"Shanda fur die Goyim:" Adapting *The Merchant of Venice* for Jewish and Non-Jewish Audiences

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Inception

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Abstract

William Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice,* and specifically the character of Shylock, the Jewish moneylender, are deeply anti-Semitic. Despite this, the play has been reworked and adapted by Jewish artists, writers, actors, and directors. In this paper I argue that Jewish adaptations of *The Merchant of Venice* have the power to subvert anti-Semitic stereotypes and represent Jewish life in the diaspora. I will compare adaptations made for primarily Jewish audiences to adaptations made to reach a significantly broader audience.

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William Shakespeare's play, *The Merchant of Venice*, likely written between 1596 and 1598, is a comedy about Bassanio, a young Venetian, who must borrow money in order to marry Portia. While the play is mostly about the unfolding love stories between the young noble people, the play also includes a conflict between Shylock, a Jewish money-lender, and the rest of the play's characters. The antagonism between Shylock and the rest of society is clear from

the beginning, as Antonio, the titular merchant of Venice, makes many nasty comments to Shylock about Jews and moneylending, and the conflict culminates in a trial towards the end of the play. Shylock refuses to show mercy and is bloodthirsty in his desire to have his debt repaid. While, as countless critics have noted, the play itself, and Shylock's character, are deeply anti-Semitic, there are nonetheless many Jewish artists, writers, actors, and directors who choose to adapt or re-appropriate *The Merchant of Venice*. Jewish reworkings of *The Merchant of Venice* can subvert the anti-Semitic stereotypes that the play on its own reinforces and therefore have the power to represent internally and externally Jewish diasporic life and persecution. It is especially compelling to examine adaptations that reflect on the last century of Jewish life in the diaspora. Adaptations for almost exclusively Jewish audiences, primarily as a part of Yiddish theatre in the twentieth century, have been able to reflect back the experience of anti-Semitism that has changed very little since Elizabethan England. To largely non-Jewish audiences, reworking and appropriating *The Merchant of Venice*, especially in large studio films directed by Jewish directors, recalls an easily recognizable instance of anti-Semitism with great cultural capital and shows its audience how dangerous anti-Semitism can become. Jewish retellings of *The Merchant of Venice* are able to disrupt the long running currents of anti-Semitism, but the strategies and effects differ with different audiences.

The character of Shylock is deeply rooted in the anti-Semitism of Shakespeare's time. As Anthony Julius explains in his 2010 book *Trials of the Diaspora: A History of Anti-Semitism in England,* there had been a long history of anti-Semitic sentiment in England before the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. There were times in which Jewish communities in England were thriving, though, as Julius writes, "conditions for the Jews began to deteriorate in the mid- to late-twelfth century. The blood libel made its first recorded appearance; the Crown stopped borrowing from the Jews and instead started taxing them; there was popular violence" (107). The result, as Julius

points out, is that, “in medieval England, then, Jews were defamed, their wealth was expropriated, they were killed and injured, they were subjected to discriminatory and humiliating regulations, and they were, finally, expelled” (108). Jews had just been readmitted to England before *The Merchant of Venice* was first staged. Although most of Shakespeare’s audience would never have met a Jew, they would have been familiar with the sentiments of anti-Semitism, sentiments that were perpetuated by literary anti-Semitism even before *The Merchant of Venice* was first performed. Julius argues that there was “by the mid-sixteenth century a certain fossilizing in the received literary account of the Jew” (176). The literary trope of the Jew was grounded in antagonism between Judaism and Christianity, the history of moneylending, blood libels, and Jews as perpetual outsiders. Christopher Marlowe’s play *The Jew of Malta,* which was first performed in 1592, depicts an obnoxiously self-righteous Jew who sits proudly atop his hoard of money. As Julius explains, Marlowe “takes all the things that his audience supposes it knows about Jews and exaggerates that ‘knowledge’” (177). *The Merchant of Venice* does not stray too far from Marlowe’s construction of the Jew and, as Julius argues, is the most written about and discussed instance of English literary anti-Semitism. Julius writes, “the play is the object of widespread exegetical activity… it has been used often enough in the centuries since its composition to promote ignoble elation at the spectacle of a Jew’s humiliation” (178). Harold Bloom, in his 1998 book *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human,* is even more damning of *The Merchant of Venice.* He writes, “one would have to be blind, deaf, and dumb not to recognize that Shakespeare’s grand, equivocal comedy *The Merchant of Venice* is nevertheless a profoundly anti-Semitic work” (171). Although the play itself cannot be detached from its anti-Semitism, reworking *The Merchant of Venice* can allow for a subversion of the play’s anti-Semitism, especially when it is approached by Jewish adapters.

Yiddish theatre was popular entertainment amongst large communities of Ashkenazi Jews, especially in cities with a great number of Jewish immigrants, such as New York. As Joel Berkowitz explains in *Shakespeare on the American Yiddish Stage, The Merchant of Venice* was first performed in Yiddish in 1894 and was such a commercial failure that it only ran for a single weekend (172). Throughout the next half of a century, however, *The Merchant of Venice* was adapted many times for the Yiddish stage and had great commercial success. Different actors and directors had varied approaches to their adaptations, as some chose just to change Shylock's character, while others changed the play itself (Berkowitz, 172). In 1901, Jacob Adler performed as Shylock in a performance of the play that focused more heavily on Shylock's perspective. Berkowitz notes an interview that Adler gave while performing as Shylock, explaining that he wanted Shylock to "be shown well-dressed and proud of mien, instead of the poor and cringing figure which custom has made familiar" (175). Adler's version of *The Merchant of Venice* premiered under the title *Shylock* and cut the original text to focus primarily on the character Shylock. Since, as Berkowitz points out, Shylock only appears in five of the twenty scenes of the play in its original form, making Shylock the central character required extensive reworking (176). The final act was cut in its entirety, and the tone of the play also shifted dramatically, for, as Berkowitz explains, to a Jewish audience in New York in 1901, "a Jewish daughter abandoning her father and converting to Christianity is the stuff of tragedy, not comedy" (176). In this adaptation, Shylock, upon discovering Jessica's betrayal, rips his clothing, a traditional sign of mourning in Judaism, and in the next scene he is directed to be full of rage and grief. The play ends in Shylock's humiliation, and, as Berkowitz explains, shows "the direct connection between the mood of Adler's ending and the anti-Semitism that so many of the immigrants in his audience had fled, and that many still feared" (178). Adler's Yiddish adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice* attempts to tell a story of Jewish persecution to a Jewish audience. These changes in plot, as well as the subtle

stage directions such as Shylock's display of mourning, which would likely only be recognizable to its Jewish audience, created a more self-aware retelling of Shylock's story. This shift reflects a very real story of persecution that many members of its Jewish audience would have experienced as Jews in a predominantly Christian world.

Maurice Schwartz also played Shylock in a Yiddish adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice* called *Shylock un Zayn Tokhter* (Shylock and his Daughter) in 1947, which was based on Ibn Zahav's novel of the same name (Berkowitz, 195). Staging *The Merchant of Venice* so soon after the tragedy of the Holocaust was not a simple task, and in this adaptation much was changed from the original play: for example, Antonio and Portia are already married and Jessica has a much greater presence. What these changes to the play added were greater historical context of the lives of actual Jews living in the ghetto in Venice in the 16th century. Early on in the script, Shylock explicitly lists multiple anti-Semitic decrees from the church, such as, "debts owed by a Jew to a Gentile are cancelled without payment. A Jew showing himself in the City without the 'hat of shame' is thrown into prison" (Berkowitz, 200). For Jewish audiences, this setting of anti-Semitism from 16th century Venice would immediately draw connections to the Nuremberg laws of Nazi Germany from just a few years earlier (Berkowitz, 200). Responding to the situation of Jews in Nazi Germany, Schwartz's Shylock was a victim, and the script is changed to tell the story of his suffering. As Berkowitz explains, in this play Shylock is a wealthy banker and money-lender who uses his influence to save fellow Jews from being burned at the stake. Shylock has lost his wife and three of his four children and has a strong relationship to Jessica. Lorenzo, the gentile manager of Shylock's bank, wishes to steal Jessica away, and Jessica, who feels stifled by life inside the walls of the ghetto, agrees to go on outings with Lorenzo (201). Perhaps the most significant change is that Shylock does not actually demand a pound of flesh from Antonio. Schwartz, in the program for the play, explained that this demand would not be kosher, and notes that Shylock, as a religious

man, would never have put such terms in his contract (Berkowitz, 201). In this version of the play, the demand for a pound of flesh is a sarcastic suggestion from Antonio, which makes its way into the contract as a joke. As Berkowitz explains, Schwartz is trying to make Shylock "a pure victim" (201). Shylock has been the victim of personal tragedy as well as societal anti-Semitism, and his experience reflects the real lives of diaspora Jews post-Holocaust. Jessica's character, according to the script, is shown Antonio's palace and, as Berkowitz explains, is "dazzled by a scene of greater splendor than she can ever know as a Jew" (203). While many critics lamented that Jessica's character was not given clear enough motivations, the script seems to attempt to make Jessica a victim as well. Jessica wishes to be free of the persecution that the Christian world has forced upon her, and in her escape abandons her faith. Whether or not the play effectively portrays this motivation was debated by critics, but the script pursues a portrayal of Jessica as someone who wishes to escape anti-Semitism, rather than someone who wishes to escape her father out of spite. The changes to the story in this play, compared to Shakespeare's original text, are significant. In both plays Shylock is an outsider. Shylock, in *Shylock un Zayn Tokhter,* is unquestionably the tragic victim rather than a character to be both mocked and feared. In Yiddish, Shylock is a mirror for his Jewish audiences, and he reflects a picture of othering and persecution that Jews have experienced for many years. Shakespeare's Shylock, on the other hand, is not a mirror but a caricature who portrays to a largely non-Jewish audience what they think they know of Jews.

As Berkowitz points out, Yiddish poet Morris Vintshevski argued that Shylock is "an apotheosis of Jewish suffering during centuries of anti-Semitism" (179). When Shylock is shown in the context of the original play, his character is simply another example of culture's ability to perpetuate Jewish suffering during centuries of anti-Semitism. When Shylock is taken out of context and is reworked by a Jewish adapter, Shylock can depict the experience of Jewish

suffering during times of heightened anti-Semitism. The success of Yiddish adaptations of *The Merchant of Venice* over decades of Yiddish theatre shows that Jewish audiences have a continued interest in self-reflection on the reality of Jewish oppression.

Yiddish theatre versions of *The Merchant of Venice* can be understood simply as adaptations, as they are very clear in their connection to the source material and, while changing language, do not change the medium. However, it can be helpful to understand them in terms of appropriation. As Julie Sanders outlines in her 2005 book *Adaptation and Appropriation,* "appropriation frequently effects a more decisive journey away from the informing text into a wholly new cultural product and domain" (26). As Sanders continues, "rather than the movements of proximation or cross-generic interpretation that we identified as central to adaptation, [in appropriation] we have a wholesale rethinking of the terms of the original" (28). Yiddish appropriations of *The Merchant of Venice* still have a relationship to the source text, although they are able to show the audience a much more complicated relationship by shifting tone, context, and perspective. In contrast to the Yiddish theatre's almost entirely Jewish audiences, there are three studio films directed by Jewish filmmakers, that use lines from *The Merchant of Venice* and reach significantly larger and broader audiences. All three films take place during World War II, although only one was actually filmed during the war itself. While most scholars might not consider these films adaptations due to their lack of sustained engagement with the source text, these films notably reference *The Merchant of Venice* through the use of the "hath not a Jew eyes?" speech. These films all deal with the subject of anti-Semitism in different ways and all use Shakespeare's cultural capital to portray an intricate history of cultural anti-Semitism. The use of *The Merchant of Venice* in these films serves a similar purpose to Yiddish theatre appropriations, although the drastic change in intended audience also changes how the source text is used.

Ernst Lubitsch's 1942 film *To Be or Not to Be* is about a theatre troupe in Nazi-occupied Poland. Lubitsch was a German Jew born in 1892 who spent much of his career in America and became a naturalized citizen in 1936. The film begins before the German invasion of Poland when the company is rehearsing a play that satirizes the Nazis, which they are forced to cancel as soon as the Germans successfully invade Poland. The rest of the film involves the theatre troupe's plan to help the Allies and use their acting skills to infiltrate the Nazis. One of the over-arching jokes in the film is that one of the actors, Joseph Tura (Jack Benny), wants to play Hamlet and deliver the "to be or not to be" soliloquy but keeps having people walk out during his lines. This parallels Greenberg (Felix Bressart), who admits at the beginning of the film that he has always wanted to play Shylock and recite the "hath not a Jew eyes" soliloquy. At the end of the film, as a part of a planned distraction, Greenberg, who is not explicitly but implicitly the Jewish character in this film, performs this soliloquy in front of Hitler. This scene on its own is quite striking, as the audience watches a Jewish man recite a plea for Jewish humanity surrounded by a horde of Nazis, before being taken away by fellow actors disguised as Nazis. This scene is especially provocative considering that Lubitsch is a German Jew, and the film's original audience was largely comprised of Americans only a year after America had joined the war. Although America was fighting the Nazis, American society was still fraught with anti-Semitism before and after the war. Aside from this specific scene, Greenberg's character serves many purposes for a non-Jewish audience. The many mentions of Greenberg's desire to play Shylock one day and recite his famous speech shows how tightly Jewish identity in the diaspora is tied to the history of anti-Semitism, as the plea of Jews to be seen as human is one that still must be repeated as centuries pass. Shakespeare is both well-recognized and well-respected, both by the characters within the film and by the film's likely audience and both Greenberg the character and Lubitsch the director utilize the widespread esteem for Shakespeare to beg for empathy from a non-Jewish audience at a time of heightened and

violent anti-Semitism. There were many Hollywood films produced during World War II that were explicitly anti-Nazi, but Lubitsch's use of *The Merchant of Venice* sets his film apart. Greenberg and Lubitsch cry out to the Nazis and to the movie-going public to see the danger and inhumanity of anti-Semitism.

The Pianist was released in 2002 and was directed by Jewish filmmaker Roman Polanski, himself a survivor of the Holocaust who fled the Krakow ghetto as a child and wandered the Polish countryside during the war. His mother died in Auschwitz and, following the war, he was reunited with his father who had survived labour camps. The film is based on the story of Holocaust survivor Władysław Szpilman, played by Adrien Brody, a Jewish pianist in Warsaw before the war. After the German invasion of Poland, Władysław is forced, alongside the rest of Warsaw's Jews, to live inside the Warsaw ghetto. As conditions within the ghetto begin to worsen dramatically, Władysław and his family are deported to the death camps, but Władysław is able to escape, and he spends the rest of the war in the ruins of Warsaw, witnessing the Warsaw ghetto uprising and the rest of the violence that followed until 1945. While they are still living together in the ghetto, Władysław's brother recites the passage "If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us do, we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?" The significance of this line is carried throughout the film. In terms of the plot, the choice to include the line "if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?" foreshadows the Warsaw ghetto uprising, which was the largest instance of Jewish resistance during the Holocaust. More broadly, with Polanski as director, these lines emphasize all that he demonstrates visually throughout the harrowing film: Jews bleeding, Jews dying, and Jews attempting to seek revenge against the Nazis. Considering that Polanski himself is a survivor, telling the story of a survivor, the choice to include Shylock's famous lines is especially poignant. While Lubitsch's film, which was released in 1942, came out before the extent of the horrors of the Holocaust were fully known to the world, Polanski's

film carries an extra weight of mourning. While Lubitsch's film uses Shakespeare's cultural capital to plea not just for empathy but for action, Polanski's film uses the juxtaposition of Shakespeare's insouciant anti-Semitism and the violence of the Holocaust to show his audience the tragedy of a long history of anti-Semitism.

In Steven Spielberg's 1993 film *Schindler's List,* the "hath not a Jew eyes?" speech is delivered not by a Jewish character but by a Nazi. Steven Spielberg is an American-Jewish director, who based *Schindler's List* on the true story of Oskar Schindler (Liam Neeson), a German businessman who risked his life during WWII to save over one thousand Jews. In the scene that references *The Merchant of Venice,* SS Officer Amon Göth (Ralph Fiennes), who has been tasked with the construction of the Płaszów concentration camp, is with his Jewish housemaid Helen Hirsch (Embeth Davidtz). Göth is especially cruel and is known for his violence against Jews. In this scene, Göth is in a room alone with Hirsch and is deciding whether or not to rape her. He stands over her and says, "Are these the eyes of a rat? Hath not a Jew eyes?" He then decides not to rape her, and instead beats her and accuses her of almost tricking him into having sex with a Jew. Here, Spielberg is highlighting the anti-Semitism of both Shakespeare and the Nazis in a different way; Rather than simply delivering a plea for humanity, Spielberg shows how Jews may be reduced to nothing more than a body. By putting Shylock's words into Göth's mouth, Spielberg shows how Shakespeare and long-standing anti-Semitic stereotypes have granted such little humanity to the Jewish people. For Göth, both rats and Jews have eyes, and bodies, and nothing more. Shakespeare reduces Shylock to nothing but a body, and the Nazis reduce Jews to vermin who infect the rest of society. The use of this line also serves a greater purpose for Spielberg's film as a whole. In many ways, Schindler's character acts as a stand-in for the film's non-Jewish audience: Schindler begins the film as a member of the Nazi party who hires Jews for cheaper labour, and he only comes around to risking his own life to save Jews after witnessing the atrocity of the liquidation

of the Krakow ghetto. Spielberg shows his audience the horrors of the Holocaust and the dangers of being idle in the face of anti-Semitism. Having a Nazi recite lines from *The Merchant of Venice* is a tool to show a non-Jewish audience how the passive perpetuation of anti-Semitism through works like *The Merchant of Venice* can take a dark and violent turn.

All three films use Shakespeare's words, but not Shakespeare's context. In all three of these films, Jews are clearly the victims. While viewers recognize Shylock and his words, in these films Shylock does not perpetuate anti-Semitic tropes but rather calls extra attention to their danger. By re-appropriating *The Merchant of Venice,* Jewish directors have drawn a critical eye to Shakespeare, and, in their evoking of Shakespeare, have called into question the cultural forces that have maintained his relevancy. As Bradley Berens argues in "On Beyond Shylock," anxieties concerning "what makes a Jew different" have rattled around cultural discourse for millennia, and the use of Shylock's words in film accentuate the dangers and ubiquity of this anxiety (24). When one sees *The Merchant of Venice* in a film about the Holocaust, audiences are forced to confront the anti-Semitism that brought about Shylock's character in the Elizabethan era, and that continued into the catastrophic outbreak of anti-Semitism during WWII.

Despite *The Merchant of Venice's* irrevocable bond to the history of anti-Semitism, Jewish artists continue to rework and consume adaptations and appropriations of the play in different forms. *The Merchant of Venice* and Shylock as a character, especially, share a very complicated and troubled legacy. Utilizing the subversive power of adaptation, and its ability to confront and challenge a source text, Jews have been able to use *The Merchant of Venice* to undermine its anti-Semitism.

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