able to conduct his affairs. His older sister Rivka comments:

I've watched you, wandering away from Jewish circles, putting your nose out in alien places. I've watched you be restless and pretend you can walk in anybody's streets. Don't think I've not understood you; suffocating in this little yard, waiting for your very own scholar to arrive. (*M*: 57)

By contrast, in *The Merchant of Venice* Shylock appears, at least on the surface, to enjoy a far greater freedom within the city. No mention is made of the system of enforced enclosure of Jews within the Venetian ghetto and Shylock seems to own his own property and

come and go as he pleases, unhampered by the restrictions of a curfew. Furthermore, until his defeat at the hands of the court, Shylock maintains a position of power over the Venetians, both in terms of forcing Antonio to come to him in order to borrow money, and of the legal authority he exercises after the bond is signed. Shylock's dominance over Venice reaches its zenith during the early part of the court scene, where it seems that Shylock has bound Venice by its own laws:

I have possessed your grace of what I purpose,
And by our holy Sabbath have I sworn
To have the due and forfeit of my bond.
If you deny it, let the danger light
Upon your charter and your city's freedom.
(*MV*: 190)

Shylock goes further, and uses the opportunity his position now commands to call into question the morality of Venetian law. In response to the Duke's plea that he should give up the demands of the bond, Shylock counters by exposing the hypocrisy of Venetian society:

What judgment shall I dread, doing no wrong?
You have among you many a purchased slave
Which, like your asses and your dogs and mules
You use in abject and in slavish parts
Because you bought them.
Shall I say to you
"Let them be free, marry them to your heirs.
Why sweat they under burdens? Let their beds
Be made as soft as yours, and let their palates
Be seasoned with such viands." You will answer
"The slaves are ours." So do I answer you.
The pound of flesh which I demand of him
Is dearly bought. 'Tis mine, and I will have it
If you deny me, fie upon your law:
There is no force in the decrees of Venice.
I stand for judgment. Answer: Shall I have it?
(*MV*: 192-193)

Frank Whigham believes that Shylock's behavior reveals a desire to wield power over the state of Venice for both cultural and ethnic reasons in a bid to spite the patrician system of government: "Shylock desires not community with but dominance over his social superiors. He wants to invert the hierarchy, using the power of authentication himself to spite the principles... asserted by the aristocratic ideology" (Whigman: 107).

In his *Variations on The Merchant of Venice* Charles Marowitz' Shylock is also on a similar quest for political dominance, within the new setting of Palestine under British mandate after World War II. Here, Shylock is a prominent member of the Zionist movement, fighting against British neo-colonialism for an independent Jewish state. In his version of the court scene, Shylock is saved from humiliation by the British when his comrades storm the court room and stage an armed take-over (Marowitz 1978: 282).

Whereas Wesker and Marowitz both wish to portray a different Shylock from the Shakespearian figure forced to utter the humiliating words, "I am content" (*MV*: 207), Wesker's Shylock is neither militant nor revolutionary. In wanting to portray the kind of Jew who was familiar to him, Wesker imbues Shylock with an intellectual curiosity and a passion for the acquisition of knowledge in rare books, together with a desire for integration and acceptance within Venetian society. When this is denied to him, he does so within the confines of the ghetto: for example, he offers money to build a new synagogue, and offers to shield the Portuguese Mendes family – acts of charity, but ones that also become the means of cementing his own reputation within the Jewish community.

Yet, Wesker makes it clear that Shylock's intentions are not malevolent against Venetian society, and if he could be criticized for anything it would perhaps be a desire to be seen as a moral and intellectual leader for reasons of personal vanity. For instance, he excitedly tells Antonio about his act of arranging asylum for the Portuguese Jewish refugees within the ghetto: "They talk, you see, Antonio! I'm a name in my community. From nobody to a somebody, a name!" (*M*: 13).

While perhaps motivated by low self-esteem and the need to be liked, Shylock does not wish to wield power in order to exact revenge, or to gain political authority. Moreover, Wesker ensures that Shylock's sphere of influence never extends further than the gates of the Ghetto Nuovo. To this end, Wesker's Shylock seems to share the same fate as characters from earlier plays by Wesker, such as Ronnie Kahn in *Chicken Soup With Barley* (1958) and Beattie Bryant in *Roots* (1959), figures who strive to change themselves and others within their immediate surroundings, but who are eventually disillusioned, sometimes by outside events, or through a naïveté within themselves.

This same naïveté can be found in Shylock's enthusiasm for the city of Venice, which he seems to assume will display a reciprocal attachment: "I love Venice, Antonio, because it's a city full of men busy living, and passing through, and free to do both as their right, not as a favour" (*M*: 38).

Antonio, in turn, reminds Shylock that the yellow hat he wears upon his head is a sign that suggests the contrary. Iska Alter also believe that Shylock's view of Venetian society is too utopian:

When one party – in this case Venice – possesses the power to alter the conditions under which the covenant operates at will or through whimsy... a marginal group such as the Jews of the Ghetto Nuovo would do well to maintain a sceptical attitude toward the sufficiency of the law and the value of legal agreements as methods of ensuring communal survival. (*Alter*: 544)

Shylock's naïveté is accentuated by others who show more awareness of the true nature of the relationship under this uneasy system of civic toleration. Shylock's friend Tubal describes the Jews' existence as a precarious survival "from contract to contract" (*M*: 15) and goes on to describe the legalized forms of extortion that the Venetian authorities practice:

Trade is trade and they know it also, and we pay! An annual tribute of twenty thousand ducats; another twenty thousand for renting these squalid walls; fifteen thousand more to the Navy board – for God knows what; another hundred for the upkeep of the canals which stink! And, on top of all that, ten thousand more in time of

war which, since our beloved and righteous republic seems constantly fighting with someone or other, ensures that sum too as a regular payment. Why, sometimes there's barely pennies in the Ghetto. For days we're borrowing off each other, till new funds flow in. Only fourteen hundred souls, remember. We're no more than that, trapped in an oppressive circus with three water wells and a proclivity for fires. (*M*: 16)

Tubal's account of Venetian toleration for the Jews in return for regular financial support was based on Wesker's research into sixteenth century Venetian society. Mary McCarthy, in her book *Venice Observed*, summarises the historical reality of the relationship between Jew and Venetian:

Here the Venetian cash-register rings, for if the Republic tolerated the Jews, it did so for a price. No Jew, including a native, could stay in Venice without a permit, which cost a considerable sum of money, and which had to be renewed every five, seven, or ten years for an additional fee... the Jews had no recourse, generally, but to pay the price set by the Republic for its continued toleration. The notion that a Jew had rights did not imply any doctrine of equality; the Jew had *specific* rights, the rights he paid to enjoy. (McCarthy: 52)

While essentially an exploitative one, in *Shylock*, Wesker compares the relationship of the Jews to the Venetians in the context of the introduction of Rebecca Da Mendes, and the writer Solomon Usque, both Portuguese refugees, who remind the audience that outright persecution exists beyond the city boundaries of Venice:

USQUE Fifty people burnt at the stake.

REBECCA Old women, young men, relatives, friends.

USQUE Marian Fernandes, a cousin from Lisbon.

REBECCA Maria Diez, my old aunt from Guarda.

USQUE Sebastian Rodrigo Pinto, a friend from Lamego.

REBECCA Diego Della Rogna, his wife Isabelle Nones, their four daughters and two sons.

USQUE An entire family burnt.

REBECCA Facing each other. (*M*: 12-13)

Even Shylock, all too willing as he is to see the best in people, has only recently come to believe that Venice is safe enough to bring his precious collection of books out of hiding. This incident in the play

was again inspired from historical accounts of Venice, where in 1553, instigated by the authorities, an outbreak of book burning took place.

The limited tolerance that Venice holds for the Jews is demonstrated through Wesker's portrayal of certain Venetians. For instance, Shylock's famous speech, "Hath not a Jew eyes" (*MV*: 161-162) (the only passage Wesker directly uses from *The Merchant of Venice*), becomes part of Lorenzo's anti-Semitic rhetoric. Subverting the speech allows Wesker to displace one of the main cornerstones that has sustained critical defence of *The Merchant of Venice*, where it is argued that the speech emphasizes the play's essential humanism. Victor Hugo, for instance, believed that "this sublime imprecation is the most eloquent plea that the human voice has ever dared to utter for a despised race" (Cited in Danson: 106). Even Moelwyn Merchant's more modest assessment still sees the speech as an ameliorative one against Shylock's subsequent behavior where he argues: "it can be justly argued that the trial is "rigged" and our sympathies therefore enlisted by simple reaction on behalf of Shylock – who has earlier put up a dignified and wholly acceptable plea for his essential humanity" (Shakespeare 1967: 25). By contrast, Wesker believes that the speech permitted audiences to "come away with its prejudices about the Jew confirmed but held with an easy conscience because a noble plea for extenuating circumstances had been made" (Wesker 1997: xvi).

In the mouth of Lorenzo, this famous plea emphasizes racial difference, and Shylock rejects its false sentiments angrily:

I will not have my humanity mocked and apologised for. If I am unexceptionably like any man then I need no exceptional portraiture. I merit no special pleas, no special cautions, no special gratitudes. My humanity is my right, not your bestowed and gracious privilege. (*M*: 77)

The fact that this one speech has been so readily accepted by critics was not lost on Wesker, who removes what amounts to the dramatic fig leaf that is still often used to defend and justify the play. Wesker's position seems to be that if Shakespeare had wanted to portray a real Jew, he would have discarded the elements of

medieval caricature in his representation of Shylock – his love of gold, his hate of Christians and the desire to shed their blood. Lorenzo’s false representation in *Shylock* is based on misconceptions that run throughout *The Merchant of Venice*, where his humanity – save perhaps in the scene that recalls the memory of his dead wife Leah (*MV*: 164) – is denied. Besides this one isolated incident, Shylock’s soliloquies only reveal the extent of his hatred for Antonio.

Wesker’s displacement of such a well-known speech as “Hath not a Jew eyes” (*MV*: 161-162) is directed at the audiences with the assumption that they either know the lines from having seen *The Merchant of Venice* in performance, or else have a hazy buried knowledge of the speech. Wesker also uses the same technique in a subtle allusion to Bassanio’s other well-known speech in *The Merchant of Venice* where he discloses his intention to woo Portia. Here the line, “In Belmont is a lady richly left” (*MV*: 111) is changed to “In Belmont sir there is a lady” (*M*: 19), where the slight change in syntax is enough to communicate Portia’s straitened circumstances and her eventual decision to turn her estates over to agriculture and husbandry. Iska Alter believes that these changes are not lost on a modern audience who, with prior knowledge of *The Merchant of Venice* would experience Wesker’s play with a deeper sense of “the ironies of the modern adaptation” (Alter: 537).

Wesker also extensively re-envisages the famous trial scene from *The Merchant of Venice*. Although it is commonly perceived that Shylock is made to suffer terribly at the hands of the Christians, closer analysis of the text shows that he is at least allowed to keep one half of his wealth. It is only after his death that the remaining portion of his estate goes to his son-in-law Lorenzo. While Shylock’s conversion to Christianity is no doubt meant to be a humiliation, it could be argued that for an Elizabethan audience it would have been interpreted as an act of mercy rather than punishment. The judgement in *Shylock* is far harsher and more indicative of the city’s true relationship to its Jews. Here the state confiscates all Shylock’s goods, including his precious collection of books. Antonio comments, “You take his life when you take his

books” (*M*: 79), another ironic echo of Shylock’s rejoinder in *The Merchant of Venice*, “You take my life / When you do take the means whereby I live” (*MV*: 206). Wesker’s Shylock is bitterly ironic after hearing the Doge’s decision:

No. Take my books. The law must be observed. We have need of the law, what need do we have of books? Distressing, disturbing things, besides. Why, dear friend, they’d make us question laws. Ha! And who in his right mind would want to do that? Certainly not old Shylock. Take my books. Take everything. I do not want the law departed from, not one letter departed from. (*M*: 79)

The court’s decision to seize Shylock’s collection of books cuts off what Shylock calls the “little springs” (*M*: 44) of knowledge that they represent, snuffing out, at least temporarily, Shylock’s spirit of faith in humanity. Yet, we are reminded earlier in the play, by Shylock himself that the knowledge carried in the written word cannot ever be completely expunged:

When generals imagine their vain glory is all, and demagogues smile with sweet benevolence as they tighten their screws of power – up! ... A little lost spring, full of blinding questions and succulent doubts. The word! Unsuspected! Written! Printed! Indestructible! (*M*: 44)

Both plays show that the law of Venice is not immutable. Robert Whigman sees the concept of justice as a flexible quality in *The Merchant of Venice*, capable of being changed suddenly when its interests are threatened (Whigman 1979: 111). For instance, the Duke cautions Shylock that if he goes against Antonio’s wishes and fails to renounce his Jewish faith then the sentence of death for attempting to take a Venetian’s life will automatically be carried out. The Duke’s decision seems to rely not on the edicts of the statute book, but rather on a sense of justice based on little more than caprice. Wesker’s concentration on the partiality of Venice’s laws stands in stark contrast to Shakespeare’s seeming respect for its precepts. David McPherson, for instance, believes that Shakespeare perpetuated a commonly held myth of his time about the non-partisan laws of Venice. However, he finds dissenting voices in Renaissance Venice itself such as Saint Didier, who was openly

critical of the Republic's system of judiciary, believing that its reputation for liberty and impartiality was an illusory one. He comments:

The liberty of Venice makes every thing Authentick, for whatsoever the Life is, or Religion one Professes, provided, you do not Talk, or Attempt anything against the State, or the Nobility, one may be sure to Live unmolested" (Cited in McPherson: 36-7).

In a peculiar reversal, we find Shakespeare both upholding the myth of Venetian justice, while simultaneously showing it to be false in the explicit prejudice the Duke shows towards Shylock and the case he presides over. From the outset, the Duke makes his sympathies clear to Antonio:

I am sorry for thee. Thou art come to answer
A stony adversary, an inhuman wretch
Uncapable of pity, void and empty
From any dram of mercy.
(*MV*: 188)

The mere description of Shylock as an "inhuman wretch" makes clear the Duke's antipathy, even when one considers the barbaric terms of Shylock's claim for justice.

Not only does Venice assume superiority regarding its laws. This dominance extends to the promotion of Christianity over the Jewish religion. In Wesker's play, Bassanio supports Lorenzo by saying, "power resides in the strength of moral superiority" (*M*: 40), by arguing that Venice's overall dominance comes, not so much through its mercantile skills of trade but from "Christian principle" (*M*: 40). Shakespeare's Venice seems to rest upon these same principles and although no such conscious assertion is uttered, there exists an ever present assumption of moral superiority. This manifests itself in everything from Lancelot Gobbo's jibe at Jessica's conversion to Christianity raising the price of pork to Shylock's forced embrace of their religion. A.D. Moody, in his perceptive study of the play, comments on the Venetians' behaviour:

I would suggest that the play is "about" the manner in which the Christians succeed in the world by not practising their ideals of love and mercy: it is about their exploitation of an assumed

unworldliness to gain the worldly advantage over Shylock. In this view the play does not celebrate the Christian virtues so much as expose their absence. (Moody: 10)

In Wesker's play, it is Antonio, a Christian Venetian, who is most aware of his city's shortcomings, and that the moral superiority his fellow citizens adopt is merely a cover for their true intentions: "Our motives are opportunist and our power rests on a geographical accident, so let's have no nonsense about Venice being a second Rome" (*M*: 40-41). Again, Wesker takes the myth of Venice as a second Roman Republic from his research into the city during the Renaissance period. He draws on the work of D. S. Chambers' influential book, *The Imperial Age of Venice 1380-1580*. Chambers is similarly sceptical about claims of Venice being a second Rome, and points out that even the oldest patrician families could trace themselves back by several generations to the ranks of humble fishermen. In the play, Wesker shows that a Venetian such as Graziano is unhampered by the contradiction of fishermen presiding over a self-proclaimed second Roman Republic:

I mean, the point is, we don't think of ourselves as descended from fishermen. It's just that we're – old. Go back a long way. The Roman Empire. Venice as a second Rome. Ancient.
(*M*: 30)

Nevertheless, the history of the city, from the founding fathers onwards, seemed to promote the belief that Venice was to be God's chosen city. Jacob Burckhardt, in his book on Italian Renaissance history, comments, "Venice recognized itself from the first as a strange and mysterious creation, the fruit of a higher power than human ingenuity" (Burckhardt: 40). Venice's image of itself as the first Christian Republic might also explain the attitude of the Christians to the Jews in each play. Its laws appear to be a blend of persecution and tolerance, reflecting perhaps the struggle that the city felt between its special status with God and its reputation as a trading centre. The hostility between Jew and Christian which existed within Venice may also have come from the other belief by the Jews that they were God's chosen people. It may well have been that it was the existence of two communities, each claiming to have

a special relationship with the Divine, that caused the sense of mistrust and enmity that each play reveals. However, Wesker's Shylock is humorously sceptical over his people's belief in themselves as God's chosen people. He suspects that the origins of this belief belong to a ruse concocted by the Old Testament's Abraham in order to instil discipline into the unruly Jewish tribes. Shylock imagines how the myth might have begun:

Behold! An unseen God! God of the Universe! Of all men! and – wait, for here it comes, – and, “of all men you are the chosen ones!” Irresistible! In an instant they were quiet. Subdued... It worked! They had God and Abraham had them. (*M*: 5)

The mood of light-hearted scepticism about the origins of the Jews' relationship with God is not shared by the Venetians. Crucial to the Christians' quest to dominate ideologically in both *The Merchant of Venice* and *Shylock* is the conversion of Jessica to Christianity. Shakespeare portrays the conversion as a remedy to save Jessica's very soul. From the moment of elopement with Lorenzo, when he proclaims, “Now by my hood, a gentile, and no Jew” (*MV*: 147), to the “comic” scene in which Lancelot Gobbo chides Jessica that her soul is damned by virtue of her birth, she gives the assured reply: “I shall be saved by my husband. He hath made me a Christian” (*MV*: 181).

Lorenzo in Wesker's play seems to subscribe to the same view that marriage has saved Jessica from damnation:

LORENZO The sadness Portia saw was also of a forsaken race, married to a God they'd thought had chosen them. Doomed!

JESSICA (*Icily*) You think so?

LORENZO But there are always survivors. I will make you a wife, a woman and a Christian. (*M*: 67)

Lorenzo's claim to make Jessica not only a Christian but his wife both look unlikely to succeed. Although Jessica is nervous at having to integrate into a strange new culture, her first introduction to Christian society at Belmont make her notice the anti-Semitic sentiments she hears from the mouths of her new friends:

BASSANIO I warned him! A Jew to be trusted?

JESSICA Please! Gentlemen! Remember me! I'm raw. My rhythms still belong to the Ghetto. I can't slip so quickly from God to God like a whore. (*M*: 65)

Wesker's humanism – a strand running throughout all his plays – is used to address this issue when he has Shylock put forward a possible solution to the schism that exists between Jew and Christian. He argues that both creeds *need* each other for the sake of mutual survival:

Listen. You have us for life, gentlemen, for life. Learn to live with us. The Jew is the Christian's parent. Difficult, I know. Parent-children relationships, always difficult, and even worse when murder is involved within the family. But what can we do? It *is* the family! Not only *would* I be your friend but I *have* to be your friend. (*M*: 39)

This argument does nothing to sway Lorenzo in his implacable distrust of Shylock. Wesker's Lorenzo is a complicated creation. While for instance he eschews Venice's obsession with capitalism, he still believes passionately in the moral and religious superiority of Venice itself. "There'll be more God than Mammon in our statute books" (*M*: 71-72) he warns, when his generation comes to power within the city. However, behind Lorenzo's fervour for social justice lurks a strong prejudice against the city's Jews, for he believes them to be instrumental in helping to create the mood of corruption in Venice through their practice of usury. Antonio, in *The Merchant of Venice*, holds similar views regarding the lending of money at interest, but the Antonio in *Shylock* berates the court during the trial of his friend for the hypocrisy that the city practises in blaming the Jews for the existence of the practice:

The usurer's a Jew, and the Jew the people's favourite villain. Convenient! Easy! But the Jew pursues what he hates to pursue in order to relieve *us* of the sin. Usury *must* exist in our city, for we have many poor and our economy can't turn without it. Do we condemn the Jew for doing what our system has required him to do? Then if we do, let's swear, upon the cross that among us we know of no Christian, no patrician, no duke, bishop or merchant who, in his secret chambers, does not lend at interest, for that is

what usury is. Swear it! On the cross! No one, we know no one!
(*pause*) You will inflame the people's grievances in order to achieve power, Lorenzo, but once there you'll sing such different songs I think. (*M: 75*)

Lorenzo in Wesker's play is close to his Shakespearian counterpart who Whigman accuses of seducing Jessica into the rampant capitalism of Venice through the profligate spending of her father's money. Here, Whigman comments, "true love, exploitation and the demonstration of identity coalesce" (Whigman: 113). However, as we have seen, Jessica in Wesker's play neither squanders her father's money, nor is blind to the shortcomings of her new husband.

Wesker's denunciation of Venice's hypocritical attitude to usury also extends to other "borrowings" the city makes from the Ghetto. This does not only include the series of taxes and levies heaped upon its inhabitants – the city also "borrows" extensively from Jewish culture. Shylock comments to Antonio:

Stay! You know how the Ghetto is constantly filled with visitors ... Stay. It'll be full of Venetian intelligentsia, they're always coming to attend the festivals, listen to the music. Very exotic we are. We fascinate them all, whether from England where they've expelled us, or Spain where they burn us. (*M: 7*)

Unlike the unexplained melancholy Antonio experiences in *The Merchant Of Venice* – "In sooth, I know not why I am so sad" (*MV: 103*) – the Antonio of *Shylock* finds cause for his melancholic turn of mind, for he has realised that he has squandered his life in the pursuit of wealth:

Those books. Look at them. How they reminded me what I am, what I've done. Nothing! A merchant! ... I see nothing. I travel neither to England to check cloth, nor Syria to check cotton, or Corfu to see that the olive oil is cleanly corked. (*M: 3-4*)

Belmont

There is some critical confusion about the function of Belmont in the scheme of *The Merchant of Venice*, especially the final act. Some see it as a panacea to the corruption and avarice that preoccupies the world of the city, and the mood of this final scene

seems to be one of harmony, love and music, where the memory of Venice already seems a distant memory. However, some critical opinion merely sees Belmont as little more than a continuation of Venetian values still being practised in a fairytale setting. Walter Cohen, for instance, makes the scathing comment, “the concluding tripartite unity of Antonio, Bassanio and Portia enacts precisely [an] interclass harmony between landed wealth and mercantile capital, with the former dominant” (Cohen: 772).

In Cohen’s view, the change of scene merely represents the exchange of one repressive ideology for another, based on the privilege of class over that of money. Wesker retains the idea of a Belmont functioning as a retreat and an alternative to Venice, yet he divests it of the classical and mythical resonances it has in Shakespeare’s play and presents it instead as a practical alternative to Venice’s capitalism. Furthermore, we learn that the estate of Belmont is bankrupt. Portia’s solution is to “reclaim the land” (*M*: 45), for she detects portents that Venetian power and influence are declining:

I love my city, Nerissa, but I hear rumours. Timber is scarce, the number of ships registered by Venice is dropping. Signs, my dear, the signs are there. It’s goodbye to Venice, and into the wheatlands of my estates near Treviso and Vicenza and here, Belmont. We’ll become growers! Stock-breeders! Cattle and drainage! That’s where our fortunes will go. (*M*: 45-46)

Through Portia we are aware that “redemption is to be found in physical labour and intellectual activity, not in the more genial comforts of Renaissance comedy” (Alter: 545). Despite offering this as a possible alternative to the corruption of Venice, Wesker resists the temptation to make Belmont the romantic and “hymeneal conclusion of Shakespearian comedy” (Alter: 545). Instead, Wesker encourages us to harbour suspicions about the unsuitability of the two couples and the play ends with “stage images of separation and knowing isolation” (Alter: 545). By concluding with both Portia and Shylock about to embrace a bitter fate, Wesker avoids the accusations made of *The Merchant of Venice* that Portia is responsible for destroying Shylock. In Wesker’s play, Portia initially offers hope

to Shylock by providing a loophole within the law to save his friend. Unfortunately, Venice manages to find another loophole within its laws to make an example of Shylock. Instead of ending on a point of harmony and comic double entendre in a moonlit Belmont, Wesker ends his version of the play in the same mood of melancholy that starts *The Merchant of Venice*.

REFERENCES

PRIMARY SOURCES

- SHAKESPEARE, William. *The Merchant of Venice*. Jay L. Halio (ed.). Oxford: OUP, 1993.
- . *The Merchant of Venice*. Moelwyn Merchant (ed.). London: Penguin, 1967.
- WESKER, Arnold. *The Merchant*. London: Methuen, 1983.

REFERENTIAL WORKS

- ALTER, Iska. ““Barbaric Laws. Barbaric Bonds”, Arnold Wesker’s *The Merchant*.” *Modern Drama* 31.4 (1998): 536-547.
- AUDEN, W.H. *The Dyer’s Hand and Other Essays*. London: Faber, 1968.
- BURCKHARDT, Jacob. *The Civilisation of The Renaissance in Italy*. S.G.C. Middlemore (trans.). London: Phaidon, 1965.
- COHEN, Derek. *Shakespeare’s Culture of Violence*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993.
- COHEN, Walter. “*The Merchant of Venice* and the Possibilities of Historical Criticism.” *English Literary History*, 49 (1982): 765-89.
- DANSON, Lawrence. *The Harmonies of The Merchant of Venice*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978.
- GRANVILLE-BARKER, Harley. “Preface” to *The Merchant of Venice*. London: Nick Hern Books, 1993.
- GROSS, John. *Shylock: Four Hundred Years in the Life of a Legend*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1992.
- HEDBACK, Ann-Mari. “The Scheme of Things in Arnold Wesker’s *The Merchant*”. *Studia Neophilologica*, 51 (1979): 233-243.

- MAROWITZ, Charles. "Giving Them Hell" in *Plays and Players* 24.10 (1977): 15-17.
- . *The Marowitz Shakespeare*. London: Boyars, 1978.
- . *Recycling Shakespeare*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991.
- MCCARTHY, Mary. *Venice Observed*. London: Heinemann, 1961.
- MCPHERSON, David. *Shakespeare, Jonson and the Myth of Venice*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1990.
- MOODY, A.D. *Shakespeare: The Merchant of Venice*. London: Edward Arnold, 1964.
- ROSENBERG, Edgar. *From Shylock to Svengali*. Stanford University Press, 1961.
- ROTH, Cecil. "The Background of Shylock". *The Review of English Studies* 9.34 (1933): 148-156. Article Stable URL: <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/507864>>
- SALINGER, Leo. "Is *The Merchant of Venice* a Problem Play?" in *Dramatic Form in Shakespeare and the Jacobean: Essays*, Cambridge: CUP, 1986, 19-31.
- WESKER, Arnold. "A Sense of What Should Follow". *Theatre Quarterly* 8 (1977): 5-24.
- . "A Nasty Piece Of Work". *The Sunday Times*, 6 June, 1993.
- . *The Birth of Shylock and the Death of Zero Mostel*, London: Quartet, 1997.
- WHIGMAN, Robert. "Ideology and Class Conduct in *The Merchant of Venice*". *Renaissance Drama* 10 (1979): 93-115.

¹ The play was originally entitled *The Merchant*, which was the given name for its 1976 premiere in Stockholm and subsequent 1977 and 1978 productions on Broadway and Birmingham UK. Since then, Wesker has retitled the play *Shylock* and this is now the name published in volume four of his *Collected Plays*. All quotations from the play in this paper come from the 1983 Methuen Student edition, with notes and commentary by Glenda Leeming. Although this edition uses the earlier title *The Merchant*, I have respected Arnold Wesker's wish by referring to the play throughout under its revised title of *Shylock*.

² Wesker's *The Merchant* edited by Methuen is referred to as *M* throughout this article.

³ Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* edited by Jay L. Halio for OUP is referred to as *MV* throughout this article.