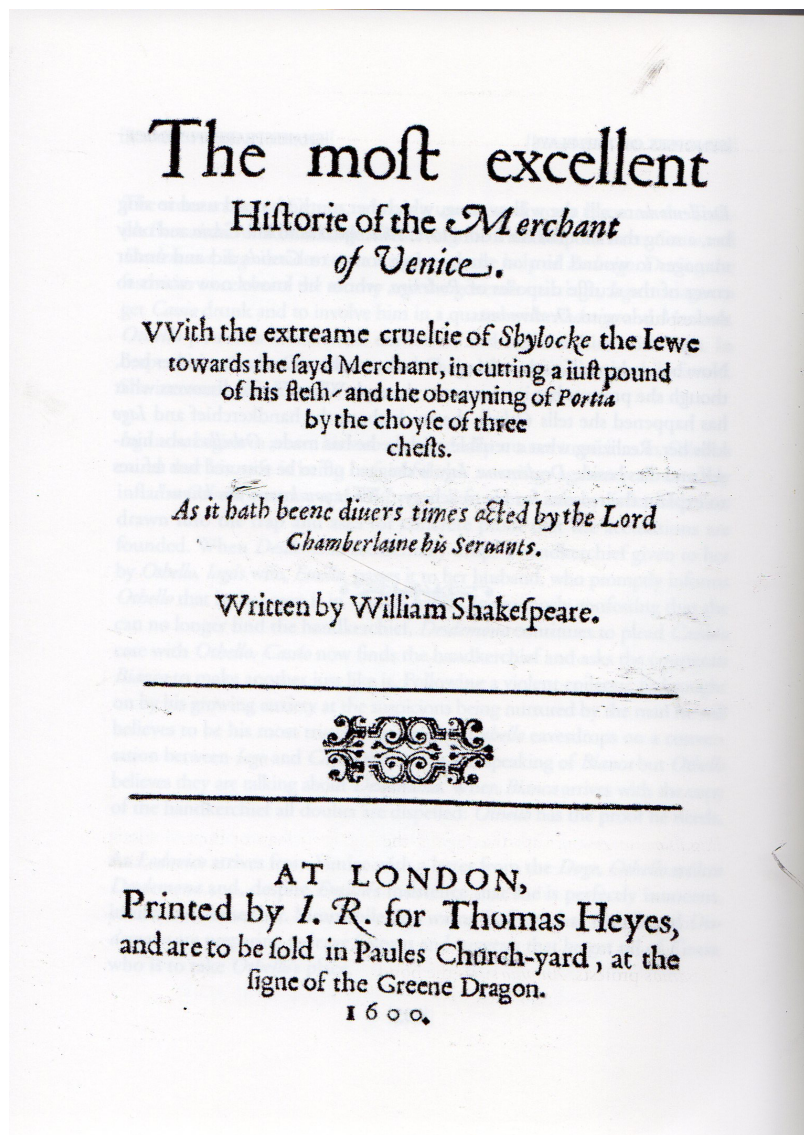


REWRITING SHAKESPEARE

The modernity of Shylock: from Shakespeare's to Wesker's and Jacobson's



*Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands,
organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions;
fed with the same food, hurt with the same
weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by
the same means, warmed and cooled by the same
winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us
do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh?
If you poison us do we not die?*

Luisanna Paggiaro

lend
lingua e nuova didattica

Gruppo di Pisa



SHYLOCK

Signor Antonio, many a time and oft
In the Rialto you have rated me
About my moneys and my usances;
Still have I borne it with a patient shrug,
For sufferance is the badge of all my tribe.
You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog,
And spit upon my Jewish gaberdine,
And all for use of that which is my own.
Well then, it now appears you need my help.
Go to then. You come to me and you say,
'Shylock, we would have moneys', you say so,
You, that did void your rheum upon my beard
And foot me as you spurn a stranger cur
Over your threshold, moneys is your suit.
What should I say to you? Should I not say,
'Hath a dog money? is it possible
A cur can lend three thousand ducats?' or
Shall I bend low, and in a bondman's key,
With bated breath and whispering humbleness,
Say this:
'Fair sir, you spat on me on Wednesday last,
You spurned me such a day, another time
You called me dog, and for these courtesies
I'll lend you thus much moneys'?

Vittore Carpaccio, *The Miracle of the Relic of the Cross at the Ponte di Rialto* (1494)

You call me misbeliever,
cut-throat dog

Hath a dog money? is it
possible

A cur can lend three
thousand ducats?’

(...)

You called me dog

Lexis card

cut-throat = violent and frightening

cur = aggressive dog



Think-aloud strategies
Our aim is to explore the idea of "being an outcast" having a look at the image of the Jew in drama/literature of different times. In any historical period and society there have been contrasts both as individuals and communities.

Lexis card
Outcast, a person who is not accepted by other people and who sometime has to leave their home and friends (Oxford Dictionary)

Jew's stereotypical image
His beard was red his face made/Not much unlike a witch's./His habit was a gown/that would de weather./His chin his nose hung down ends met together

Plot
Shylock is a Venetian Jewish usurer, who gives a loan of three thousand ducats to the merchant Antonio on the 'merry' condition that, if Antonio fails to repair it punctually, he should forfeit a whole pound of his living flesh. As Antonio needs the ducats to assist his friend Bassanio, a Venetian fortune hunter who wants to woo and win the wealthy Portia, chatelaine of Belmont, he accepts this strange condition and receives the money. Bassanio manages to win his heiress; but soon afterwards Antonio hears that his ships have been lost at sea and he realizes that he cannot repay Shylock's loan. The revengeful Jew insists on strict adherence to the law and his pound of flesh and is brought to court...

SHYLOCK
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Context
In Shakespeare's England Jewish religion was banned, but so was every other religion apart from Anglicanism. Jews lived in London, and as they did not make themselves too obtrusive (they had to pretend they were Christians) or create a disturbance, they were tolerated, principally because they were money lenders.

Critical view
Why did Shakespeare make Shylock a Jew?(...)
In making his moneylender a member of the oppressed religious minority, Shakespeare may have wished to stress even further the isolation of the usurer from the national life. The plays of many Elisabethan dramatists, such as Marlowe and Webster, are full of attacks on money lending. In making such attacks, the playwrights were seeking to please the influential noblemen in their audience, who were so often the victims of these usurers; but the dramatists were also reflecting an ancient tradition of Christian belief. Like Antonio, Christians for centuries had believed that loans should be given as an act of pure friendship, and not for profit.

The Merchant
by Arnold Wesker

Act One, Scene One

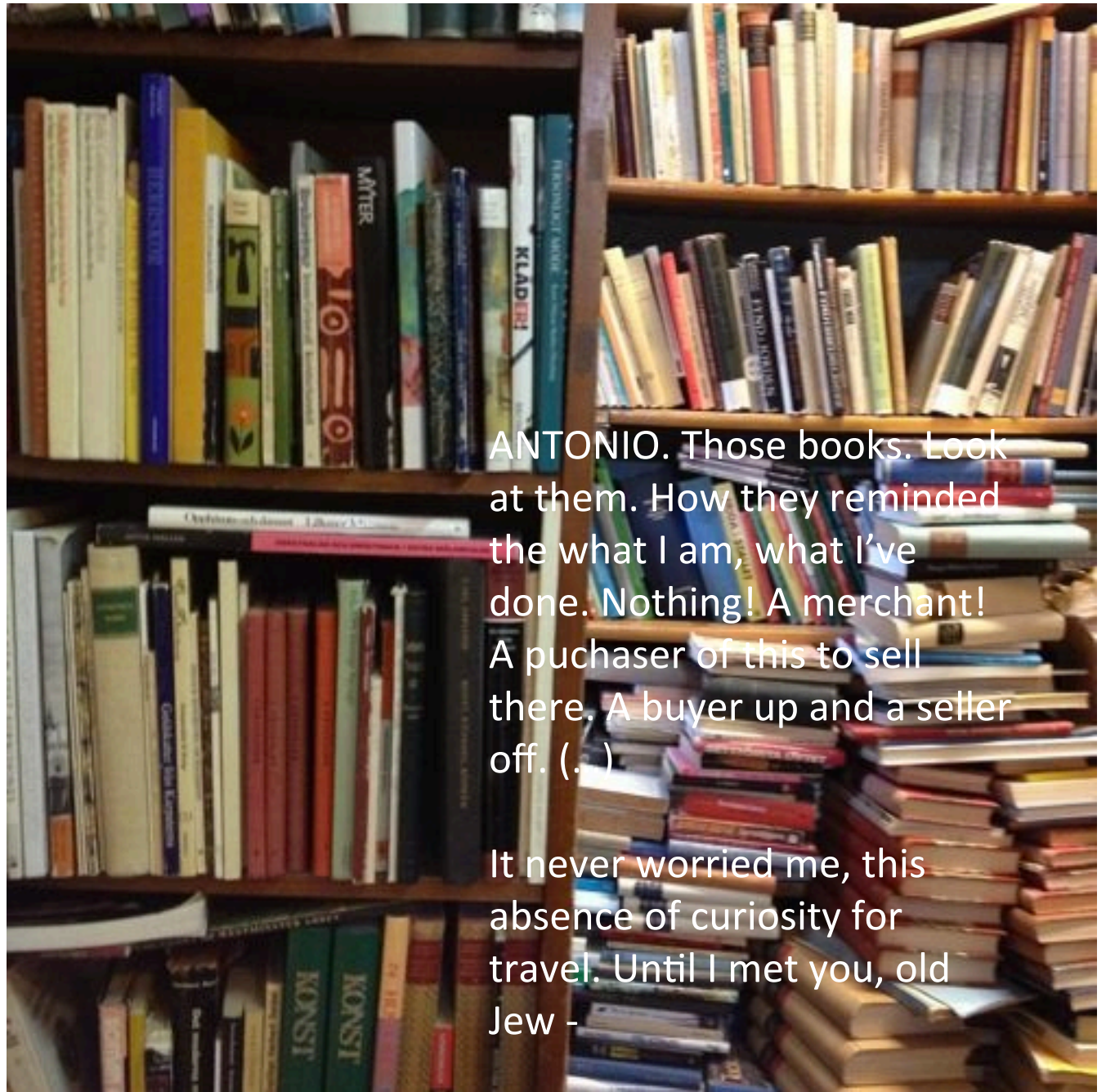
Venice, 1563. The ghetto Nuovo.

SHYLOCK's study. It is strewn with books and manuscripts.

SHYLOCK, a 'loan-banker', with his friend Antonio, a merchant, are leisurely cataloguing.

ANTONIO is by the table, writing, as SHYLOCK reads out the titles and places them on shelves.

They are old friends, and old: in their middle sixties.



ANTONIO. Those books. Look at them. How they reminded the what I am, what I've done. Nothing! A merchant! A purchaser of this to sell there. A buyer up and a seller off. (.)

It never worried me, this absence of curiosity for travel. Until I met you, old Jew -

Wesker's approach to Shylock (a talk in 1982)

Suddenly it came to me: my Shylock was a free spirit. That's what he was about and that's what I was about and that, I realized, is what a certain kind, a very important and influential kind, of Jewishness is about. Perhaps this was one of the reasons why the Jew has throughout history attracted such hostility and resentments, as free spirits do.

Lexis card

blundering = mistake

scheming = making secret plans

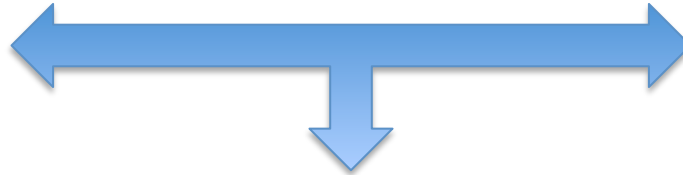
marauders = someone who goes around a place to steal or attack people

bond = agreement to pay

interest on the money you have lent

Think-aloud strategies

Let us examine another character of Shylock through Wesker's *The Merchant*, which sounds as a sort of reply to Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. We would like to point out the similarities and differences between the two Shylocks.



SHYLOCK [*furious but low and dangerous, building*]: **Jew! Jew, Jew, Jew!** I hear the name around and everywhere. Your wars go wrong, the Jew must be the cause of it; your economic systems crumble, there the Jew must be; your wives get sick of you — **a Jew will be an easy target for your sour frustrations.** Failed university, professional blunderings, self-loathing — the Jew, the Jew, the cause the Jew. And when will you cease? When, when, when will your hatreds dry up? There's nothing we can do is right. Admit it! **You will have us all ways** won't you? For our prophecies, our belief in universal morality, our scholarship, our command of trade, even our ability to survive. If we are silent we must be scheming, if we talk we are insolent. **When we come we are strangers, when we go we are traitors.** In tolerating persecution we are despised, but were we to take up arms we'd be the world's marauders, for sure. Nothing will please you. Well, damn you then! [*Drawing knife.*] **I'll have my pound of flesh and not feel obliged to explain my whys and wherefores.** Think what you will, you will think that in any case. I'll say it is my bond. **The law is the law.** You need no other reason, nor shall you get it - from me.(...)

Critical view

In rewriting the play, Wesker embodied present-day feelings about Shylock's role, both in making him a consistent character, and in facing up the question of 'his wrongs, his birth, and his creed.'

*The basic change in the play as a whole, focused by the shift in Shylock's character is the way anti-Jewish feeling is presented. In Shakespeare's play it is taken for granted: it is the foundation and background to Shylock's character as a villain: all Jews are supposed to be miserly, so Shylock is miserly. But in Wesker's *The Merchant* this attitude is discussed and questioned explicitly.*



Lexis card

remotely = at all

kosher = according to the rules of Jewish law

riven = divided in a violent way

defect = to leave a political party or country to join another that is considered to be an enemy

So what was it **Gentiles** saw that told them **they were both Jews**?

Shylock knew, from the intensity of Strulovitch's scrutiny, what he was thinking. 'No, we aren't remotely alike,' he said. 'Not in appearance nor in the manner we have lived our lives. You don't keep a kosher house, you don't attend synagogue and I'm prepared to wager you don't speak a word of Hebrew. **So what does it mean to say we are both Jewish?**

'I'm more interested in what it means to *them* [Gentiles]. What do they see that unites us?

'Something older than myself,' he said.

'In you, maybe... I don't intend that unkindly.'

'I know how you intend it. But in you too. It isn't wear and tear. It's an inability to be indifferent. You might think you don't believe but you're still listening to ancient injunction.'

'That makes me **no different from a Muslim or a Christian.**'

'Yes, it does. Christians are so anxious to accommodate to the modern they have stopped listening. They sing carols and call it faith. Before long there will be none of them left, the long interregnum will have come to an end and we'll be back with just pagans and Jews.'

'And Muslims.'

'Yes, and **Muslims**, but **they are out on their own**, in an argument with everybody but themselves. Look at you – you are riven. Islam does not encourage the schizophrenia you live by. When a Muslim listens to ancient injunction he attends with the whole of himself and finds a sort of peace in it.'

'Peace? Iraq! Syria! Afghanistan!'

Stop! You don't have to name every failed country in the Middle East. I'm talking about an inner conviction of peace, however we judge the political consequences. We **Jews are more self-suspicious**, always wondering if it's time to defect but knowing there's nothing we could finally bear to defect to.'

(*Shylock is My Name* , pp.105-106)

Out in the garden Shylock was talking to his wife.
(...)

These Jews, Leah, these Jews! They don't know whether to cry for me, disown me or explain me. Just as they don't know whether to explain or disown themselves. They wait for a signal that they are not as cringingly passive as they have been described, and when it comes they tear their hair in shame. “ **We are a people on the verge of annihilation**, “ Strulovich is fond of telling me, when he remembers. “We cannot look to anyone to help us but ourselves.” Yet the moment a Jew raises a hand to do just that **his courage fails him**. Better we be killed than kill, I see him thinking. Look at him now, pacing his floor, plotting a revenge he won't in the end have the courage to carry out. **The man lacks resolution**, Leah. Tell me what I should do – spur him on or let him be? He waited for her to tell him what she thought. They spoke so often for so long when she was alive. They spoke and spoke. When she was no longer there to speak to him it was **as though a cord connecting him to life was severed**.
(pp. 193-94)

Lexis card

disown = refuse to acknowledge
cringingly = in a servile manner
spur = encourage
severed = cut

Act it out

Choose one of the three characters of Shylock (out of the texts taken from the three literary works) and act out a possible monologue, identifying key words and paying attention to convey Shylock's mood through his tone of voice

Reviews

Shylock is My Name by Howard Jacobson review- a provocative retelling of the Merchant of Venice

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/feb/07/my-name-is-shylock-review-howard-jacobson-shakespeare-merchant-of-venice>

Shylock is My Name by Howard Jacobson book review
<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/shylock-is-my-name-by-howard-jacobson-book-review-a6825566.html>

Think-aloud strategies

Once you have completed the texts say to yourself, "I originally thought this but now I think this."
"My overall opinion of the texts is _____. From this story I learned that _____."

Literary works

1. Arnold Wesker, *The Merchant*, Methuen, London, 1983.
2. William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Il mercante di Venezia*, Garzanti 1993.
3. Howard Jacobson, *Shylock is My Name*, Hogarth, 2016.

References

- Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare – The Invention of the Human*, Forth Estate, London, 1999.
- Estelle Rivier-Arnaud, *Shakespeare's Plays For and By the Contemporary Stage*, ed. by Michael Dobson and Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2017.
- Shakespeare's *Animals*, Pavilion Books, 1995.
- Shylock and Othello*, Exploring the city with Shylock and Othello, Shaul Bassii- Alberto Toso Fei, Elzeviso 2007.