

“Shelach Is My Name”

Prolegomena to a new play about Shylock

by Robin Russin

Part One: Shylock as Venetian Israelite

Why focus on Shylock in the context of an institute dealing with the real history of Jews in Venice? I would start by suggesting that, perhaps more than any other single factor, Shylock is the underlying reason for the existence of our NEH institute. This may seem an absurd statement - how could our many and varied interests somehow be driven by a fictional character in a fictional Venice, created by a non-Jewish author who may or may not ever have met a real Jew or even been to Italy?

In fact, our discussions and analyses clearly reveal how the multi-faceted “myth of Venice” often trumped the actual, ephemeral realities of the city in terms of its larger cultural and even historic significance. Venice is defined by its myths, whether supplied by its rulers as propaganda, or by visitors over the centuries, each finding in its waters the mirror of their own fantasies and obsessions. Insofar as Jews and the English-speaking world are concerned, Shylock is the central focus of the “myth of Venice,” extending to define the image of the Jew in Renaissance Europe more generally. Beyond that (and with all deference to Dickens’ Fagan), Shylock is the only truly transcendent Jewish figure in world literature outside of the Bible. By transcendent, I mean universally known, a figure who has framed the world’s attitudes about “the Jew” for better or worse, and who has for over four centuries been the subject of ongoing fascination with and debate about the relationship of Jews to the rest of the world. Fiction – as great fiction often does – has colored, if not supplanted, the truth. It--and Shylock--therefore ineluctably affect our renewed search for truth about the real life and experience of the Jew of Venice.

My goal here is not to try and add to the extensive scholarship on the subject, but rather to get closer to the character of Shylock as he might really have existed. As a screenwriter and playwright, my interest in Shylock is concerned with how and why he remains such a vital, essential character—and then, in my forthcoming play, to take this remarkable figure and re-imagine him--not to alter him, so much as to put him in a more

complete and informed context, to portray him as he might really have been in Venice of the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century. Who was he within his community? How might that community have reacted to his situation? What were the realities of his position? What more might we come to understand about his relationship with his daughter Jessica and his dead wife, Leah? What I propose is more an act of creative translation than of scholarly investigation or interpretation (if such a distinction really exists).

Our fascination with Shylock, and the reason he remains one of the best-known and most debated of characters, comes from the fact that he is profoundly multi-dimensional. As much as Moses or David or Joseph before him, Shylock is the embodiment of both age-old Jewish pain and gentile fear. In him we see the collision of a medieval archetype with an emerging humanism, an isolated figure of both grandeur and malevolence, whose bitterness and sense of betrayal are so intense and yet so understandable as to give him an emotional reality beyond any other figure in the play. He is detested by the other characters simply for what, rather than who, he is, and yet he is the only consistent moral presence in the play, making all the rest seem vain, shiftless or hypocritical. Some may argue that this is a post-Shoah take on the play. Of course it is; all analysis is defined by its time, and revises prior attitudes. But that doesn't make it any less valid, even in the context of its own time, and there are a number of Enlightenment-era writings about the play that are strikingly modern in their analysis, as I'll briefly discuss later. I hope the far better qualified scholars out there will indulge my efforts.

Shakespeare was a great borrower (in today's world, he'd have been condemned as a plagiarist) but he always transformed what he borrowed by infusing it with a precise moral and thematic intention often lacking in the source. Shylock is one of his most profound and provocative transformations or translations of what I would call a pre-existing text: the idea or gestalt of the late-medieval Jew. There is a wealth of material to support this notion. Shylock was the latest incarnation of many literary and folk-lore predecessors, from the various tales of the Wandering Jew, to the murderous Jews of the blood libel, to the buffoon Judas's of the "Miracle Plays," to Barabas, *The Jew of Malta*, by Shakespeare's contemporary Marlowe (who may have drawn inspiration from the real and irrepressible Joseph Nasi, Duke of Naxos). And of course there was the real-life

spectacle of the execution of Rodrigo Lopez, Queen Elizabeth's *Marrano* doctor, probably falsely convicted of plotting to poison her.

But Shylock is no stock villain. As a way to explain away his complexity and our perplexity at his supposedly supporting role in what is supposedly a romantic comedy, the claim is sometimes made that Shylock is simply a character who got away from Shakespeare and took on a life of his own. Truly powerful characters can have a way of doing that. John Dryden famously reported that Shakespeare once said he had to kill Mercutio before Mercutio killed the play he was in, *Romeo and Juliet*. But Shakespeare, rather remarkably, did not kill Shylock. Instead, he made him survive to suffer a stunning act of moral hypocrisy. Shylock was no stock villain to be dispatched by the axe or sent to the fires of Hell, but rather a man condemned to be saved, through forced conversion. This is an extraordinary thought: that "salvation" would be a punishment more fitting than death. It is especially remarkable in having been forced upon him by worldly, materialistic gentiles who have never given a prior thought to the divine in the course of play, while Shylock is a man who is constantly mindful of God's law, sacred text and his place of worship. I prefer to give Shakespeare the benefit of the doubt and assume that he knew exactly what he was doing: using and converting (literally as well as figuratively) a universally despised stock character with great subversive effect to attack the hypocrisies of his age.

Let's take a brief look at some opinions in line with my take on the character - at least that there are heroic, if tragic elements within him. I leave out those critics who revel in or condemn Shylock as a buffoon or pure villain, because even those like Harold Bloom are, in my opinion, neither correct nor helpful. They react merely to the obvious surface portrayal, the caricature, without seeing how Shakespeare deconstructs and reinvents his character as a force of righteous anger in a vain and superficial world. It's like seeing Lear's Fool as simply a fool, rather than as the lone voice of sanity in a world of emotional savagery. In 1817, essayist William Hazlitt, in *The Round Table: Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* (London, M. Dent & Sons, pp. 320-4) called *The Merchant of Venice* "...a play that in spite of the change of manners and prejudices still holds undisputed possession of the stage...In proportion as Shylock has ceased to be a popular bugbear, 'baited with the rabble's curse,' he becomes a half-favourite with the philosophical part of the audience, who are disposed to think that Jewish revenge is at

least as good as Christian injuries. Shylock is a good hater; ‘a man no less sinned against than sinning.’ If he carries his revenge too far, yet he has strong grounds for ‘the lodged hate he bears Anthonio,’ which he explains with equal force of eloquence and reason. He seems the depositary of the vengeance of his race...”

That same year, Nathan Drake in *Shakespeare and His Times* (London, T. Cadell & W. Davies, vol. 2, pp. 287-9) appears even more apologetic. He comments on the “savage eccentricity” of the device of the flesh-bond, apparently unaware that this was a familiar trope used by half a dozen sources possibly available to Shakespeare, and going back perhaps to the *Mahbarata* (and only involving Jews after the plague years of the mid 14th century, for which they were often blamed). Nonetheless, his point is that, whatever the sources, Shylock’s blood-thirsty goal derives from “...an aversion, indeed, partaking of hatred and horror, [that] was indulged against this persecuted people, and consequently the picture which Shakespeare has drawn exhibits not only a faithful representation of Jewish sentiments and manners...but it embodies in colours, of almost preternatural strength, the Jew as he appeared to the eye of the shuddering Christian...Fortunately the time has now arrived when the Jew and the Christian can meet with all the feelings of humanity about them; a state of society which, more than any other, is calculated to effect that conversion for which every disciple of our blessed religion will assuredly pray.”

So this pious author’s notion is that, ironically, if only the poor Jews would just convert, things would finally be all right for them. As a set-up and a betrayal, Portia hardly did better herself during her unlawful performance as a lawyer. Not to mention that this opinion ignores the actual history of those who chose to ingratiate or save themselves by conversion and assimilation. But Shylock, as conceived by Shakespeare, is not someone who would honestly convert. At best, his forced acquiescence hints at his becoming a *Marrano*, as so many others had done, converting but then biding his time until he could once again be true to himself. At worst, as a pre-WWII German actor once played the role, in his pride and sense of injury, he would use the knife he brought for Antonio’s flesh with which to stab himself - bringing a darker meaning to his statement that he is not well. It would mean he in fact self-executed, where the Christians would not grant such greater mercy--for Shylock would rather give up the ghost than give up his God.

A century later, Edgar Stoll (“Shylock” in *Shakespeare Studies*, New York, The Macmillan Co. 1927) writes that “Hero or not, Shylock is given a villain’s due...” but that we can’t kid ourselves about giving equal weight to both sides of the contest. In the trial scene, Portia clearly builds up Shylock’s hopes only to tear them down, matching step for step each moment of his apparent victory with a later, parallel body-blow of defeat (in some ways echoing the earlier scene with Tubal), with Gratiano providing the jeering chorus. Indeed, after sanctimoniously proclaiming the need for mercy, whose quality is “unstrained, it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven,” Portia proceeds to destroy Shylock utterly. Stoll concludes, “How can we here for a moment sympathize with Shylock unless at the same time we indignantly turn, not only against Gratiano, but against Portia, the Duke, and all Venice as well?” That is exactly right, and exactly the point: *The Merchant of Venice* is precisely that subversive, which is what makes it so contemporary. Gentile Venice is a city of debt, lust, speculation and greed masquerading as wealth, love and selflessness. Shylock is the only honest person in town.

Part Two: Shylock as Shelach

So this is the basis for my Shylock—or rather my “Shelach,” for I accept the idea that his name was not only, as Shaul Bassi points out, a reference to a contemporary Protestant moneylender in London, but also possibly derived from the Biblical grandson of Shem, and thus associated with the roots of the Semitic nation. But my Shelach is not an Old Testament Jew, or a medieval type, so much as a Renaissance Maccabee, angry, tough and willing to risk the wrath of the outsiders.

What’s more, he’s willing to risk the condemnation of his own community, because he can no longer tolerate or partake in what he sees as their own self-contempt. This will lead to another area of exploration: Shylock’s position within the Ghetto itself.

Shakespeare has portrayed him in stark isolation, other than his variable friend Tubal and faithless daughter Jessica. But in real life, he would have been part of a tight-knit and somewhat timorous community, who would have been appalled at his brazen challenge to the Venetian society upon whose tolerance their very livelihood and continued presence depended. How might the two opposing rabbis, Luzzato and Modena, have tried to mediate this potential disaster? What pressures might Shylock have been subjected to by his own peers? Was conversion only a Christian penalty, or might the Jews themselves

have felt compelled to exile him? When he joins Tubal at the synagogue, what forces of opposition and condemnation might be waiting for him there, as fierce and implacable as those in the Doge's court?

And what of Jessica? How can her choice be made more understandable? Who is to say that a young man, perhaps even one of the guards assigned to circle the Ghetto by canal day after day, might not have caught her eye – and that he might not have seen her as an imprisoned maiden to be rescued? Could this not be our Lorenzo? Might not the very forbidden quality of their mutual attraction have been irresistible, especially after her mother's death, and her being forced to live with an angry, emotionally distant father? Might not a young woman of intelligence have longed for something better than the prospect of marrying someone else just like her father, longed for a world of freedom beyond the six acres of the Ghetto? Sara Coppio Sullam was steadfast in her faith, even when tempted by a man she clearly loved. But why wouldn't another girl, in a worse-off position, have given in? Or maybe Jessica did it to mollify the authorities in some way, to mitigate the harshness of their judgment against her father by accepting their faith?

There will be real challenges in trying to achieve a sense of the reality of their situation. Were the Jews legally allowed to lend that much money? Benjamin Ravid has told us that he doubts this - so what might be the solution in order to make the story work? If the loan was *sub rosa*, how could Shelach hope to find his justice in a Venetian court? Would a claim like the pound of flesh have landed either party anywhere but the insane asylum? Might not Shelach know, just as Shakespeare knew, that the pound of flesh story was a familiar fairy-tale? And if so, might it not be that Shelach in fact offered a loan without interest to Antonio, to try one last time to establish better relations with the Christian world – employing what began as a quaint “term of use” for this merry bond – and then turn deadly in earnest about the language of the bond after the humiliation of his daughter's betrayal?

How to deal with the “fairy tale” aspects of the play? By giving them their due. The pound of flesh and other folktale elements - such as the trial of the three chests and the female lover coming to the rescue disguised as a man - have traditions going back centuries, if not millennia, before Shakespeare put them to use, even before a Jew was painted as the villain of the tale. And their persistence gives them a weight and an

emotional reality that I do not wish to temper or avoid (though I will not go into detail about these earlier versions here, as they are thoroughly dealt with in many other sources, including the Arden edition of the play, Hermann Sinsheimer's *Shylock* and many more). Also, there is some core of actual truth behind these tales. This was a time when ancient, often barbaric laws still sanded the emerging legal machinery. The principle of "talio" existed in most European countries at the time, of strict and severe legal obligations of debtor to creditor. "'Flesh-bonds' were common usage in European countries until, at least, the fifteenth century--that is to say, agreements by which bodily safety was staked on the performance or omission of certain conditions. They had the quality of penalties to which both parties had agreed...Such stipulations (cutting off the ears, the nose, etc.) seem to have served only to underline the gravity and strictness of an agreement." (Sinsheimer 81-2) In any case, amputations, torture and dismemberments of one sort or another were common punishment for a variety of crimes. And the pound of flesh being the central conceit of Shakespeare's play, I will have to find a way to make it real, or feel real, in mine.

I am still developing my own vision of Shylock: what and how much of a past to give him, what fuels his fire beyond what we already know, what secrets exist between him and his daughter, what hidden love and hurt. Much of the secret to the enduring power of Shakespeare's character is in what he leaves unsaid, for us to fill in. How to go far enough, and yet not too far? I can't compete with Shakespeare, and there would be no point in doing so in any event. But hopefully my "translation" of Shylock into Shelach will be true both to the original character and to the real Jews of the Ghetto.

Part Three: Shylock as Myself, a Post-Shoah Jew

But again--why Shylock? Perhaps, because I identify with him, or with the mixture of emotions and ideas he represents. The more I study Shylock, the more personal he becomes to me. I grew up the only Jewish boy in a primarily Southern Baptist Wyoming town, and then in Italy as the only Jewish boy in an entirely Catholic town. I didn't really know what it meant to be a Jew. Of course I knew about the Holocaust, about the pogroms my great grandparents had suffered, about the great uncle with the forehead scarred and caved in by a Cossack truncheon, about the Russian shtetls and gulags--I'd seen *Fiddler on the Roof* and even *Yentl*--but astonishingly I didn't know what Rosh

Hashanah or any of the other holidays beyond Passover and Chanukah were until my fiancée dragged me along to her temple when I was already twenty five years old. But I always knew that I was different.

In Italy it was fun that I was different, because it made me unique. My first day, when I went to the bathroom, all the other boys crowded in to see “the difference,” and the idea that this revelation could have gotten me shot a quarter of a century earlier never entered my mind (as it had, however, for an Italian boy and survivor named Leo Jesurun, our guest and survivor of the Shoah). In Wyoming, being Jewish also set me apart, in a less pleasant way. One day a friend told me his father had told him that my family was rich-- this was news to me, and only later did I realize the implication. In seventh grade, after a collision in a basketball game, a kid called me a dirty Jew, and I instinctively punched him in the nose. I got in trouble at school, but my dad was strangely proud of me. And every year, our neighbors - fundamentalist Christians who wouldn't let their kids play with me after I'd informed them that man had evolved from an ape-like creature - would send us a card every Easter and Christmas, begging us to convert, because they knew we were such nice people and they hated to think that we were going to Hell.

As I began to discover who I was, who my people had been, and how little I really knew, the one thing I felt growing inside me - beside shame at how little I knew - was a sense of rage. Why had our tiny population, disproportionately the source of so much good in the world, music, science, art, philosophy, the source of at least two other great religions, been subjected to such disproportionate horrors, such spite and contempt, for no reason I could see other than our remaining constant in our own beliefs? And I could not understand our acquiescence, the toleration of insult after injury, what Shylock calls the sufferance that is “the badge of all our tribe.”

Perhaps as part of my own self-discovery, my work drew me to Jewish subject matter-- but always, about the Jews who had fought back. I wrote a script based on the early life story of one of the toughest men I've ever known, an Israeli who fought and scammed his way from Poland across Russia, Japan, China, Burma and India on his way to join the Israeli War of Independence. I wrote an adaptation of a novel about a chess master who waited for and found revenge against the sadistic kommandant of his former concentration camp. I wrote about King David, that most conflicted of Jewish warriors,

who created a nation at the cost of his most beloved children, and the blood on whose hands cost him the dream of building the Temple to house the Ark of the Covenant.

The fights I'd gotten into in middle school, barely knowing what I was fighting about, later led to an interest in martial arts, but I never really felt at home until I entered the Krav Maga gym in Los Angeles: Israeli karate, Contact Combat, taught by former special forces guys. Here, I felt, were my people, tough Jews, latter day Maccabees. Jews who could rip off an enemy pound of flesh with their bare hands and not break a sweat. Of course I was going to fall in love with Shylock. To me, though I overstate the case a bit, he makes the leap from Israelite to Israeli. Shylock is a warrior, sharing to some degree the aspect of Achilles in *The Iliad* as defined by its very first word: *Menin*—"rage"—an epic wrath both justified by personal insult and injury, and yet self-destructive in its consequences. Where Achilles has his sword and shield, Shylock brandishes the weapons of law and divine justice.

In sum, I see my Shylock - or Shelach - as a proud man caught between two worlds, forced into a position of outrage by those outside his community, even as he's abandoned and condemned by those of his own people whose very dignity he is trying to uphold. I hope to take up where Shakespeare left off, to follow Shylock back into the synagogue and fill in the gaps of his life and the forces that created him, and perhaps to help reconcile the two conflicting schools of thought that either laud him as a latter day prophet, or execrate him as a heinous villain. The truth is somewhere in between, to be found in the words and lives of those Venetian Jews whom Shakespeare probably never met, even as he was indelibly defining them – and our fascination with them - to this day.