Introduction: Shakespeare and the Jews

Coen Heijes & Sabine Schülting

To cite this article: Coen Heijes & Sabine Schülting (2022) Introduction: Shakespeare and the Jews, Shakespeare, 18:1, 1-7, DOI: 10.1080/17450918.2022.2030397

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17450918.2022.2030397

Published online: 15 Mar 2022.

Article views: 183

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While the topic of this special issue has long held our scholarly and personal interests, the idea to dedicate a special issue of Shakespeare to the topic originated at the 2019 conference of the British Shakespeare Association, under whose auspices the journal is published. At the time, a plethora of incidents involving anti-Semitism was prevalent in the UK, which reported a record high of anti-Semitic incidents in 2019, including assaults of Jews and damage and desecration of Jewish property. At the time of the conference, the Labour Party seemed to almost tear itself apart as it struggled to deal with accusations of an anti-Semitic culture and a tendency to turn a blind eye to anti-Semitism among its members. The rise in anti-Semitic incidents was not limited to the UK, however, as similar reports across Europe indicated an ongoing and increasing rise in pervasive and systemic ant-Semitism. In 2019 in France, the prominent French Jewish philosopher Alain Finkielkraut was mocked and harassed by members of the Yellow Vest movement. Windows of Jewish shops in Paris were sprayed with the word “Juden”, Jewish cemeteries were smeared with graffiti and swastikas as the number of anti-Semitic incidents doubled. Our own two countries of birth, Germany and the Netherlands, showed similarly worrying trends. In 2019, this culminated in a violent attack on a synagogue in the city of Halle on Yom Kippur, resulting in two deaths, while the Dutch Minister of Justice warned of the dangers of anti-Semitism becoming socially acceptable once again. Despite the horrors of the Shoah, anti-Semitism is no longer an issue confined to extremist parties but seems to have entered the political and cultural mainstream. Neither is this an isolated European tendency and the Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres, called in 2020 for global unity in fighting the scourge of anti-Semitism.

Shakespeare and the accusation of anti-Semitism have long been intertwined, with The Merchant of Venice being central in this discourse. The play has been criticised for reproducing anti-Semitic stereotypes, and there have been repeated calls to exclude it from school curricula and the stage. At the same time, the play has been instrumental for a deconstruction of anti-
Semitism and for cultural remembrance of the Shoah. It was therefore both our academic interest as Shakespeareans and our concern with the recent rise in anti-Semitic incidents which stimulated us to guest-edit this volume and we were highly pleased when the editorial board of *Shakespeare*, without any hesitation, agreed to our suggestion for a special issue on ‘Shakespeare and the Jews’.

It has been thirty years since James Shapiro discussed ‘Shakespeare and the Jews’ in the James Parkes Lecture at the University of Southampton in 1992, a lecture that would form one of the cornerstones of the ground-breaking book of the same title, which appeared in 1996. Delving deep into the cultural imagination from which Shakespeare’s Shylock emerged, Shapiro challenges the widespread assumption ‘that there were no Jews or Jewish questions in Shakespeare’s England’ (225). Instead, he presents early modern England as a society ‘surprisingly preoccupied’ (1) with Jews and Jewishness – a concern influenced by mediaeval myths and fantasies, the Reformation, the emergence of English nationalism, and far-reaching economic changes. To date, Shapiro’s monograph offers indispensable reading for historical approaches to *Merchant* and early modern anti-Semitism, and it has inspired scholars who have analysed the embeddedness of the play in early modern economic, sexual, and theological discourses. In the same year in which Shapiro gave his seminal lecture, John Gross published his *Shylock: Four Hundred Years in the Life of a Legend* (1992), in which he traces Shylock’s multi-faceted history and interpretations in British and American theatres until the twentieth century. This has been complemented by a large number of studies on the reception of *Merchant* in individual countries and at specific historical moments. Current scholarship on ‘Jewish questions’ in *Merchant* is similarly divergent, ranging from Kenneth Gross’s enthusiastic suggestion that Shylock can be read as Shakespeare’s double (*Shylock Is Shakespeare*, 2006) to Janet Adelman’s resistant reading in *Blood Relations* (2008), in which she confronts, as a Jew, what for her is the ‘most painful of plays’ (vii). The ambivalent potential of *Merchant* to both reiterate and challenge anti-Semitic thought has stimulated Jewish writers, directors, actors and critics alike; their *Wrestling with Shylock* is explored in the contributions to the collection edited by Edna Nahshon and Michael Shapiro (2017). In the conclusion to *Shakespeare and the Jews*, James Shapiro writes that ‘racist fantasies continue to compel belief because they tap into some of the deepest fears people have of “turning” – especially of physical, sexual, or religious transformation.’ (227) Contemporary anti-Semitism may be caused by similar anxieties in our rapidly changing globalised world, and this may contribute to the ‘weird, uneasy relevance’ that Stephen Greenblatt has attributed to the play in *Shakespeare’s Freedom* (2010:52).

In this special issue of *Shakespeare*, we pay homage to James Shapiro’s research, both by looking back and reflecting on the issues Shapiro raised. In launching our call for papers for this volume, we had no idea that we would
receive so many proposals (no less than thirty-four) from fellow Shakespear-"eans from many different countries. While it forced us to make some hard choices, the broad, international interest in the special issue was also a clear indication of how important the topic was to the scholarly community. In the end, we decided on eight essays which demonstrate the incredible width of the topic in their approaches, some more historicist, some more presentist, some theatre oriented, some focusing on adaptations in the cinema or on the page, some more autobiographical, some zooming in on specific aspects of Jewishness. The interaction between Jewishness and Shakespeare and the more general cultural and political context demonstrates an equally wide terrain, moving between Anglophone and non-Anglophone countries, including the US, the UK, Australia, Russia, France, Germany, Spain, Italy and Israel. As a group, these essays not only explore (interpretations of) Jewishness in Shakespeare’s plays, productions and adaptations, but also how these have functioned in their wider historical and national cultural settings and how they have reflected and promoted debate, and continue to do so, on Jewishness, assimilation, anti-Semitism and the Other. At the same time, we are painfully aware of the many aspects and perspectives that have not been included and we hope that this special issue may serve as a springboard for further research on this topic, which continues to be important, both from a scholarly and from a societal point of view.

In his preface to the Twentieth Anniversary edition of Shakespeare and the Jews (2016), Shapiro concludes with a comment on an Israeli production of The Merchant of Venice that alluded to the massacre of 29 Palestinians in Hebron in 1994, committed by a fanatic Jew: ‘That production,’ Shapiro writes, ‘truly served as a canary in the coal mine, but I had not taken seriously enough the dangers of poisonous Jewish intolerance, directed not only against outsiders, including residents denied the rights of citizens (the hollow legal grounds that justifies persecution in The Merchant of Venice), but also, and increasingly, against fellow Jews.’ (Shapiro 2016: x) Shaul Bassi’s article, which introduces the special issue, takes its departure from this quote. Bassi comments on his own ambivalent emotional reaction to Shapiro’s remark, the complicated relationship to Israel, and his admiration for American Jewish self-confidence. Cultural difference, he stresses, has a considerable affective component and is the effect of different emotional communities. His analysis contextualises Shylock’s ‘tyranny and rage’ in the emotional communities of early modernity, and traces the trope of the ‘angry Jew’ from the late sixteenth-century England to twentieth-century Italy, Israel and the United States. In spite of potential pitfalls, ‘angry Jewish resistance’, a phrase borrowed from Roth’s autobiography The Facts (2011), has a critical potential and offers an alternative to the construct of, or the demand for, the ‘good Jew’. Joan Fitzpatrick is also concerned with the relationship between Christians and Jews, in The Merchant of Venice and its historical contexts, and she highlights
the centrality of food and eating, of hospitality and its antithesis, for the discursive construction of this relation. Reading Shakespeare’s play alongside two of its intertexts, namely Robert Wilson’s *The Three Ladies of London* (early 1580s) and Giovanni Fiorentino’s late fourteenth-century novella *Il Pecorone*, she argues that in these texts, hospitality and its breakdown become a means to negotiate the shift from mediaeval feudalism to a market economy. She suggests that Shakespeare’s Shylock serves as a device ‘to explore […] the extent to which traditional Christian virtues are tested or undermined by older ideas about identity (specifically Jewishness) in an emerging capitalist economy.’ Zeno Ackermann shifts attention to the question of language and accent as a (purported) marker of Jewish difference, and from early modern England to Germany in the late eighteenth and early twentieth centuries. Shylock’s ‘linguistic articulation’ has repeatedly been addressed in the stage history of the play, which therefore testifies to a logic that connects language to a racialised body and stereotypical notions of ethnic ‘character’. But in early twentieth-century responses to Shylock, Ackermann also detects an attitude that he describes, with Rey Chow, as a ‘xenophonic vision of multi-accentuality’, a positive embrace of ‘linguistic plurality’. These first three articles develop their historical approaches to *The Merchant of Venice* on the basis of recent theoretical debates (in Emotion, Food and Sound Studies), which allow them to challenge simple binaries and highlight the complex and often contradictory responses to Shakespeare’s Jewish moneylender. These responses include Jewish voices, which are at the centre of the following two essays dealing with Jewish translations and adaptations of Shakespeare, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The contributions by Lily Kahn and Mark Thornton Burnett both deal with Yiddish Shakespeare, in the early Soviet Union and the contemporary United States. Kahn discusses Y. Goldstein’s 1935 Yiddish translation of *Othello*, which has been neglected by Shakespeare scholarship so far. In a close reading of Goldstein’s version and his various translational decisions, she shows how he managed to strategically combine the ‘tension between modernising Soviet ideology and traditional Eastern European Jewish elements’. This becomes apparent in a text that remains surprisingly close to the Shakespearean original and displays a particular interest in Desdemona as a modern woman. But whereas Goldstein avoids references to Jewish religion, he includes expressions from Jewish secular life and material culture. *Romeo and Juliet in Yiddish* (2011), the film adaptation analysed by Mark Thornton Burnett, forms part of a tradition that can be traced back to the thriving of Yiddish literature, theatre and film in the early twentieth century, in Russia and the early Soviet Union, eastern Europe and the United States. But the film’s concern is with the contemporary world, with ‘secular and Orthodox relations in early twenty-first-century America’ and ‘the plight of its dispossessed subjects inside discourses of Jewish identity and diaspora’. In the film, these tensions
are explored through *Romeo and Juliet*. Shakespeare’s tragedy is used to offer a complex but eventually ameliorative view of modern Judaism for a heterogeneous American audience that is not limited to Jewish spectators or speakers of Yiddish.

The last three articles, by Cynthia May Martin, Lucy Eyre and Susan Fischer, are concerned with a novelisation and three stage productions of *The Merchant of Venice* in different countries in the twenty-first century. In very general terms, they all address the question how a novelisation or production of *Merchant* can tackle the conflicts in contemporary societies and show a historical awareness of the Holocaust and the long history of anti-Semitism. The first article in this group of essays is Cynthia May Martin’s reading of *Shylock Is My Name* (2016), Howard Jacobson’s novelisation of *Merchant* for the Hogarth Shakespeare series, which was launched on the occasion of the quatercentenary of Shakespeare’s death. Martin focuses on metalepsis in the novel, the juxtaposition of ‘Shakespeare’s’ Shylock and Simon Strulovitch, a contemporary adaptation of Shylock, in the same storyworld. This device, she argues, allows Jacobson to compare and contrast early modern England and the contemporary UK, as well as the different ‘versions’ of the Shylock figure. In this way, the novel insists on ‘the fluidity and diversity within Jewish identity’, while simultaneously drawing attention to the persistence of anti-Semitism in popular culture, sports and the political sphere, as the recent conflicts within the Labour Party show. *Directing Merchant is not for the faint-hearted*, Eyre stresses and comments on her experience of directing *The Merchant of Venice* in Australia in 2019. She decided for a setting in fascist Italy in 1938, which built on the audience’s historical knowledge about the Holocaust, and also sought to relate the play to recent Australian debates about racial discrimination. Interestingly, her article echoes Shaul Bassi’s exploration of Jewish anger, but whereas Bassi positively embraces Shylock’s strong affects, Eyre describes how she found it necessary to downplay Shylock’s fury, not only to highlight the complexity of his character but also to shift ‘the focus to the machinations at play, rather than the question of whether Shylock will actually kill Antonio’. Susan Fischer is also concerned with Shylock, and the different ways of putting this character on stage, in a 2001 Spanish/German co-production, directed by Hansgünther Heyme with the Teatro de la Abadía, Madrid, and the Ruhrfestspiele Recklinghausen, and a 2017 French production, which was directed by Jacques Vincey with Théâtre Olympia/Centre Dramatique National de Tours. Fischer’s unique approach, which she calls ‘Shylock in slow motion’, combines a close reading of key scenes from the play with ‘synoptic sorties into maverick stagings of those same scenes’. Both productions, Fischer contends, address the persistence of anti-Semitism in mainstream culture and politics, thus coming to a similar diagnosis as Martin in her reading of Jacobson’s *Shylock Is My Name*. In addition, if the Shylock in these two productions is the ‘Jew that Shakespeare drew’ (Pope), then this
Jewish character is inextricably interconnected with the merchant Antonio in a ‘paradoxical reciprocity’: ‘each is the other’s Other, the other’s fantasy and nightmare, both self and anti-self’.

These three essays take us back to Shapiro’s preface to the anniversary edition of *Shakespeare and the Jews*, but the ‘canary in the coal mine’ (Shapiro 2016: x) may indeed be a phrase that characterises all of the explorations of ‘Shakespeare and the Jews’ in this volume: they offer critical analyses of the history and present of anti-Semitism while simultaneously identifying those moments in which Shakespeare’s plays, their adaption, production or reception, afford an alternative logic, even if only ephemerally.

We would like to express our profound gratitude to the authors in this volume and the fascinating insights that their research has uncovered. We are also very grateful to James Shapiro for generously agreeing to contribute an afterword. Likewise, we would like to thank the reviewers who have been so generous with their time and comments to the authors and have helped shape and improve the essays in this volume. In this we have leaned not only on fellow Shakespeareans, but also on reviewers from the field of Jewish Studies who have supported the authors throughout the process. While perhaps needless to say, it does need to be said that, over the past two years, the editorial board of *Shakespeare* has not only been incredibly supportive, but has also given us a free rein to compose this special issue as we saw fit. As Humanities and Shakespeare scholars, we are living in an era in which our discipline is increasingly under fire and in fending off ongoing budget cuts we are asked over and again to demonstrate our relevance. We are confident that the authors in this volume have demonstrated this relevance in discussing the intricate intertwining between Shakespeare and the broader discourses on today’s challenges, such as anti-Semitism and the position of the Other in society. It is this deep and thoughtful scrutiny and engagement, transcending borders and time, that is, more than ever, invaluable for today’s societies.

**Disclosure Statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

**References**


