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The Merchant of Venice Through the Lens of Continental Philosophy

Editorial Introduction

The papers included here were originally presented at the first annual Joseph J. Hartog Symposium at Pomona College, in November of 2006. The intention behind the Symposium was to gather scholars who would read *The Merchant of Venice* through the lens of a continental philosopher: thus Zdravko Planinc read through Adorno, Julia Lupton through Arendt and Schmitt, Paul Kottman through Hegel, Ken Jackson through Kierkegaard and Derrida, and I through Derrida alone. The event was framed by Art Horowitz's account of 20th century production history, and Aaron Kunin's critical commentary on the day's proceedings.

We knew our approach would raise interesting questions. But none of us, I believe, was prepared for the remarkable integrity of the Symposium as a whole. To be sure, we had our methodological differences. Some of the papers, for instance, pull the play in the direction of the philosopher in question while others pull the philosopher toward the play; thus though one can learn a good deal here both about *Merchant* and about continental thought, the degree of the mix varies from paper to paper. Far more important, though, is the division that arises from what we were amazed to find was a single focus: Shylock's conversion is at the heart of each of the papers except one—and that one, Ken Jackson's, is arguing *against* the idea that the conversion is the main religious event of the courtroom scene. From this unified focus emerges the one question that concerns us all, the question of where the conversion should be situated on the line between cruel coercion and social benevolence. Almost all of the papers present Shylock as the modern everyman: his economy, his status in the world, tells us something about ourselves. Is the conversion an integral part of this status? Is it a social or civic necessity? As a social or civic event, is it effectual? Or is Shylock a tragic casualty of the march of modernity? We find the whole scale of arguments represented here, and the question of the relation of the

outsider to modernity discussed forcefully from every angle. There follows a brief summary of six of the Symposium's papers.

Art Horowitz's paper takes up the difficulties of staging *The Merchant of Venice* after Auschwitz, and describes a number of productions and adaptations in which the difficulties were addressed. In general such address involves understating both Belmont and all but the play's blackest comedy while ennobling the figure of Shylock, but Horowitz's intention is to describe productions that take an almost opposite tack, emphasizing not Shylock's nobility but his otherness. Thus Peter Zadek's production, in which Shylock was the essence of the rapacious Jew and the play's comedy vulgar farce. Thus too Arthur Hopkin's production, in which Jacob Adler's Shylock spoke in Yiddish while the rest of the characters spoke in English. Both these stagings render Shylock the alien, unbridgeably divided from the Venetians: these are Shylocks for whom no conversion is possible, whatever the play nominally mandates. Indeed conversion, Horowitz's account suggests, is a problem even in adaptations that ennoble Shylock; for instance in Wesker's rewriting, where Shylock is educated, modern, and liberal, his conversion is transformed into the loss of his precious library. The most startling of all are George Tabori's productions. In the first of these, the play becomes play-within-a play, acted by concentration camp inmates before an audience of Nazi guards. In the second, Shylock is fragmented, played by 13 different actors; for Tabori Shylock is almost an impossible figure, divided even from himself. In their radicalism these treatments of the play reveal the extraordinary degree to which it causes us discomfort. All the political questions are raised in this juxtaposition of interpretations. After Auschwitz do we take the road of assimilation or of identity politics? And is it possible that neither road offers comfort or protection?

Zdravko Planinc's paper opens with an account of Adorno's analysis of modern antisemitism as related to the rise of capitalism at the expense of the premodern understanding of virtue, religion, and family. Several points emerge from Adorno's argument that antisemitism is linked to the totalizing thrust of modernity, among them the psychological insight that the antisemite "wants to imitate his mental image of the Jew" and the broader picture of the Jew as operating under an older economy, the Jew as other to the modern understanding of wealth as providence, and to "the new race of men who have elevated business into an absolute." Both of these ideas are staged, Planinc argues, in *The Merchant of Venice,* where distinctions blur, where, in several ways, the Jews become Christian, and, in many more, the Christians become like their caricature of Jews—where, what is more, the hallmark of the modern understanding is revealed in Antonio's conflation of theology and economics, a

conflation Planinc demonstrates with careful detail. The main part of the paper, however, illustrates Adorno's argument in an unexpected and illuminating way, namely, through an examination of Shakespeare's use of biblical motif. The subtleties of this account are legion: Shakespeare has his characters re-enact biblical scenes and then depart from them, or refer to passages in misleading ways. To offer only two instances, Bassanio's first staged encounter with Antonio parallels the return of the prodigal son, with Shylock soon slated to play the role of fatted calf; and Shylock in the courtroom is Abraham to Antonio's Isaac—with a final twist by which the new salvific interpretation of the Old Testament story places Shylock suddenly in the role of the ram in the thicket. Much more specific analysis follows, including a consideration of the relationship of circumcision of the heart to the blood libel in an account of the original import of the bond. The final parallel is a tour-de-force reading of Portia, called "a Daniel" and "a second Daniel," as the anti-type of the two biblical figures bearing that name. What emerges out of the specifics is a picture of a thoroughly vulgar modernity in which Venice and Belmont are not at all at odds: the former represents economic reality and the latter its sit-com fantasy.

Julia Lupton is already well known for her argument that Shylock's conversion is neither wholly forced nor ultimately tragic. The idea around which she centers her interpretation, here as elsewhere, is that the conversion is a naturalization that will accord him certain social rights; it is thus precisely as tragic as Jewish emancipation in general, and very close, perhaps, to as little forced. Beginning from Shylock's expression, "I am content," she argues, more broadly, that he embodies a 'discontented contentment' representative of the prevailing conditions of modern politics, in which our political community is not a corporate body, not a unit with which we can feel one. What is new in this essay is a fruitful extrapolation of this argument through key texts by Hannah Arendt and Carl Schmitt. Arendt and Schmitt criticize liberalism from oppositional perspectives that together draw us to awareness of the central liberal conundrum: Arendt expresses doubts about liberalism's homogeneity, Schmitt about its pluralism; and Shylock is strung between them, "representing the mixed body politic of modernity in both the plurality of its constitution and its uneasy relation to the state of exception." Lupton's argument sheds interesting light on the ideas of both thinkers, but perhaps even more interesting is the way they deepen her thesis about naturalization. Shylock, she contends, enters the courtroom a resident alien, is rendered a stateless refugee by Portia, is returned to the status of resident alien by the Duke, and is made a citizen by Antonio. Read through Arendt, this is a journey to emancipation, where emancipation does not mean assimilation but rather the possibility of becoming political. But read through Arendt-Schmitt, two even more interesting insights emerge. One is a redemption of the character of Antonio, who not only extends Shylock his naturalization but shows him, earlier in the play, a Schmittian respect, insofar as

"lend it to thine enemy" bespeaks a recognition of equality. The other, more radical, is that Shylock stands for an aporia: he is, in a sense, naturalized only because he will never fully be naturalized; he remains an 'exception,' an example of the movement by which an act of extra-legal power re-establishes the status quo, of which he, therefore, is both the essential representative and not a full member. The discontentment in Shylock's content is emphasized; he becomes the model for the liberal complaint against liberalism.

Paul Kottman seeks moments in the play that overflow the political. He suggests that the discomfort contemporary critics have with the notion of radical hatred requires a refusal to admit that Shylock might be harboring such a feeling; in order then to cover and justify this refusal they read the play as presenting a political problem that has, of necessity, a political solution. In distinction to these critics, he argues that we must take the possibility of such hatred seriously, both on the narrow grounds that Shylock is refusing the political, or calculable, when he seeks the fiscally worthless pound of flesh, and on the broader grounds that the courtroom scene makes no dramatic sense unless we believe it is at least possible for Shylock to be unappeasable. Thus, like Lupton, Kottman argues that the play represents an aporia through the figure of Shylock, but it is not the aporia of liberalism; rather it is the aporia involving our desire for political solution and our unspoken awareness that some situations have no political solution. The Christians in the play understand mercy as an excess, but they cannot bear the idea of hatred as another excess, hence they several times offer Shylock money in the courtroom scene, treating his unstrained as constrainable: in this they are like the critics who attempt to find political solution to the play's problems. The culmination of Kottman's argument is a critique of a previously published version of Lupton's, and of Hegel. Both Lupton and Hegel argue that Shylock's fate cannot be tragic; both seek to dissolve aporia. The critique of Lupton is strongest when Kottman suggests that Shylock is being forced not into modern emancipation but into allegiance to another corporate body, namely the church. It is on more radical ground when it relies on a comparison between Shakespeare and George Bush, both of whom render their auditors fearful of the alien's excessive, unappeasable wrath. Kottman's final question is provocative and disturbing: "Do we, today, after Baghdad, London, Madrid, 9/11 and so on, really think that the contentment of citizenship is an anecdote to hatred?"

Ken Jackson, like Kottman, seeks the points in the play that overflow and unsettle the political. He argues that the trial scene, and particularly its religious import, can only be understood by reading it alongside the story of the near-sacrifice of Isaac, as that story is theorized by Kierkegaard and Derrida. Through careful analysis, he shows that it is possible that Shylock, in the courtroom, hears both divine commands of the Genesis story: the command that Abraham give

the "gift of death" and the command that he lower the knife. Jackson presents both commands as originating in a Law that is higher than human law, an absolute otherness that is neither Christian nor Jewish, but a universal phenomenological structure. Thus Shylock comes to understand that the law is not something one chooses, but something by which one is grasped. And, through Shylock, we readers come to understand two important things. The first is specific to the play: that the central religious moment in the courtroom scene is not the conversion nor anything else in the realm of politics, but rather a structure in which the call for gift unsettles the political. The second is that "Shakespeare famously never recognizes a divine presence or immanence, not because of a forward looking sensibility, but because the absolute demands of Genesis 22 read seriously and devoutly preclude any such recognition." In other words, Shakespeare, in critical respects, anticipates the understanding of the divine espoused by many contemporary continental philosophers, the understanding sometimes expressed in the phrase "religion without religion."

My paper takes up Derrida's commentary on the play in some detail. I argue that the commentary presents two oppositional thrusts. The first is a defense of Shylock, in all his stereotypical Jewish allegiance to the external, the letter, and the law (or, as Derrida puts it, in his refusal of a certain translation, a translation to inwardness, meaning, and spirit). Emerging from this is a defense of the stereotype itself, such that the model of the Jew as legalist is both redeemed and also used to overturn the model of the Jew as the agent of contractual, fiscal relation, which Derrida associates with the Christians in the play and with one understanding of Christianity in general. The second thrust is a Hegelian or Rosenzweigian acknowledgement of the necessity of a synthesis between Jew and Christian, which Derrida offers us despite the fact that such a synthesis leaves the Jew of necessity in the position of 'the untranslatable remainder to be mourned.' Part way through the paper, I turn to the play itself in order to provide support for the first of these thrusts and to suggest that the second is, from both philosophical and literary perspectives, unnecessary. Derrida is at his best, I argue, when his Jewish blood is roused in defense of Shylock, and at something less than his best when he dissolves Jew and Christian into the stew of modernity. Like Jackson, I understand the idea of Law in the play as ultimately redemptive. But more fundamentally my reading is at odds with his. For, as I understand Derrida, he would not allow a higher law to remain in the transcendent realm, but would draw it down and put hard questions to it. Who is hurt by the law beyond the law? Whom does it consume? These questions are implied when Derrida reveals mercy, an aspect of higher law, as a ruse to entrap and fleece Shylock, and the agent of a historical translation from Jewish particularlism to Christian universalism.

I will let Aaron Kunin's masterful commentary speak for itself, saying only that it raises, more forcefully than I could, the question of what we were doing at the Symposium, of what it is to read Shakespeare through, with, between, and as philosophy, and the sharper questions of the relation of philosophical criticism to revenge, and also to a radical humanism Kunin develops as a courtesy that permits serious play. I would like to thank John Hartog (Pomona '74) for his generosity in underwriting the annual symposium in honor of his father, and not less for his incisive and enlivening participation at the event.

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