

New Readings of *The Merchant of Venice*

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Edited by

Horacio Sierra

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WHY NEW READINGS?

HORACIO SIERRA

The first two decades of the twenty-first century have witnessed a spate of high-profile presentations of *The Merchant of Venice*: the 2004 Michael Radford film, 2010's New York City "Shakespeare in the Park" production, as well as the play's Tony Award-nominated 2010-11 Broadway run. Likewise, new scholarly works such as Kenneth Gross's *Shylock is Shakespeare* (2006) and Janet Adelman's *Blood Relations: Christian and Jew in The Merchant of Venice* (2008) have offered poignant insights into this drama. Why has this play garnered so much attention of late? What else can we learn from this contentious comedy? How else can we read the drama's characters? Where do studies of *The Merchant of Venice* go from here?

When asked why Shakespeare's dramas are as popular today as they were hundreds of years ago, those in academia and the performing arts often cite the universal nature of the emotions, philosophies, and themes explored in his plays. Star-crossed lovers, humorous disguises, and bawdy jokes are some of the more enjoyable timeless elements of Shakespeare's comedies and tragedies. Incompetent rulers, religious prejudices, and racist taunts, however, are just as, if not more, relevant to contemporary audiences who seek a connection to the sometimes confusing early modern English of Shakespeare's plays. While an enchanted forest and shipwrecked twins seem the stuff of myth and slapstick comedy, respectively, the plight of ostracized minorities and state-sanctioned discrimination are all too real, which promises an uncanny verisimilitude for twenty-first century audiences. Though the magical charms of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the political turmoil of *Hamlet* continue to intrigue readers and theatergoers from grammar school to adulthood, we must wonder why there is still so much fascination with a play such as *The Merchant of Venice*.

The play cannot escape its anti-Semitic elements. Yet its more inoffensive thematic elements, such as the dichotomy between justice and mercy and conflations of love and money, save the play from being racist propaganda. After all, as many would attest, Shakespeare knew better than

that. To say the least, the character of the usurious Jew Shylock is problematic, complex, and unforgettable. Audiences despise him at the same time that, increasingly, they sympathize with him or understand where he is coming from. Educated by post-Nazi Holocaust humanist studies and forced to confront our previous prejudices and complicity in the oppression of others, we realize, perhaps better than previous generations, that Shakespeare's portrayal of Shylock, the stereotypical Renaissance-era Jewish usurer, is so much more than we see at first glance. He is not a hero. In fact, he is the antagonist and yet we still feel for him. It need not be said that the play would be another creature without Shylock – this is obvious. However, without him and the religious conflict that emerges because of his presence, this play runs the risk of being another run-of-the-mill comedy, an early modern *Mamma Mia!* wherein three men are potential caretakers for a beautiful young woman and the curtain closes on felicitous unions.

Although not as popular among the secondary school set as feel-good comedies such as *Twelfth Night* or classic romantic tragedies such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Merchant of Venice* is experiencing a revival in high school productions thanks to the heightened attention the issue of bullying has received of late. Directors of high school productions of the drama are sure to keep the cruel verbal barbs that are thrown at Shylock in their scripts so as to present teachable moments about discrimination and prejudice.

This collection of essay thrives on teachable moments that are influenced by watershed critical twentieth-century scholarly works such as Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*, and James Shapiro's *Shakespeare and the Jews*, and contextualized within new ways of approaching both the primary text and these critical texts with an eye towards the horizons of twenty-first-century intellectual inquiry. *New Readings of The Merchant of Venice* showcases a sampling of ways this culturally arresting play can be read and interpreted. The strength of this monograph lies in the disparate approaches we offer – from a feminist view of Portia and Nerissa's friendship inspired by a viral YouTube clip to psychoanalytic readings of allegories between the play and Shakespeare's *Pericles* to a visual and textual analysis of a Manga version of *The Merchant of Venice*. Each essay is supported by a strong basis in traditional close reading practices. Our collection of scholars then buttresses such work with the theoretical or pedagogical frameworks that reflect their area of expertise.

Although professors and graduate students can appreciate and employ the scholarship of this collection, we write with our primary audience in

mind: undergraduate students and professors who work with them. We've all had the experience of checking out a book and then finding it was a waste of time because the author spends three hundred pages discussing a perspective of which we have no interest. We hope that in this collection you will not only see how multi-faceted interpretations of the play can be but also find essays that appeal to your own research interests.

“What news on the Rialto?”: *The Merchant of Venice* Then and Now

Spanning Venice's Grand Canal, the Rialto Bridge connects the Venetian *sestierie* (districts) of San Polo and San Marco. Construction on this permanent stone bridge, which replaced less reliable pontoon and wooden bridges, began in 1591 and was completed a few years before William Shakespeare penned *The Merchant of Venice* sometime between 1596 and 1598. Yet the fame of this bustling bridge, teeming with pedestrians, merchants, and investors, was established centuries before Shakespeare would set the Rialto as the spatial nexus for Shylock's interactions with the Christian community in *The Merchant of Venice*. San Polo, known for its main commercial market area, is named after the Church of San Polo, a Roman Catholic church dedicated to Saint Paul the Apostle. Saint Paul differentiates between a physical and spiritual circumcision in the New Testament: “But he is a Jew, that is one inwardly; and the circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God” (Romans 2:29). The San Marco district is named after Venice's patron, Saint Mark, and includes the heart of the city's religious identity with Saint Mark's Basilica, and its political character with the Doge's Palace. The fact that the Rialto links Venice's commercial identity with Christianity's most influential early proselytizer prods us to think about connections, tensions, and conflations: between church and state, mercy and justice, love and money, Jews and Christians, and men and women. Mostly, though, as we examine and appreciate the scholarly work that has been done in the twentieth century, we try to read *The Merchant of Venice* with twenty-first-century eyes informed by new and alternative modes of analyses that are refreshing in their indebtedness to and departure from older forms of study.

Keeping in mind undergraduate students who want a basic rundown of how and when *The Merchant of Venice* first came to be, this section will provide undergraduates with a rudimentary understanding of *The Merchant of Venice*'s early history. Because the issue of usury and the character of Shylock are the play's most commonly studied elements, I will offer a

brief contextualized history of the play's publication as it relates to usury and anti-Semitic discourse before previewing the topics covered by this collection's set of essays.

***The Merchant of Venice* and the 1590s**

On 22 July 1598 the play was entered into the London Stationers' Register by James Roberts as "the Marchaunt of Venyce or otherwise called the Jewe of Venice." Roberts was a printer who entered the play into the Register in order to control the license to print its script. On 28 October 1600 Roberts transferred the rights to publish the drama to Thomas Heyes. This collaboration resulted in the first printed edition of the play, the 1600 First Quarto. The title for this printed copy reads "The most excellent History of the Merchant of Venice" with a subtitle of "With the extreame crueltie of Shylocke the Jew towards the sayd Merchant . . ." The 1623 Folio edition simplifies the title to *The Merchant of Venice*.

Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice* sometime between 1596 and 1598. Many scholars believe the play was first performed as *The Jew of Venice* to capitalize on the popularity of Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, which was written sometime between 1588 and 1592. Marlowe's play was an early modern equivalent of a hit when it was performed at least thirty six times by the Admiral's Men acting company between February 1592 and June 1596. Although much credit for the tragedy's popularity must go to Marlowe's "mighty line" and his unparalleled craftsmanship, the 1594 execution of Rodrigo Lopez must also be cited as a reason for its commercial success.

Highly regarded and trusted by the English court, Lopez was Queen Elizabeth I's physician for thirteen years and had practiced medicine in the homes of Sir Francis Walsingham, Robert Dudley, and Sir Robert Cecil among other members of the royal court's upper echelon. In fact, Marlowe satirized Lopez for the high fees he charged for his services as early as 1588 in *Doctor Faustus*.

Lopez was born in Portugal and is now seen by many as a closeted Jew who clandestinely practiced his religion in the hostile environs of the anti-Semitic Iberian Peninsula, which was obsessed with *limpieza de sangre* (purity of blood) distinctions and rooting out heretics under the authority of the Spanish Inquisition. Publicly, of course, Lopez lived as a Jew who had converted to the dominant and legally sanctioned Christian religion of the day. Nonetheless, known as a *converso*, New Christian, or, more pejoratively in Spain, a *marrano*, Lopez, like other Jews-cum-Christians would always be doubted as to the genuineness of his newly found faith.

When he was caught up in a treasonous plot to poison Queen Elizabeth, Lopez's links to Catholic Spain and his Jewish roots marked him as a man set for failure by the Christian majority – much like Shylock. Just as Shylock's property and money is forfeited by the end of Act 4, Lopez's home had been confiscated by the law and his goods were seized by the Customs House. Lopez was hanged, drawn, and quartered at Tyburn on 1594 after being convicted of plotting to poison the queen.

Shakespeare was no doubt influenced by Lopez in his portrayal of Shylock – how much so is debatable. Scholars such as Charles Edelman and Christopher Spencer suggest that Shylock's origins might not necessarily lie in Lopez. It is certain that Shakespeare knew how popular an earlier stage Jew was: Barabas from Marlowe's *The Jew Of Malta*. Many scholars suggest that the now standard title of *The Merchant of Venice* was eventually created to avoid confusion with Marlowe's tragedy. After all, Marlowe's play, which can be seen as nothing short of virulently anti-Semitic, was a blockbuster even before Lopez was executed in June 1594. All the same, the notoriety of Lopez's trial and execution, as well as *The Jew of Malta's* popularity, surely was not missing on Shakespeare. The web of conspiracy, rumors, secret dealings, and, bloodshed that swirled around Lopez's death must have played some role in the darkness that pervades *The Merchant of Venice*, which is ostensibly meant to be viewed as a comedy.

The 1623 First Folio edition of the play places *The Merchant of Venice* under the category of comedies right between *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *As You Like It*. The listing seems innocuous enough, but if we remember the older titles under which the play was printed and published, or even the subtitle of the 1598 licensing of the play, "Otherwise Called *The Jew of Venice*," we can easily problematize readings of the play as a straightforward comedy. When we consider *The Merchant of Venice* alongside Shakespeare's other comedies, we note the lack of a catchy title imbued with a fanciful or substantive theme stemming from a popular proverb or phrase (think *All's Well That End's Well* or *Much Ado About Nothing*). Although the title is absent a proper noun like those we see in his tragedies, the play's anomalous title hints that more than a run-of-the-mill comedy is in the works. The seventeenth-century categorization of *The Merchant of Venice* as a comedy, even if it was later classified as one of Shakespeare's problem plays in the 1930s and 1940s by W. W. Lawrence and E. M. W. Tillyard, belies the virulent anti-Semitism, high-wire tension, and threat of death that permeates this play.

In a post-WWII era, rare is the reader or viewer of *The Merchant of Venice* that is ignorant to the atrocities the Nazis perpetrated on Europe's

Jewish population. Nudged to be more inclusive and humanist with the help of cultural products such as Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl* (1947), Elie Wiesel's *The Night* (1958), and the Hollywood film *Schindler's List* (1993), Western society has become increasingly sensitive to negative stereotypes about Jews in culture, politics, and quotidian life. So how does the patently anti-Semitic nature of *The Merchant of Venice* survive in the classroom, on the stage, and, to a lesser extent, on film? The cultural capital we have invested in all things Shakespeare plays an important role in the continued fascination with *The Merchant of Venice* as much as it does in the continued interest in the unsettling misogyny of *Taming of the Shrew* and the caustic racism of *Othello*. However, as this collection argues, Shakespeare the genius, legend, and enduring English icon, is not the only factor fueling *The Merchant of Venice's* longevity.

Shylock, the play's Jewish villain, appears in only five scenes in the play but dominates the Venetian community's psyche not only as a religious Other but also as a catalyst for the early modern world's anxiety about capitalism, usury, inter-faith friendships and relationships, homosocial bonds, and the inability to decipher the signified from the signifier. Shylock exists in surprising ways as the indelible focal point of the comedy. However, as many are keen on pointing out, he is not the title character of the play.

How important of an issue was usury in Elizabethan England? By some accounts, the necessity of interest (and even usury) was a foregone conclusion.

Although the Jewish community in England served the kingdom as money-lenders before their banishment in 1290, by the late sixteenth century, many a Christian venture capitalist could be found lending money at interest. Nonetheless, anti-Semitic legends, myths, and folklore contributed to a history of Jewish prejudice, especially in respect to the alleged greediness of Jews. The essentials regarding usury and Jews, as it relates to *The Merchant of Venice*, are as follows.

The first legislation to sanction the charging of interest in England was the Act of 1545, which allowed the practice as long as it did not exceed 10%. The Act was repealed in 1552 with possible punishments including a fine, imprisonment, and the forfeiture of interest and principal. It was not until 1571 that the charging of interest was once again legally sanctioned in England. Interest, as opposed to usury, was once more set at a maximum of 10%. With a numerical limit placed on legal interest, individuals could argue that usury was interest above the allowable ten percent.

Of course, human flesh is unquantifiable save in terms of weights and measurements, making the flesh bond plot of *The Merchant of Venice* all the more horrific and engrossing. Shylock's thirst for Christian flesh (and, as Portia argues, blood) allows him to live up to the stereotype and caricature of the evil and devilish Jew that was rumored to use the blood of Christian children in religious rituals. From Martin Luther's sermons against Jews, most notably 1543's *On the Jews and Their Lies*, to Marlowe's Barabas and Medieval portrayals of Judas as a usurer, Jews had few, if any, positive portrayals in the popular discourse on which to count.

Yet Shylock endures because he is different. He challenges the stereotype. In fact, Shylock is the only character in the drama to employ any form of the term "usury" when he says that Antonio "was wont to call me usurer" (3.1.47). Although he is quoting Antonio, Shylock's reference to this name-calling demonstrates his offense at the term. Other characters, however, are more likely to call him "Jew" (sixty one times) rather than his given name (fifteen times). If we consider the dramatic form of the text, Shylock is referred to as "Jew" in the stage direction and speech prefixes of the First Quarto thirty times while his proper name is given fifty seven times in the directions and prefixes. Can we assign some sympathy to Shakespeare's more respectful usage of the Shylock's name in the stage directions? After all, whereas Barabas is more of a well-rounded misanthrope scorning Christians, Turks, and even other Jews, Shylock speaks of his "sacred nation." He is cognizant of his community and asks us to consider as much in his pathos-rich "If you prick us do we not bleed?" speech.

New Readings of *The Merchant of Venice*

Despite the vexing character of Shylock, this play, as much as it is indebted to the controversy over usury for its infamy, is so much more than a play about Shylock, money, and religious rivalry. As this collection stands testament to, just as with all of Shakespeare's works, readers and viewers of *The Merchant of Venice* can choose sundry topics to analyze, reflect on, and be inspired by.¹

¹ *The Merchant of Venice* has long been a rich field to mine in academia with respect to literary studies, history, and the performing arts. It has also increasingly become a key text in studies of Judaism and Jewish culture. In fact, three authors in this collection (Horacio Sierra, James Newlin, and Sidney Homan) have ties and are indebted to the University of Florida and its Jewish Studies Center, which hosted a symposium in 2010 entitled "Convergences and Conversions: The Merchant of Venice into the 21st Century" under the direction of Judith Page. The

Regardless of how much scholarship is done on early modern life, culture, and theater-going customs, we can never know how the original audience of *The Merchant of Venice* interpreted the play. Likewise, even in our own era, we can never take an accurate survey of how even a single production of *The Merchant of Venice* is received by audience members. Imagine yourself in the theater and seeing Shylock, Portia, and Antonio on stage. Consider how you might feel during the first two acts, during intermission, a few minutes after the performance, and a few days later when you discuss it with a friend. Our feelings and interpretations are likely to change based on what we saw, what our friends and spouses tell us they felt, what popular press reviews focus on, etc. In a nod to the infinite variety of such interpretations, this collection presents different readings of *The Merchant of Venice* that are indebted to twentieth-century scholarship and invigorated by twenty-first century appreciations, contexts, and theoretical frameworks. This collection does not purport to be the bedrock on which future scholarship is founded. Rather, it is one piece of an ever-changing stream of academic studies dedicated to enjoying and making sense of *The Merchant of Venice*.

Just as there are myriad ways to interpret Shylock as a redeemable or incorrigible villain, there are a variety of ways to read, understand, perform, and appropriate *The Merchant of Venice* within a twenty-first century context. This collection of essays offers new and sometimes alternative systems of analyses for comprehending the complex masterpiece that is *The Merchant of Venice*. The authors in this collection are a little looser with their language – not so much for the fun of using slang as for reflecting colloquial vocabulary that would not sound strange in the contemporary undergraduate classroom. Such vocabulary, phrases, idioms, and pop culture allusions make a discussion of this work relatable without being condescending. Just as Shakespeare made hay (and gold) with the language of his day, so must we continue to respect, challenge, and utilize our vernacular to the best of our ability so that we can communicate as inclusively as possible in the spirit of the humanities without obfuscating jargon or esoteric language.

This collection's first essay, Audrey Birkett's "Theoretical Investigations and Critical Answers in *The Merchant of Venice*" offers undergraduates a brief set of primers on critical theory that are then applied to *The Merchant of Venice*. An added bonus to such an introduction is Birkett's ability to

symposium's focus on considering *The Merchant of Venice* within the context of the twenty-first century complements the heart of this collection's goals as we seek to read, decipher, and experience *The Merchant of Venice* as a cultural product and literary artifact that responds to, reflects, and informs our everyday lives.

articulate the “real world” applications of employing theoretical lenses to interpret literature. This chapter explores how different theoretical readings of *The Merchant of Venice* provide disparate answers to the array of social, political, gender, religious, and racial questions posed in the text. By guiding students to understand the ideas, structures, and divides in *The Merchant of Venice*, Birkett arrives at a sustained, focused reading of the play that elucidates the nuances of theory in a fashion palatable to undergraduate vocabulary. Birkett focuses on four of the more popular schools of critical theory: queer theory, feminism, post-colonialism, and Marxism. This chapter gives us a better idea of what the play can do, what we can learn about it, and how we can apply theory to understand and solve difficult literary problems, such as those posed in *The Merchant of Venice*. This chapter examines the slipperiness of genre as Birkett argues that, more than any other Shakespeare text, *The Merchant of Venice*’s fluidity mirrors our current state of theoretical play as we study literature and drama in a “post”-theoretical moment.

Working with the theoretical apparatuses Birkett deconstructs in her chapter, the collection’s subsequent three essays employ various styles of feminism, queer theory, and gender studies to examine the characters of Antonio, Bassanio, Portia, and Nerissa.

Paul Dingman starts off this thread with “‘Why then you are in love’: Close Male Friendship and Ethical Identity in Early Modern Drama,” which explores Antonio and Bassanio’s amity as a manifestation of Renaissance-era male-male friendships as influenced by notions of chivalric friendship in the Middle Ages. Fierce loyalty or even love between knights on campaign or adventures helped define good chivalric character in medieval times as indicated by the wildly popular romances and epic poems of the period. Although the ideological dominance of chivalry began to fade—ever so slowly—in the Early Modern era, some of its central tenets critical to elite male identity did not. Strong, emotional friendships between men, for example, transferred easily across time and topography from the battlefield to the marketplace. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Bassanio and Antonio are beloved yet beleaguered friend-heroes in the knightly tradition even though they never enter a joust or seek a religious artifact. By examining chronicle sources and older, influential tales such as the anonymous *Amis and Amiloun*, the *Gesta Romanorum*, and Malory’s *Le Morte D’arthur*, this chapter highlights enduring ideas of male friendship and chivalric virtue in Shakespeare’s dark comedy while revealing the medieval context of the play in a mode similar to the recent scholarship of Curtis Perry, James Simpson, Brian Walsh, and others. Understanding the link between bonds of emotional male friendship and

accompanying ethics/esteem may help illuminate the perennial fascination with this complex drama.

Rebecca Olson's study of female friendship complements Dingman's chapter and offers a closer look at Shakespeare's comedic heroines who typically have "BFFs" (sisters or close female friends of comparable social standing) in contrast to the heroines in the tragedies and romances who tend to confide in sympathetic servants or lack female camaraderie altogether. "The Genre of Female Friendship in *The Merchant of Venice*" launches this investigation with a nod to Brian Gallivan's YouTube viral video series "Sassy Gay Friend" and by employing a recent Oregon Shakespeare Festival production of *Merchant* that problematized the allegedly easy relationship between Portia and Nerissa by highlighting one of the heiress's uglier moments, when she dismisses her suitor the Prince of Morocco with "Let all of his complexion choose me so." This chapter attends to the "girlfriend problem" in *The Merchant of Venice* to argue that Portia's social isolation may set the stage for the play's less traditional comedic conclusion.

The following essay in the collection, Horacio Sierra's "'Thrift is blessing, if men steal it not': Usury and Cuckoldry in *The Merchant of Venice*," appropriates the tenets of gender studies and queer theory to offer a new way of understanding Shylock. This chapter proposes one more motivation for Shylock's cruelty: his anxieties about having been cuckolded. The scholarly silence on cuckoldry in *The Merchant of Venice* belies the numerous references to it in the play. There is no literal reading of Shylock-as-cuckold. Rather, Shylock is cuckolded through verbal innuendo, rumor, imagery, double entendre, and subtext. Because Renaissance conceptions about usury originate in classical prohibitions of the practice because of its unnaturalness, this chapter argues that Shylock sublimates his paternal unease by substituting financial regeneration for biological reproduction. As such, Sierra asserts that Shylock's bond is a hyperbolic, psychosexual manifestation of anti-usury polemics. Antonio is a foil to Shylock in this proposition since he neither charges interest nor fears about his nonexistent offspring. Antonio's queer acceptance of his childlessness contrasts with Shylock's doubts about being Jessica's father. This chapter showcases how the text questions Shylock's paternity and reflects concern about conflations of love and money while interrogating early modern angst over capitalism's reliance on usury. This chapter also models for undergraduates how even the most radical interpretations of literature can be credibly supported with careful close readings of the text and the employment of critical resources, historical contextualization, and theoretical structures.

Just as Sierra's unconventional reading of Shylock's back story shifts the reader's perspective of the villainized Jew, James Newlin takes on the very notion of reading *The Merchant of Venice* as a conduit for understanding intertextual allegorical residue between two Shakespearean works in "How Every Fool Can Play Upon The Word!": Allegories of Reading in *The Merchant of Venice* and *Pericles*." Unlike Sigmund Freud, who links the choice of three caskets in *The Merchant of Venice* with the love test in *King Lear*, Newlin compares the riddles of the caskets—and the suitors' accompanying answers—with Antiochus's riddle at the beginning of *Pericles*. As this chapter's subtitle's allusion to Paul de Man indicates, Newlin's study employs a method inspired by deconstruction to read the two plays and their riddles. With a particular focus on the characters' accounts of the various contracts and bonds in *The Merchant of Venice*, these two plays are read as allegories of their own reading, or as Lorenzo puts it, how we "can play upon the word!" But rather than simply mapping de Man's famous notion of the impossibility of reading unto the plays, such "play" will illuminate many of the specific riddles that have plagued the critical history of these works, such as *The Merchant of Venice*'s treatment of anti-Semitism and the textual difficulties of *Pericles*.

Jeffrey Wilson's work in "Hath Not a Jew a Nose? Or, the Danger of Deformity in Comedy" dovetails with this introductory essay's engagement with the most vexing element of the play, Shylock as the embodiment of early modern anti-Semitic stereotypes, in respect to theoretical and practical stage considerations. In more than the obvious way, an obnoxiously large nose has been attached to Shakespeare's Shylock. This prosthetic comes neither from the text of *The Merchant of Venice* nor from a Shakespearean theatrical tradition, but from "the artificiall Iewe of Maltas nose," as William Rowley's *A Search for Money* (1609) remembers the costume of Edward Alleyn's Barabas in Marlowe's play. The play influencing Shakespeare's invention of Shylock uses an artificial nose to signal a Jewish villainy, and so do at least two plays influenced by Shakespeare's Shylock: George Chapman's *The Blinde Begger of Alexandria* (1598) and John Marston's *Jack Drum's Entertainment* (1601). Some historicists reason an artificial nose onto Shylock due to early English theatrical and cultural conventions, but other strict textualists cannot credit this unsubstantiated suggestion, and the issue of Shylock's artificial nose is so tricky that analysts such as James Shapiro and Joan Holmer have thrown up their hands in uncertainty. Did Shakespeare's Shylock actually wear an artificial Jew's nose on the Elizabethan stage? This chapter responds to this question, not by scouring the historical record of Elizabethan performances, which yields no answer, but by

extrapolating from Shakespeare's other thematic considerations and compositional decisions in *The Merchant of Venice*.

In our increasingly visual culture, Shakespeare's plays have been appearing more frequently in the popular form of comic books and graphic novels. *The Merchant of Venice* is no exception. To understand how these texts are adapting and interpreting Shakespeare for a new generation requires an interpretive approach that can engage both with Shakespeare's poetry and with the medium of sequential art. Russell McDonnell's chapter "Reading Law and Ethnicity in the Manga Shakespeare *Merchant of Venice*" examines Faye Yong's *Manga Shakespeare* edition of the play by combining a traditionally formalist close reading with detailed attention to Yong's use of the comics medium, using a method derived from the pioneering work of visual theorist Scott McCloud, who provides a basic descriptive grammar of the comics form. Yong's adaptation carefully deploys Shakespeare's words in combination with sequential images to present a version of the play in which Shylock exposes how the order and prosperity of Venice rests upon a self-contradictory system of law, dependent upon the racially-other "strangers" that it marginalizes and excludes. This chapter not only provides insight into a fresh new way of interpreting *The Merchant of Venice*, but it also models an interpretation of Shakespeare in graphic novels, thus opening up a new field of inquiry for the further study of Shakespeare and visual culture.

As I often remind my students, Shakespeare's plays were meant to be seen on stage. One of the most prolific and astute scholars on Shakespeare and acting, Sidney Homan, concludes our collection with a masterful chapter that is more of a vision than an essay. Given his knack for bringing Shakespeare to life as a professor of undergraduates and graduates at the University of Florida for more than thirty years, Homan employs his skills as a community theater director and his expertise as a scholar to bring to life the ideas that this collection's authors explore. Amalgamating his trademark academic astuteness with his passion for the performing arts, Homan offers a zestfully imagined vision of how a production of *The Merchant of Venice* would work using the new readings proffered in this collection. Intellectually curious and artistically open-minded, Homan focuses on eight distinct scenes that can offer rich rewards for actors and offers a plan along with a slew of questions to inspire further inquiry. This final chapter, "With These Essays in Hand: Re-Stagings of *The Merchant of Venice*," embodies the potential that new scholarship and alterative analysis offers students, professors, directors, actors, and viewers. Homan's coda, if you will, reminds us to pay attention to every new

opinion on *The Merchant of Venice*, for without a reading/viewing and response to the play, it would be dead.

The Merchant of Venice has long been a rich field to mine in academia with respect to literary studies, history, and the performing arts. It has also increasingly become a key text in studies of Judaism and Jewish culture. In fact, three authors in this collection (Sierra, Newlin, and Homan) have ties and are indebted to the University of Florida and its Jewish Studies Center, which hosted a symposium in 2010 entitled “Convergences and Conversions: The Merchant of Venice into the 21st Century.” The symposium’s focus on considering *The Merchant of Venice* within the context of the twenty-first century complements the heart of this collection’s goals as we seek to read, decipher, and experience *The Merchant of Venice* as a cultural product and literary artifact that responds to, reflects, and informs our everyday lives.

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THEORETICAL QUESTIONS AND CRITICAL ANSWERS IN *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE*

AUDREY BIRKETT

At the end of his article, “The Merchant of Venice and the Possibilities of Historical Criticism,” Walter Cohen suggests that “if we attempt to use *The Merchant of Venice* . . . to interrogate literary theory, rather than the other way around, it will be evident, the need to account for both its familiarity and its otherness” (784). I will do just that in this chapter: show the familiarity and the otherness of the play in respect to how it is reflected in contemporary society. An examination of four specific literary theories – queer theory, feminism, postcolonialism, and Marxism – when used to explain different interpretations of *Merchant* provides a series of insights into twenty-first-century society. The issues at the play’s core, involving same-sex love, the rights of women, discrimination against foreign and religious outsiders, and the struggles between the classes are all relevant in contemporary society. Theory, both consciously and subconsciously, has the potential to explain and define the world. However, the limitations of theory actually raise more questions and leave loose ends about where society stands in terms of gender, sexuality, foreignness, and capitalism, which in itself is another positive aspect of theory’s potential.

In order to understand the interpretive power of literary criticism, we must begin by examining the beginnings of theory and how it changed as society has shifted and progressed. Beginning with New Criticism and liberal humanism, the attempt to find answers within a work, outside of a social context, suggests that there is a singular meaning that will be understood and applicable, regardless of where a work is written or read. The notion that a literary text can reflect a universal human experience is still a cornerstone of literary study today, but it is also too restrictive and confining. The need for truths (plural) rather than truth (singular) paved the way for those French theorists of the 1950s and 1960s who contextualized theory. Philosophers and cultural anthropologists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault demanded that other voices and other agents, *outside* of the text,

have a profound effect on determining different meanings.¹ Barthes's 1967 essay "The Death of the Author" provided the crucial pivot point between structuralism and post-structuralism, which opened the door for the reader, the author, and society to make demands of the text and impose their own meanings on it. As a result, in the twenty-first century, numerous voices have a say about the meaning and interpretation of a text, none incorrect or absolute.

The variety and validity of such diverse interpretations prove the post-structuralist quandary in which twenty-first-century scholars now find themselves, because of theoretical limitations: if all viewpoints are valid, how can any singular viewpoint be true? Barthes's 1971 essay "From Work to Text" solidifies the idea that it is the "interdisciplinarity" of the text, its place in a wider "frames of reference" that provides its meaning; it is not the "work" in isolation that provides meaning, but the "text" in context (155-56). In short, structuralists and post-structuralists determined that meaning must come from the text *in context*, but the definition of the context itself has no fixed and permanent meaning. Theories that center around the reader, the author, the history, and the culture all stem from mid-twentieth-century literary philosophy and provide diverse meanings to literature for a variety of readers.

It is with the question "How can so many viewpoints be accurate?" that I wish to start the search for critical answers to the problems posed in *Merchant*. The individual, social, and global conflicts that plague the twenty-first century mirrors the events that engulf Portia, Antonio, Bassanio, Shylock, and the rest of the Venetians in the play. The problems that the characters experience in commerce, love, and social acceptance have stretched across oceans, borders, and even time to be just as relevant and applicable in contemporary, Western society as they were in the fictional Italy and real-life England of the late sixteenth century. This chapter investigates the address of modern-day problems through an examination of *Merchant*, as well as the play's limits in providing full answers to social questions because of the disparate theoretical explanations that can be and are applied to it by contemporary readers. *Merchant*, perhaps more than any other Shakespearean play, has at its core acutely modern issues such as the nature of the relationship between

¹ Lévi-Strauss's *Structural Anthropology* opened the doors for structuralism in the humanities. Foucault's *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* serves as a groundbreaking text on shifts in social discourses across time and place. Barthes's "The Death of the Author" and Derrida's *Writing and Difference* offer the next step, post-structuralism, but also offer commentary on the movement between the theories themselves.

Antonio and Bassanio, the amount of control held by Portia in her own destiny, the required social standing to “fit in” Venetian society, and the view of the religious “Other” as the villain. These issues are reflective of similar complementary contemporary debates within queer theory, feminism, postcolonialism, and Marxism. However, as theory shifts, contemporary understandings and interpretations also change, and often clash with one another, making the play both a source of answers as well as further questions.

Queer Theory, Antonio and Bassanio, and Same-Sex Rights

Queer theory does not have the same emphasis on normal and “deviant” that it initially did when the school of thought first formed in the 1990s. Foucault’s chapter “The Perverse Implantation,” from *The History of Sexuality*, discusses how same-sex relationships came to be condemned as “perverse” because of hegemonic and linguistic categorizations that were put in place by dominant power structures. From Foucault’s study, the use of terminology such as “gay,” “straight,” or even “queer” evokes an identity that fluctuates between acceptable and unacceptable based on how a society evaluates sexuality and the terms used to signify homosexuality.² In other words, to be “gay,” a word that began as a synonym for “noble, beautiful, excellent, or fine” (“Gay,” OED), might be acceptable, but to be “queer,” which originally meant “strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric” or “of questionable character; suspicious, dubious,” (“Queer,” OED) is not, at least in terms of sexuality. There is an inherent fluidity within definitions that the queer theorist seeks to highlight in order to refute the associations that accompany a singular term within a society. Even the term “queer” suggests an instability and continuous change by which theorists attempt to reconfigure the terms that define and evaluate those with non-normative sexualities. “Queer” is a word that has long gone out of fashion in the mainstream to describe or insult homosexuals. The term “queer” denotes something that is out of ordinary, abnormal, and

² Since Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality*, a wealth of queer theory scholarship has been produced by such noted scholars as Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*, Jonathan Dollimore in *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault*, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosexual Desire*. These critics provide a legitimate and authoritative voice for the homosexual perspective and experience in literature and established the fundamental tenets of queer theory.

therefore dangerous to the average citizen.³ To use this word to describe the interpretations that come about from seeing life and literature through the lens of the homosexual experience is offensive and problematic to those men and women who identify themselves as lesbian or gay, or even transgender or bisexual.⁴ Some theorists use the phrase “Lesbian and Gay Studies or Theory,” but this term also comes with problems, namely that all lesbians and gays have a shared, common experience.

Sexual alienation within contemporary Western society has diminished and the mode of thinking that considers homosexuality “deviant” or heterosexuality “correct” has moderated. Likewise, issues and identities of bisexuality and transgender that were not a part of the theoretical package because they were not a part of the initial “gay” experience as defined by queer theory are now a regular part of sexuality studies. As can already be seen, life moves much faster than a field of study, which changes to keep up, but ultimately remains one wave behind. Queer theory, according to the *Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* makes sexual orientation “a fundamental category of analysis and understanding,” but seeks to eradicate a hierarchy of sexual preference, namely that homosexual is wrong or deviant and heterosexual is right and normal (Abelove xv).

The application of queer theory to *Merchant* provides a good foundation for interpreting non-heteronormative moments in the play. Contemporary readers can use what happens in the play, in terms of defining sexuality and sexual practice, to investigate the impact of sexual preference in modern society. Although labels such as “gay” and “homosexual” are anachronistic in the sixteenth-century play, the practices and relationships that are today labeled as such can be identified, particularly in reference to the relationship between Antonio and Bassanio. The term “homosexual” as it is used today to describe “a person who has a sexual propensity for his or her own sex” only came into common use in

³ Will Fisher interrogates the term “queer” in “Queer Money” and examines how it has evolved in terms of identifying “other” sexualities from its origins in economic practices.

⁴ Since the establishment of the theory in the later half of the twentieth century, little has emerged to further the study into transgender or transsexual experiences. Recent studies include: Judith Halberstam’s *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgendered Bodies, Subcultural Lives* and Patricia Elliot’s *Debates in Transgender, Queer, and Feminist Theory*. One important study I wish to draw attention to is Jess Battis’s edited collection *Homofiles: Theory, Sexuality, and Graduate Studies*. In this collection, gay, lesbian, and transgender graduate students offer insights and investigations into how literature, theory, and scholarship intersect with and influence daily social interactions in and out of academia.

the early twentieth century (“Homosexual,” OED). As a result, the information that is gained from asking basic questions about the play, and the answers that result, provide information about the appearance and acceptance of homosexuality in contemporary society rather than in Shakespeare’s. Is Antonio gay? Are his actions abnormal or deviant? These considerations lead to larger questions of identity in our society: how do we define ourselves today and how are we defined by society in relation to sexuality? If Antonio is gay, what message about early modern homosexuality can we glean from the play? How can we use what we have learned to act in society and feel about ourselves, either as or in relation to homosexuals and homosexuality?

An application of queer theory to the play often results in Antonio being viewed, in a contemporary context, as homosexual.⁵ The language he uses in discussion with or about Bassanio is more intimate and personal than the language of friendship, even a close one. The opening scene in which Antonio unlocks his “purse, person, and extremest means” (1.1.141) to Bassanio is reaffirmed in the trial scene when the merchant insists that Bassanio tell his new wife Portia how much Antonio loved him, and also to “speak him fair in death” (4.1.283). The language used and the emotions expressed all seem to point to a homosexual Antonio, at least by contemporary standards. But the circumstances do not provide a definitive answer. The attempt to reconfigure what is “normal” and expected must be considered in constructing Antonio’s sexual identity as it meshes with the tenet of queer theory that “expose[s] the ‘homophobia’ of mainstream literature and criticism, as seen in ignoring or denigrating the homosexual aspects of the work of major canonical figures” (Barry 143). If Antonio is seen as gay and the protagonist of a Shakespearean play, consequently, through the lens of queer theory, homosexuals can be positive characters in mainstream literature, which is a reconfiguration of the traditional, heterosexual hero of the Western canon.

The assumption that there is a commonality in gay experience is rejected by queer theory. A question of identity is addressed through more

⁵ There are differing views on Antonio’s sexual preference, particularly in view of anachronisms, but there is a wide spectrum of possibility for Antonio’s affections. In particular, see Alan Sinfield, “How to Read *The Merchant of Venice* without Being Heterosexist”; Alan Bray, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England*; Coppelia Kahn, “The Cuckoo’s Note: Male Friendship and Cuckoldry in *The Merchant of Venice*”; Steve Patterson, “The Bankruptcy of Homoerotic Amity in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*”; Lawrence W. Hyman, “The Rival Lovers in *The Merchant of Venice*”; and Joseph Pequigney, “The Two Antonios and Same-Sex Love in *Twelfth Night* and *The Merchant of Venice*.”

sophisticated theoretical analyses that rely on binaries and fluctuations, which, in turn, cause differences in experience and outlook. After all, heterosexuals do not share a “common” experience, so why should homosexuals? There is a great deal of reliance on potential in queer theory. Identity is a constant shuffling of a range of different roles and positions. In *Merchant*, Antonio’s sexuality is largely based on his potential with Bassanio. The nature of the relationship between the merchant and his gentleman friend is unclear at the outset, but the two are quickly distinguished from the other companions in Act 1. Salerio and Solanio are set to depart from Antonio because a better, closer companion has entered:

SOLANIO. Here comes Bassanio, your most noble kinsman,
 Gratiano, and Lorenzo. Fare ye well.
 We leave you now with better company.
 SALERIO. I would have stayed till I had made you merry,
 If worthier friends had not prevented me. (1.1.59-63)

Gratiano and Lorenzo are then separated further from Antonio and Bassanio, who the others acknowledge have a more personal relationship. Once the others have left, these two men engage in a more intimate and personal dialogue than the other pairings of friends had previously in the scene, with Antonio pledging his loyalty:

I pray you, good Bassanio, let me know it;
 And if it stand, as you yourself still do,
 Within the eye of honor, be assure
 My purse, my person, my extremest means
 Lie all unlocked to your occasions. (1.1.138-42)⁶

Antonio and Bassanio keep their intimacy private from the other companions, which would suggest, to a queer theorist, that their relationship is different from those of the male friends who otherwise populate the opening scene. However, their relationship is never identified in terms of sexuality in the play itself and thus the question of whether they are homosexual or heterosexual remains.

⁶ These lines from Antonio are often discussed, in criticism, in terms of his queer identity. Seymour Kleinberg expresses the notion that “the echoing pun on ‘purse’ and ‘person’ suggest as ‘sexual longing’” in “The Homosexual as Anti-Semite in Nascent Capitalism” (117). Suzanne Penuel observes that Antonio’s words may have erotic intent, a definition of “purse” as “scrotum” also lets us read the offer in terms of parenting in “Castrating the Creditor in *The Merchant of Venice*” (260).

This opening exchange between the men also brings in questions of potentiality and fluidity that are crucial to queer theory. If Bassanio will accept, Antonio will give himself and his extremities to Bassanio. Bassanio accepts and Antonio is willing to provide a pound of his flesh. However, does this acceptance make both men homosexual? If Bassanio does not accept, does that mean Antonio is not or cannot be gay? Antonio is willing to sacrifice all for his lover, in the same way Shakespearean heterosexual lovers sacrifice themselves for their loves.⁷ Based on Antonio's willingness, we can make the inference that Antonio and Bassanio are lovers, which Bassanio admits when he states that to the merchant does he "owe the most in money and in love" (1.1.134). However, there needs to be something that happens for Bassanio's sexual identity to be confirmed, in either direction: he needs to take Antonio's money to be committed to Antonio and homosexuality, or he needs to sail away to win the hand of Portia to confirm heterosexual love. Both men are sexual *tabulae rasae*, with no default sexual orientations, until something happens, until a commitment is made.

Identity is a complex mixture of chosen allegiances, social positions, and professional roles rather than fixed essence. If Antonio is gay, does that make the object of his affections gay as well? How is the relationship defined if one wants the consummation and the other does not? Steve Patterson's "Bankruptcy of Homoerotic Amity" argues that Antonio and Bassanio are engaged in "homoerotic friendship, or amity," rather than outright homosexual relations (9). Antonio's "frustrated" sexual desire, exhibited from the outset of the play, would suggest that it is Bassanio that is resisting sexual advances from Antonio, thus proving the merchant gay, but the gentleman not (Patterson 16). However, even this assumption is slippery. When Bassanio gives the ring to the disguised Portia, at the behest of Antonio, is he choosing his gay admirer over his heterosexual wife? Although we do not know if he has consummated his relationship with Antonio, the defiance of his wife's ultimatum would certainly suggest a conscious choice of what Antonio wants over what Portia demands. Bassanio has not consummated his relationship with his wife either; yet, Bassanio appears more straight than gay to the average reader. Homosexual and heterosexual are not fixed identities in the play, nor are they fixed in our own society. Sexual identity is based on a series of marks, roles, and potentialities – a combination of everything that is provisional, contingent, and improvisatory. There is no fixed sexual

⁷ Romeo and Juliet and their source material counterparts Pyramus and Thisbe make the ultimate sacrifice for their heterosexual loves, just as Antonio is willing to do.

identity and terms such as “gay” or “straight” become irrelevant and obsolete.⁸

The question of what makes a man or woman homosexual or what constitutes a homosexual relationship allows us to clarify sexual parameters and identities in contemporary society. Often heterosexuality is considered the default sexuality, but is it in reality? Does homosexual experience define homosexual identity? Are the identities fixed or can they be overturned? A close, personal, and intimate, but sexless relationship between two close friends can be seen, in twenty-first-century society, as being homosexual, whereas it would have been “homosocial” in Elizabethan England.⁹ In the introduction to *Between Men*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick attempts to reconfigure the “homosocial” as more erotic in pre-twentieth-century literature, at the same time she highlights the problems associated with calling simple male friendships homosexual in a more contemporary society. In other words, relationships were more complex than the term “homosocial” implies, and now they are less latent in terms of sexual congress than “homosexual” often suggests. For instance, the volleyball scene in *Top Gun*, a film that premiered in 1986, a year after *Between Men* was published, is often referenced for its homosexual overtones, but does not necessarily mean the scene has homosexual overtones (Engle). In contemporary society, close, personal, and emotional relations between men, such as those between *Top Gun* flyboys Iceman and Maverick, are often described in homoerotic terms. Antonio and Bassanio could certainly be early modern versions of Iceman and Maverick, and their sexual identities would still be as ambiguous as their

⁸ Such close, personal relationships are referred to as “homosocial,” particularly in reference to Shakespeare’s plays. In *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, Eve Sedgwick goes further and sees homosocial relations (and homosexuality by extension) as reliant on heterosexual marriages saying that homosocial and homosexual relations are patterned on heterosexual ones.

⁹ In an article discussing homosocial relations in contemporary society, “Hybrid Masculine Power: Reconceptualizing the Relationship between Homosociality and Hegemonic Masculinity,” Steven Arxer discusses the hybridity of homo- and heterosexual practices in everyday situations. The term “gay” has widely been thrown around as a synonym for daft, stupid, or out of fashion, and such usage has only recently been challenged. Homosocial relations are the subject of a number of scholarly works, including but certainly not limited to: Sedgwick’s *Between Men*; Pequigney’s “The Two Antonios and Same-Sex Love in *Twelfth Night* and *The Merchant of Venice*”; Alan Bray’s “Homosexuality and the Signs of Male Friendship in Elizabethan England.” Julie Crawford discusses female homosociality in Belmont in her article “The Homoerotics of Shakespeare’s Elizabethan Comedies.”