

## **«UNTO THE STATE OF VENICE» MIGRATIONS, TOLERATIONS, AND LEGALITY IN SHAKESPEARE'S *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE***

Hath not an immigrant rights? Hath not an immigrant all the claims of legality that you have taught an immigrant? Of the questions which arose in this reading of *The Merchant of Venice* none seem as salient as these when considering the figure of the immigrant in the play. Looking closely at how the immigrant is such an important figure in the history of Europe (and beyond) and relating it to those who are trying to find refuge on its shores today, I argue that we can observe the ever-present disparity between the «natural born, legal» citizens of a country and the immigrant Other in this play. With *The Merchant of Venice*, what reigns preeminently are questions concerning the very nature of legality and the shifting goalposts of assimilation. The treatment of immigrants, ranging from the Prince of Morocco to the Jews of Venice, demonstrates a very common situation where the law is used as a methodology of Othering and of committing violence against immigrants. What is more, *The Merchant of Venice* shows how the question of legality is not distributed equally amongst all immigrants coming into Venice. There is a willingness to allow for the White citizens of other regions to exert power in Venice in particular against non-white immigrants, which demonstrates how this play is one of violence against those most in need. What this reading will show is that, by looking at the immigrants of the play, we can break down the myths and legal understandings and see the immigrants on their own terms.

### **«Cursèd be my tribe»**

The topic of immigration is always a difficult subject to approach even if one is an immigrant. When it comes to *The Merchant of Venice*, in particular, it becomes necessary to attune oneself to the nuance of the hegemonic culture. There has always been, in Venice, an «anxiety about

outsiders, foreigners, and the ‘Other’ entering the lagoon»<sup>1</sup> and, due to this, both specifically and generally, members of the hegemonic culture question the arrival of immigrants. There is a special need in the play to know «what stuff ‘tis made of, where of it is born»<sup>2</sup> in order to relate to the immigrant. This, however, is part of a method of Othering precisely because it assumes that one is foreign and so is therefore offensive. Thus, in *Merchant* there needs to be an examination of how Othering occurs: it occurs as a desire to distance members of the hegemonic culture from the Other through categorization. This is especially salient since the «desired homogeneity»<sup>3</sup> disallows even the most assimilated non-Italian (read: non-White) person from being accepted into Venetian society. In the dramatic action, so much of the opening scenes showcase exactly this, since they are concerned with establishing characters as Venetian through and through and, in a broader sense, also European. The description of the company that Bassanio keeps is that they are «rich signors and burghers»<sup>4</sup>. This associates them distinctively with the lands of Italy and the cities of Italy. In other words, they are the merchant class and, in this sense, they are the “landed” class. Moreover, religious identity is also significant in *Merchant* and it is deeply tied to a particular economic identity: that of the merchant. This is evident when the play suggests one,

Should ... go to church  
And the holy edifice of stone  
And not be think me straight of dangerous rocks  
Which, touching by my gentle vessel's side would scatter all her spices  
on the stream,  
Enrobe the roaring waters with my silks,  
And, in a word, but even now worth this,  
And now worth nothing?<sup>5</sup>

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- 1 ELIZABETH HORODOWICH, *Language and Statecraft in Early Modern Venice* Cambridge University Press, New York 2008, 83.
  - 2 WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *The Merchant of Venice* Bedford/St. Martin's, London 2002, 1.1.4-5.
  - 3 ELIZABETH VALDEZ ACOSTA «Open Doors, Secure Borders: The Paradoxical Immigration Policy of Belmont in *The Merchant of Venice*.» In *Shakespeare and Immigration* edited by RUBEN ESPINOSA and DAVID RUITER Routledge, 2014, 245.
  - 4 SHAKESPEARE 1.1.10.
  - 5 Ibid., 1.1.28-36.

These lines speak to a specific religious-based socioeconomic anxiety over foreignness, which is illuminated by Patrick Buchanan<sup>6</sup>. As Buchanan suggests, once outside Venice the dangers are not only of trade but also of the other people who exist beyond the strand of Lido. In this market driven city, the gateway to the East, expressions of fear over the loss of “silks and spices” betrays anxiety over the loss of Venetian identity itself, which was necessarily very much entangled with mercantilism. In this sense, the nobleman and the merchant classes are at the center of this identity, but so, necessarily, is the Jewish merchant they would exclude, and what is excluded is also always central to identity formation. For the Venetians, «Jews ... embodied both the evils and dynamism of a mercantile society concerned with turning a profit»<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, there are parallels evident between the way the Jew functions in Venetian society and the way the immigrant functions in present day America. The play, along these contemporary lines of thought, through its portrayal of the exclusion of the Jewish Shylock in the construction of a positive Mercantile Venetian identity, might be heard to echo a jingoistic: “Make Venice Great Again.”

I say this with caution if only because the nature of the «original» statement is so deeply imbued with political animosity. Nevertheless, it must be remarked that this line of thinking is clearly evident in the play. Considering that in the early modern period not only was «Jewishness ... seen as immutable»<sup>8</sup> but it was also that «the contradictions generated by an alien policy of toleration and equality, on the one hand, and legislation, restraint, surveillance, and suspicion, on the other were not easily reconciled»<sup>9</sup>.

These distinctions are evident when Antonio «think[s] upon his merchandise»<sup>10</sup> which marks him as a legal, native Venetian since he can trade wares and own property. He can participate in a world of trade and exchange *legally*. I stress *legally* because this term is used to disparage

6 A noted Paleoconservative. See: *The Death of the West: How Dying Populations and Immigrant Invasions Imperil Our Country and Civilization*. St. Martin's Press, New York 2002.

7 HORODOWICH, p. 169.

8 JAMES SHAPIRO *Shakespeare and the Jews* Columbia University Press, New York 1996, p. 168

9 Ibid., p. 183.

10 SHAKESPEARE, 1.1.40.

immigrants who are «both despised but [are] economically empowered»<sup>11</sup> insofar as they can participate in the lending of money at interest, which the «Venetian State often sought to promote for its own benefit»<sup>12</sup>. Thus, the immigrants are forced to conform to the norms of where they are seeking refuge only as it benefits that state. Antonio is endlessly grateful for this native-born status: «I thank my fortune for it, / my ventures are not in one bottom trusted, / Nor to one place; not is my whole estate / Upon the fortune of this present year»<sup>13</sup>. He is also able to freely invest, travel, and be the recipient of every benefit Venice affords him, and he is not subject to any limitations.

Antonio's being able to assert his Venetian status and invest without penalty drives an economic wedge between the Venetians and the immigrants. Indeed, it is even what allows for Antonio to be so well known, since money in the Early Modern Period was «a substitute for some of the personal relationships basic to the ... society»<sup>14</sup>. This locates the perennial problem of the free movement of capital in relation to the restricted movement of labor or people. This suggests also the way in which capital can confine and structure relationships. Legal status becomes reified, undermining some identities, because undermining social relationships between the Christian and the Jew, while strengthening others, strengthening relationships between those in power. The immigrant does not have the same rights and are, in this way, vulnerable to exploitation.

When Antonio states that «[He] hold[s] the world but as ... a stage where each man must play a part»<sup>15</sup> He suggests that the Venetians see the mutability of identity and how essentially identity is performative. In terms of immigration, it is the view that X does Y, which leads to an understanding that that X is Y. You can find the values that decide each of the variables, but these formulae are methods of Othering and create a negative ontology with moralizing strictures of behavior that have real-world consequences that are suggested by the play. For Venetians and indeed all hegemonic cultures of the Global North, it is far too easy to

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11 HORODOWICH, p. 98.

12 Ibid.

13 SHAKESPEARE, 1.1.41-44.

14 LESTER K. LITTLE «Pride Goes Before Avarice: Social Change and the Vices in Latin Christendom» *The American Historical Review*, vol. 76, no. 1, 1971, 16-49.

15 SHAKESPEARE, 1.1.77-78.



fall into the idea that the people inhabiting a land are the *true* custodians of the lands they inhabit. This is evident in the Early Modern Period when «Venice proclaimed herself the defender of Italian freedom»<sup>16</sup> thus constructing and performing Italian identity in the play despite the «internal ethnic diversity» suggesting Italians «are ... collectively racialized as white,»<sup>17</sup>.

### «Confess and Live»

Not all immigrants are «created» equal and are thus not endowed by the dominant culture with the right to life, liberty, nor happiness. *The Merchant of Venice* is swift to recognize this contradiction concerning the *myth of assimilation* precisely because of racial difference. Before us we see two Italian city-states that demonstrate not only «their emphasis on secure borders [and] ... homogeneity»<sup>18</sup> but also how their «perceived safety and the comfort of [the native, legal] community [is] often wrought through fraudulence and unscrupulous exclusionary practices»<sup>19</sup>. Portia is deemed worthy of being considered a legal member or citizen of Venice because she is from Belmont and thus Italian, itself a constructed identity. She is introduced by Bassanio revealing that

in Belmont is a fair lady richly left;  
And she is fair and, fairer than that word, of wondrous virtues ...  
... Her name is Portia, nothing undervalued  
to Cato's daughter, Brutus' Portia.<sup>20</sup>

Portia and, by extension Belmont, are distinctly Italian because of their connection to the great *native* Romans. Even her name, Portia, which in Latin would be Porcia further derive from the word Porcus which means that she is the natural repellant that will remove from Italy both Muslims<sup>21</sup> and Jews. Portia is described as fair because she is white

16 DAVID ROSAND *Myths of Venice: The Figuration of a State* University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill 2001, 119.

17 CLAUDIA SADOWSKI-SMITH *New Immigrant Whiteness: Race, Neoliberalism, and Post Soviet Migration to the United States*. New York University Press, New York 2018, 6.

18 VALDEZ ACOSTA, 245.

19 Ibid.

20 SHAKESPEARE 1.1.160-165.

21 Their famous aversion to pork is how St. Mark's remains were smuggled out of Egypt, by being covered in pork. A mural depicts the scene in St. Mark's Basilica in Venice.

but upholds Italian-cum-European-cum-Christian virtues and the «desired homogeneity»<sup>22</sup> of Venice. She is also noted for having «Sunny locks [which] hang on to her temples like a golden fleece»<sup>23</sup> which identify her with the image of sunny locked Venetia herself. Whether in *The Triumph of Venice* by Jacopo Palma Il Giovane or Tintoretto's *The Voluntary Submission of the Provinces to Venetian Domination* both illustrious and vast paintings which adorn the Chamber of Council where presumably the trial would be held. It is made clear, blonde-haired Venetia will triumph. Portia is the incarnation of a Venetian; a fair, blond woman who rules over the waves and has many suitors (merchants) making their way to seek her beauty and trade with her jewels, silks and spices.

Portia's betrothal table-top game is speaking to something far greater. I contend that Belmont is not the abstract nowhere that seems to be the consensus but rather that it is carefully chosen because of what that city brings to the table. There is indeed a city which is known as Bellimunti or Belmonte which is in the region of Italy known as Calabria. It was once called Bruttium. It was the charge of a Genoese family which had ties to that banking center. The marriage of Portia, Bruttium's daughter, would thus be a way to see if the suitor was able to engage with the questions of value and recognize the alchemy of money. Since «the lottery that [Portia's father] has devised in these / three chests of gold, silver, and lead, whereof who chooses his meaning / chooses you»<sup>24</sup>, will make the suitor have to prove himself capable of transforming a marriage for money into something far greater, the perpetuation of capital.

Moreover, Portia's origin is never questioned except in placing her on the other side of the Italian peninsula. However, unlike the Jewish Shylock, she, as a White Italian woman, is given all the legality in the world because she is the immigrant that is *wanted*. In addition, Nerissa does note how Bassanio is «a Venetian, a / Scholar and a soldier, that came hither in the company of the Marquess of / Montferrat»<sup>25</sup> and thus has connections across Italy and its part of the economic superstructure. The titles which are granted Bassanio paint a vast colonizing portrait of Capital. Bassanio has access to education and is part of the military

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22 ACOSTA, 245.

23 SHAKESPEARE 1.1.168-169.

24 Ibid., 1.2.22-24

25 Ibid., 1.2.82-84.

which conquers places such as Cyprus and the Dodecanese islands of modern-day Greece. In other words, he is deeply ingrained in an imperial culture and can be defined against the other nations such as the Palatinate who aren't Italian and tied to the Roman ideal. It is no mistake when Portia becomes a Roman legal scholar since Roman norms can be easily translated beyond the borders of the Papal States.

Portia is the figure who reveals the sharpened blade that is the dismembering myth of assimilation. Her comment about the Prince of Morocco that «If he have the / Condition of a saint and the complexion of a devil, I had rather he / Should shrive me than wive me»<sup>26</sup>, shows that, no matter how assimilated one might be, no matter how well-behaved the immigrant is, this difference will always allow for discrimination. The Prince of Morocco who has «sl[ain] the Sophy and a Persian prince, / That won three fields of Sultan Solymán,» whom he would «o'erstare the sternest eyes that look, / Outbrave the heart most daring on earth, / Pluck the young suckling cubs from the she-bear»<sup>27</sup>, proves himself to be a great ally to the Doge of Venice. However, even though he has gone against the Turks, he is outside the ambit of Roman-cum-Italian virtues. His statement characterizes him as one who would deny the actions necessary to construct an empire to equal the Romans of yore.

The three caskets which represent the gravitational center of the Belmont plot sit before the eyes of Morocco. His thoughts which are made clear to the audience might be seen as an invitation to recognizing his self-worth; yet, they say much, much more. His call to

weigh thy [his] value an even hand.  
 If thou be'st rated by thy estimation,  
 Thou dost deserve enough; and yet enough  
 May not extend so far as to the lady;  
 And yet to be afraid of my deserving  
 Were but a weak disabling of myself.  
 As much as I deserve? Why, that's the lady.  
 I do in birth deserve her, and in fortunes,  
 In graces, and in qualities of breeding;  
 But more than these, in love I do deserve.<sup>28</sup>

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26 Ibid., 1.2.94-96.

27 Ibid., 2.1.25-29.

28 Ibid., 2.7.25-34.

Effectively, what is described here is analogous – although opposite – to Shylock's actions. The Prince of Morocco is Muslim, which means that he, just like the Venetians, is unable to charge interest. His weighing of the different values is related to this since he *must* choose gold. To gain what «all the world desires,»<sup>29</sup> he must elect something which contains equal value to her. To have chosen lead would be to expect it to engage in symbolic «alchemy» which would change lead into gold by way of interest. Portia, commodified as she is, has accrued interest from many suitors and must therefore be represented in the golden casket since this would be her equal worth without interest. He is thus not the correct suitor since his foreign identity makes him unable to perpetuate the superstructure of Italy.

### «Shylock is my name»

Imagine, the gilded molding which dresses the vast splendor of the Venetian court is our scene. The light of day shines through the windows and hits the marble floors upon which rests the chest filled with golden ducats. Shylock, incensed, demands justice from the court «Upon [Venice's] charter and your city's freedom!»<sup>30</sup> because if Venice is a nation of laws, they must be executed equally. Yet, the hesitation of the defendants who wish to reach a settlement cause Shylock to recognize the vacuity of these alabaster figures of *Justitia* who are anything but blind<sup>31</sup>. Thus, his cry that «There is no force in the decrees of Venice / I stand for judgement,»<sup>32</sup> is not only a statement of fact—that the laws of Venice are only in force when it comes to the Venetians—It is also a signal of his utmost desire to be freed from the manacles of inequality. The disparity between the legal rights of Shylock and the Venetians is so stark, that Balthasar, the enrobed Portia, being a Doctor of Law, is able to extend the jurisprudence of Rome into the court of the free city of Venice. Venice, which had been the site where the Talmud was brought to its printing precisely *because* the city was outside of the «harsh and often unpredictable polices of the Papal States»<sup>33</sup>, has now come to exact its

29 Ibid., 2.7.37

30 Ibid., 4.1.39.

31 PAOLO VERONESE, *Venice Enthroned with Justice and Peace* (Sala del Collegio, Ducal Palace)

32 Ibid. 4.1.103-104.

33 KATHERINE ARON-BELLER, *Jews on Trial: The Papal Inquisition in Modena, 1598-1638* Manchester University Press 201, 120.



power. Venice then begins to seem suspect in its keeping to its own supposed ideals. However, this was not at all outside the character of the Venetian Inquisition which chose «doctors of law [so] as the ... court might choose to summon and consult».<sup>34</sup> This means that the hypocrisy of the trial is indeed a real one since the Inquisition in Venice was «given teeth and claws»<sup>35</sup> in 1547 and regularly would use Papal authority to prosecute.

What the trial of *Shylock v. Antonio* demonstrates is often too simply viewed as a trial of revenge. If read through the lens of legality itself, it manifests something even more important. As Balthasar declares:

Tarry a little; there is something else.  
This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood;  
The words expressly are 'a pound of flesh.'  
Take then thy bond, take thou thy pound of flesh,  
But in cutting it if thou dost shed  
One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods  
Are by the laws of Venice confiscate  
Unto the state of Venice.<sup>36</sup>

How are we to see this if not by the lens of how the law can be twisted, mangled, rewritten, and brought to cause any immigrant to feel isolation before the monolith of false justice. The very notion that Shylock's bond must be exact and not contain the *interest* of blood is an obvious reference to the blood libel charged against Jews<sup>37</sup>. What is more, in any semblance of justice for an immigrant, there must be a greater injustice in order to keep order as it is between the immigrant and the dominant culture.

While people might wish to point to the cruelty of Shylock in demanding this bond, note that this bond is to have a piece of flesh, but not a drop of blood, which would render Shylock the ability to be an equal. It is equally cruel, that Gratiano is thrilled by the realization that the law can be used *against* Shylock: «Now, infidel, I have you on the

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34 BRIAN PULLAN, *The Jews of Europe and the Inquisition of Venice 1550-1670* Basil Blackwell, London 1983, 6-7.

35 Ibid. p. 9.

36 SHAKESPEARE, 4.1.300-307.

37 SHAPIRO, p. 2.

hip.»<sup>38</sup> And while Shylock does give into their initial offer to have his «principal»<sup>39</sup> instead of the pound of flesh, he is also trying to release himself from the bonds which now tie him to the axe. Portia is merciless. The unwillingness of Portia to let Shylock have his money and go, allows her to exact the violence which had been latent throughout the play. The antisemitism that whispered through the narrow canals now floats like a fog bank into the marbled Venetian court. When Balthasar de-claims:

Tarry, Jew!  
 The law hath yet another hold on you.  
 It is enacted in the laws of Venice,  
 If it be proved against an *alien* [emphasis mine]  
 That by direct or indirect attempts  
 He seek the life of any citizen,  
 The party 'gainst the which he doth contrive  
 Shall seize one half his goods; the other half  
 Comes to the privy coffer of the state  
 And the offender's life lies in the mercy  
 Of the Duke only.<sup>40</sup>

Here, the mercilessness of the State and the nation bears down upon Shylock. The ability to take all of his worth, to use such a tactic, was gaining momentum from the beginning. Shylocks anxiety then is well-grounded and once he notes that «you do take the means whereby I live»<sup>41</sup>, it is not just that he has to pay fines but that he has no other way by which to make a living, rendering him essentially dead. The forcing then that «he do record a gift / Here in the court of all he dies possessed / Unto his son Lorenzo and his daughter»<sup>42</sup> is designed to render all his life forfeit. By taking his possessions as if he were died, they assert the biopower of the state, bringing on death and creating a sense of «grim desperation»<sup>43</sup>. Even if he were to commit suicide, he would not be free from the State of Venice. Moreover, even the futurity of his tribe is

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38 SHAKESPEARE, 4.1.329.

39 Ibid., 4.1.331.

40 Ibid., 4.1.342-351.

41 Ibid., 4.1.373.

42 Ibid., 4.1.383-385.

43 LITTLE, 37.

brought into question by the marriage of Jessica. The precarity of this union means that Lorenzo would presumably get every last bit of Shylock's existence, snuffing him out completely.

### «Give me leave to go»

*The Merchant of Venice* is a deeply troubling play. Its origin makes one wonder if it should even be performed by people such as Ayanna Thompson as well as others. Yet, I hope to have shown here how this play is indeed useful precisely because it is difficult. The stories of immigrants are always filled with a multitude of questions. Will the State come take my children away? Will the Immigration Police find the smallest of reasons or hiccups by which to deport me? These questions are explored here in this play. As one can see, Shylock, Morocco, and Portia form an example of how even the most supposedly tolerant societies can, in fact, be waiting to pounce on calls for justice. Assimilation, which is a topic that is entrenched in the discourse surrounding immigration is always construed as «good» by the dominant culture. This play tackles this as well other significant issues by showing how violent whole assimilation can be, and by modeling the anxiety minority identities can face, who never feel safe from persecution. This should make any person truly think about the trials and tribulations which befall the immigrant and how by the mere accident of being Italian, Portia was able to exercise power where neither Shylock nor Morocco could. Therefore, one cannot but conclude that this play is about the immigrant's struggle in relation to a society and how often problematic that relationship is no matter how tolerant the state might claim to be.

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## Ամփոփում

«ՎԵՆԵՏԻԿԻ ՀԱՍԱՐԱԿԱՊԵՏՈՒԹԻՒՆԸ»  
ԳԱՂԹԱԿԱՆՈՒԹԻՒՆ, ՀԱՆԴՈՒՐԺՈՂՈՒԹԻՒՆ, ԵՒ  
ՕՐԻՆԱԿԱՆՈՒԹԻՒՆ  
ՇԵՅՔՍՓԻՐԻ ՎԵՆԵՏԻԿԻ ՎԱՃԱՌԱԿԱՆԻՆ ՄԷՋ

## ՄԱՐԿ ԼԱՌՈՒՊԻՈՅ

Գաղթականը իրաւունքներ չունէ՞ր: Իրաւունք չունէ՞ր պահանջելու բոլոր այն իրաւունքները, որ իրեն սորվեցուցած էին: Ասոնք գլխաւոր հարցումներն են, որ կը մտաբերենք Վենետիկի Վաճառականը կարգալէ ետք, երբ նկատի կ'առնենք գաղթականի կերպարը:

Մարկ Լաուրերոն լրջօրէն կը մեկնաբանէ գաղթականին կարեւորութիւնը Եւրոպայի պատմութեան մէջ, զայն համեմատելով փախստականներու այսօրուան վիճակին: Յօդուածին հեղինակը կը պատճառաբանէ, որ այս թատերախաղին մէջ կրնանք նկատել մշտատեւ անհաւասարութիւնը երկրի մը «բնածին, օրինաւոր» քաղաքացիներուն եւ օտար գաղթականին միջեւ:

Գաղթականներու հանդէպ վերաբերմունքը, Մարոքի Իշխանէն մինչեւ Վենետիկի հրեաները, ցոյց կու տայ շատ ընդհանրացած իրականութիւն մը, ուր օրէնքը կը գործածուի գաղթականները օտարացնելու եւ անոնց դէմ դաժանութիւն գործադրելու նպատակով: