

Nisht kayn Desdemona, nisht kayn Dzulietta:
Yiddish Adaptations of *The Merchant of Venice*
and the Early Modern Father-Daughter Bond

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Abstract

This essay examines three Yiddish "readings" of *The Merchant of Venice* — Joseph Bovshover's translation (1899), Avrom Morevski's critical essay (1937), and Maurice Schwartz's stage adaptation (1947) — that deal with Shylock's apparent betrayal by his daughter Jessica. Although these readings reflect sociocultural preoccupations with losing a daughter to intermarriage in a violently anti-Semitic environment, they also pick up on concerns present in the early modern English rendering of the father-daughter relationship and the sense of filial duty that informed it. Bovshover, Morevski, and Schwartz, I will argue, seem to have "read into" Shakespeare a correlation between the figure of the rebellious daughter and a wider preoccupation, shared in a sense by the early modern English and early twentieth-century Jews, with threats to national identity.

Writing in 1933, the Russian-Jewish actor Avrom Morevski rebuked those actors, directors, and critics who believed that *The Merchant of Venice* was an anti-Semitic story about a murderous Jew; he accused them of not actually reading the play. Morevski, whose work with the Vilna Troupe might have linked him to both formalism and Stanislavski,¹ advocates "fidelity to the text" (Ginsburg trans., 1967)² for both actor and critic, and reminds his readers that it is merely a *bobe-mayse*, or old wives' tale, that Shylock kills Antonio. Yet, Morevski seems to depart from a straightforward text-based reading when he identifies who he believes to be the play's actual antagonist: "*Yesike iz a farbrekherin!*" ["Jessica is a criminal!"]. He argues that Shylock, despite his faults, is ultimately an abandoned father and that Jessica is thus no more respectable a daughter than is Regan or Goneril. She is "*nisht kayn Ofelia, nisht kayn Desdemona, un nisht kayn Dzulietta*" ["no Ophelia, no Desdemona, and no Juliet"] (Morevski 1937, 59-60). This attack on Jessica can certainly be read as an anti-feminist critique of daughters with minds of their own,

but in another vein, it is clearly faithful to *The Merchant of Venice*, in which Jessica does not only elope with her forbidden lover, but also goes so far as to dupe and rob her father.

Morevski's argument against reading Shylock as a murderer seems to suggest that early to mid-twentieth-century Jews of European descent uniformly (and mistakenly) found *The Merchant of Venice* to be anti-Semitic. Indeed, this mis-reading has to some degree persisted within Jewish culture well into the late twentieth century: one popular primer on Jewish history, religion, and culture contains a separate entry for the character of Shylock in its section on anti-Semitism and claims that "the damage inflicted on the Jews by *The Merchant of Venice* has been far greater than a pound of flesh" (Tellushkin 1991, 466). However, there were many Yiddish translations and adaptations of *Merchant* circulating as texts and performances that either did not significantly depart from Shakespeare's play or reverently portrayed Shylock as a betrayed father while preserving the basic structure of Shakespeare's plot.³

In this essay, I focus on three Yiddish adaptations or readings that deal with Shylock's apparent betrayal by his daughter Jessica: the poet Joseph Bovshover's 1899 translation of the play, Morevski's *Shailok un Shekspir*, and finally, Maurice Schwartz's *Shaylok un zayn tokhter*, an adaptation first staged in 1947 for the Yiddish Art Theatre in New York City. Although these readings reflect anxieties about losing a daughter to intermarriage in a violently anti-Semitic environment, they also, quite significantly, pick up on concerns present in the early modern English rendering of the father-daughter relationship and the sense of filial duty that informed it. Adapters and critics such as Morevski, Schwartz, and Bovshover seem to have "read into Shakespeare" a correlation between the figure of the rebellious daughter and a wider preoccupation with threats to national identity.

Michael Ragussis's study of various tropes of Jewish-Christian conversion that appear in nineteenth-century English literature posits that English authors not only dealt with issues of identity and race via the figure of the converted Jew, but also illustrated how "the survival of a minority population" could be endangered because of a daughter's rebellion, her "conversion or, what amounts to the same thing, her intermarriage" (Ragussis 1995, 136). Ragussis argues that this connection between "filial loyalty" and a population's or race's survival occurs in English literature "from *Ivanhoe* onwards" (137), but Yiddish readings of *The Merchant of Venice*, which maintain more "fidelity" to Shakespeare's play than one might initially imagine, suggest that the link Ragussis describes was present in English drama and perhaps in early modern England as well.

Interrogating the Past?

Before I examine the three Yiddish texts under consideration, I find it necessary to address the fact that reading a late sixteenth-century text through the lens of twentieth-century adaptations can prove problematic in several respects. Stanley Fish's concept of the "interpretive community," for instance, may seem useful to a discussion of a group of writers and actors who shared a language and culture; the early modern meanings of *The Merchant of Venice*, however, might fall away under the assumption that interpretive validity is wholly a function of culture, "that no reading, however outlandish it might appear, is inherently an impossible one" (Fish 1980, 347). Fish implies that every action that the reader or member of an interpretive community takes is a drive towards interpretation, rendering it nearly impossible to distinguish between the ongoing sensory reactions that a text produces in a reader and the reader's conscious attempts to create meaning from that text.

It would also be a mistake to attempt to experience directly *The Merchant of Venice* as Morevski (or, perhaps, Shakespeare) might have performed and written about it. In her cultural history of the early modern family, Catherine Belsey notes that one cannot work to recover and interrogate the past while participating or pretending to participate in it (Belsey 1999, 3-4). At the same time, the reader who successfully situates him or herself only in the present must remain aware that he or she will not be able to easily or completely recover the past; texts are not as "relatively transparent" as New Historicists believe (17). Belsey addresses these problems by staging readings that "interpret[s] the residues of the past explicitly from the present" (9).

Belsey's claim that "we misread fiction if we misunderstand the practices of the period" (7) does not, in my view, shut out the possibility that post-sixteenth-century readings of Shakespeare also point to "residues of the past." In interrogating these residues, there is more at work than merely the critic's present and the text's past. Without incorrectly assuming that *The Merchant of Venice* was exactly what its adapters made of it, I will examine below the "residues" of an early modern connection between the father-daughter relationship and anxieties about national identity that turn up in a set of the Yiddish theater's readings and adaptations of the play.

Bovshover: Progeny and the "Flesh Bond"

Joseph Bovshover's translation of *The Merchant of Venice* was first staged in 1899 and possibly published in the same year by a "Katzenellenbogen Press" (Berkowitz 2002, 172, 255 n.3);⁴ approximately a decade later, it was published in the United States with an introduction and a "*Kurze Biografie fun Shekspir*" [Short Biography of Shakespeare] that described the dramatist's childhood in the "*shtetl*" of Stratford-upon-Avon appended. For the most part, Bovshover produced a word-for-word translation of the First Quarto text in which Shylock, the semi-stereotyped Jewish usurer, demands a pound of Antonio's flesh and puts his ducats before his daughter.⁵ Although a

direct translation of *The Merchant of Venice* may seem inhospitable to the Jewish audience for whom Bovshover was writing, there are some subtle moments in *Shaylok, oder der koyfman fun venedig* where the work becomes more of a reading than a translation.

Portia, explaining her dilemma to Nerissa, says, "*azoy iz der viln fun a lebender tokhter gebondn durkh dem viln fun a toytn foter*," a line that corresponds quite well to Shakespeare's "so is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father" (*Merchant of Venice*, 1.2.23-25),⁶ with the exception of the phrase "*gebondn durkh*." It seems telling that Bovshover uses *gebondn durkh* (literally, bonded through) where he could have selected *ayntzamn*,⁷ *oyfhorn* [to stop], or even *blaybn* [to stay]. In spite of the more literal choices available to the translator, Bovshover selects *gebondn durkh*, aligning Portia's duty as a daughter with the flesh bond integral to Shylock's story.

Shakespeare, too, aligns the flesh bond with the daughter's duty to her father in his construction of Shylock's reaction to Jessica's departure. It is often assumed that Shylock holds Antonio to the flesh bond because of greed, but as Salerio and Jessica remind the audience, Shylock wants the pound of flesh despite the fact that Bassanio's marriage to Portia allows Antonio to pay back his monetary debt (*Merchant of Venice*, 3.2.271-72, 285-87). In court, Shylock first refuses a payment of 3,000, then 6,000 ducats (4.1.40-42, 84-87). Although Shylock gives no clear reason for his refusal, a possible reading of his actions may lie in how he conceives of "flesh": Jessica is his "flesh and blood" (3.1.31). Earlier, he had attached no value to the flesh bond, asking, "what should I gain / By the exaction of this forfeiture?" (1.3.159-60). But after Jessica and Lorenzo elope, after his "flesh and blood" steals his money and runs off with her Christian lover, Shylock wants only to collect on the flesh bond: "If it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge" (3.1.47-48). It seems — and Maurice Schwartz would also read *Merchant* this way in 1947 — that Shylock wants a piece of Antonio's flesh because Lorenzo has taken a piece of his flesh.

A concern with the daughter's duty to her father is also reflected in Bovshover's rendering of the cast of characters, which identifies the princes as "*yonge layt, vos shatkhn zikh tzu Portzia*" and Bassanio as "*[Antonios] fraynd, vos shatkhn zikh oykh tzu Portzia*" (my emphasis in both), where *shatkhn*, a verb meaning to woo or court, serves as a translation of Q3's "suitor," and also evokes the *shadkhan*, the traditional matchmaker hired by parents. Lorenzo, meanwhile, is labeled "*Yesikes gelibter*," which connotes something significantly more illicit than the "in love with Jessica" of *Merchant's* list of *dramatis personae*. The loyal Portia is courted, while the rebellious Jessica runs off with her *gelibter*.

Perhaps Bovshover made an astute decision in light of Shakespeare's play, in which Portia is constructed, in contrast to Jessica, as an obedient daughter. Though she is unhappy about the casket arrangement, she vows "to die as chaste as Diana" unless she "be obtained by the method of [her] father's will" (*Merchant of Venice*, 1.2.102-103). And Portia's late father is vindicated in that the undesirable princes choose the wrong caskets, while Bassanio chooses correctly. Elizabeth Spiller points out that *The Merchant of Venice* was itself an adaptation that reflected a cultural preoccupation with filial obedience: in the *Gesta Romanorum's* telling of the story, the correct casket contained jewels, not Portia's picture. Maintaining the patriarchal line was so important to early modern fathers, Spiller argues, that Shakespeare changed the contents of the final casket "to suggest that the Portia story is primarily about securing progeny" (Spiller 2000, 148).

In European and American Yiddish culture, the loss of one's "progeny" through intermarriage was a serious concern; in some writers' imaginations, it was more serious than the loss of one's health or livelihood. According to Leonard Prager, Jewish immigrants to America may have learned to deal with hardships like "sweatshops and crowded tenements," but the possibility that "they would lose their children to the 'modern' world, to Gentile America, and consequently be rejected together with their deeply-felt folk culture — this induced genuine anxiety" (Prager 1966, 507). In Prager's view, an adaptation that engaged the trope of children rebelling against, but then returning to the family, as in Jacob Gordin's *The Jewish King Lear*, could serve as a "symbolic affirmation of group solidarity and continuity" (507). Because "securing one's progeny" was critical in European and American Yiddish culture, the changes that Yiddish writers made when adapting *Merchant* can thus be seen as parallel to the changes that Shakespeare made in his own adaptation of the *Gesta Romanorum* tale.

Morevski and the "Jewish Question"

Whereas Prager is able to ask a "Jewish question" of sorts about Gordin's adaptation of *King Lear* — how "an inferior work" (judged so simply because Gordin, unlike S. Ansky, was not well-known outside the Yiddish theater community) could yet generate the "impact of art" in its audiences (Prager 1966, 507-8) — Morevski warns against asking "Jewish questions" about the audience and author in Shakespeare's plays. Morevski, amidst severe and virulent anti-Semitism,⁸ nonetheless critiques the significance of the insufficiently-defined "Jewish question" in *The Merchant of Venice*. He understands Shylock as a character on the European stage, not as a "real" Jew, and claims that Shakespeare uses what we might today term "ethnicity" not to attack or ridicule a stereotyped other, but to create a dramatic figure with "*konkretn kharakhter*" (Morevski 1937, 7). Jewishness (or Jewishness as it might have been understood in sixteenth-century England)

is one facet of Shylock's character; his avarice is another. And this avarice is no more connected to Shylock's being a Jew than Othello's jealousy is connected to his being a Moor. Morevski asks, "*Iz Otello a motiv fun shvartzhotlike tvishn vayse?*" ["Is *Othello's* motif one of blacks amongst whites?"] and "*iz Hamlet a tragedie fun a dener?*" ["Is *Hamlet* a tragedy about a Dane?"] (3-4). Perhaps what Morevski is pointing out here is that to suggest that a "Jewish question" lies at the heart of *The Merchant of Venice* would be akin to putting forth the argument that *Hamlet* is informed by a "Danish question." Readers and audience members typically do not ask if Hamlet delays his revenge because he is a Dane, if he is melancholic because he is Danish, and they especially do not wonder what *Hamlet* has to say about the contemporary Danish man or woman.

Martin Yaffe's exploration of the Jewish question (here, Shakespeare's supposed anti-Semitism) points to one significant problem with filtering *The Merchant of Venice* through questions that we would likely never ask about *Hamlet*: in attempting to "challenge the widespread presumption that Shakespeare is . . . unfriendly to Jews" and reclaim the play "as a helpful guide for the self-understanding of the modern Jew" (Yaffe 1997, 1), Yaffe implies that Shakespeare's sixteenth-century play is somehow about the modern Jew. This type of interpretation seems to me far less useful (and less convincing) than an examination of an historically specific cultural response to a play that was nevertheless produced at the end of the sixteenth century. If there is a "Jewish question" at work, it is perhaps more similar to those asked by Michael Ragussis and James Shapiro (1996) than those that Morevski critiqued. Ragussis and Shapiro ask what issues of Jewish conversion might have had to say about perceptions of race, ethnicity, and nationality in the sixteenth century; Maurice Schwartz would bring a father-daughter race link which had telling connections to Shakespeare to the forefront in his play *Shaylok un zayn tokhter*.

Schwartz: *Merchant*, "New and Improved"

Schwartz's *Shaylok un zayn tokhter* was a stage play based on Ari Ibn Zahav's 1943 Hebrew novel, *Shailok: ha-Yehudi mi-Venestyah*. The play, first performed in the Yiddish Art Theatre in 1947 and published in English translation the same year, portrays Portia and Antonio as a Christian couple who have been married for fifteen years. Schwartz, known for his "new and improved" mode of interpreting the classics (i.e., the marquees for his productions would actually read "New and Improved, by Moishe Shvartz" beneath the play's title), eliminates Bassanio and has Portia and Antonio function as surrogate parents, rather than peers, to Jessica and Lorenzo. He also introduces Morro, the always-serious Torah scholar whom Shylock wants Jessica to marry; he calls Morro "a noble son of our people" in response to his depressing aphorism, "Our sufferings in the Ghetto strengthen our spirit to outlive our enemies" (Schwartz 1947, p. 57).⁹ But for Jessica, a young

woman who speaks Italian and wants to live outside the Ghetto, suffering is not quite so noble: all she wants, she says, is "a little less suffering, less pining, less loneliness" (63).

Though Schwartz's Jessica is constructed as a lonely character trapped within her father's house, it is unlikely that theatergoers on Second Avenue in the 1940s would have been invited to fully sympathize with a daughter who rejects her father's history and language. At one point, Jessica describes herself as evil, apologizing to Shylock for "the sorrows I cause you . . . Evil winds pursue me and encircle me" (63). By the time the play concludes, it is impossible for Jessica, who has been converted to Christianity upon her marriage to Lorenzo, to convert back to her father's faith. Her drowning — a striking departure from Shakespeare's *Merchant* — is presented as the only way out of the dilemma that the play sets up for her.

That Schwartz renders a comic ending impossible and Morevski identifies Jessica as the only clear-cut villain in *The Merchant of Venice* can in part be explained by sociocultural preoccupations with losing a daughter to intermarriage in the years just preceding and just following the Holocaust. According to Prager, the Jewish immigrants to America who had been forced to abandon generations of family members because they were too old, too sick, or simply did not want to leave now lived with the fear that their own children would "desert their parents and 'Yiddishkayt'" (Prager 1966, 575). Schwartz himself made these fears clear in a film adaptation of Sholom Aleichem's 1894 *Tevye der Milkhiker* stories that he wrote and starred in less than a decade before *Shaylok un zayn tokhter* was produced. Though it spans several years of the life of a fictional Ukrainian-Jewish family, Schwartz's film focuses on a story in which Tevye performs mourning rituals for Chave, the daughter he considers dead because of her marriage to a Ukrainian gentile. The somewhat brighter *Fiddler on the Roof* musical would preserve Tevye's indignation, but have Chave stay behind with her husband; in Schwartz's telling, however, the eventual failure of Chave's marriage leads to her poignant return to her father's family. During this period, it becomes nearly impossible to conceive of losing a child through his or her (but usually her) voluntary intermarriage; daughters must return, like Sholom Aleichem's Chave, or die, like Schwartz's Jessica. A Jewish daughter who married a Gentile could no longer be seen as an Esther who saves her people by convincing her husband that they, like her, are virtuous; instead, she becomes a traitor who has abandoned her father and her people and, we might infer, can no longer produce fully Jewish descendants.

Shaylok un zayn tokhter surely, then, suggests a Jewish trauma narrative. But trauma was likely not the only factor that influenced Schwartz's portrayal of Shylock as a tragic protagonist and betrayed father; Henry Irving, whose influential performance predated Schwartz's adaptation by more than half a century, was well-known for his Shylock-as-protagonist. Irving's production

supposedly cut so many of Portia's scenes that Shylock became a suffering figure capable of winning the audience's sympathy.¹⁰ And it is more than likely that Irving's Shylock influenced Schwartz, as the two men are connected through Jacob Adler. Berkowitz quotes a 1902 interview in which Adler praises Irving's Shylock (a performance he may have witnessed while living in London in the late 1890s), but still expresses concern that Irving presented a "caricature" to the audience (Berkowitz 2002, 175). Adler set out, it seemed, to consciously create a sympathetic, but proud, Shylock, a character he brought to New York City in 1901 and 1903. Schwartz, meanwhile, refused to add scenes from *Merchant* to his stage act until after Adler had retired, since Adler was so much associated with the role. The tragic Shylock, therefore, was likely not specific to the Yiddish theater or to Jewish readings of Shakespeare's play.

As an actor and writer, Schwartz was considered somewhat of a showman. Norman Holland remembers the marquee heralding Schwartz's Yiddish *Hamlet* at a Lower East Side theater: "In big letters, *Hamlet*. In smaller letters, By William Shakespeare. And in the biggest letters of them all, Translated and Improved by Moische Schwartz" (Holland 1975, 419). The "improvements" Schwartz makes to *The Merchant of Venice* often involve characters speaking as though they were lifted out of a grade-school pageant, telegraphing the historical facts and state laws of Renaissance Venice to the audience. Ari Ibn Zahav, whose *Shailok: ha-Yehudi mi-Venestyah* served as Schwartz's direct source, saw Shakespeare the author as mistaken or uninformed, having, according to his introduction to the 1947 printing of *Shaylok un zayn tokhter*, "made no special effort to understand or familiarize himself with the Jew of his age." Ibn Zahav and Schwartz thus attempt to locate their retellings in an historical Renaissance Venice.

Some of the scenes that Schwartz seems to have invented in response to Shakespeare's supposed misunderstanding of Venetian Jewish culture are, however, actually very much based in Shakespeare's play and perhaps also in Shakespeare's England. Schwartz's Shaylok mourns his "beloved Leah" (Schwartz 1947, 38), the wife whom Shakespeare's Shylock mentions only once, in reference to a ring that Jessica took and reportedly exchanged for a monkey. With perhaps just a hint of sentiment, Shakespeare's Shylock says, "I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor: I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys" (*Merchant of Venice*, 3.1.111-13). Here, Shylock (in both plays) connects one of his stolen items to the memory of his wife rather than to material wealth. And Schwartz's Shylock's forbidding Jessica to participate in Carnival is no invention: the scene is, quite probably, derived from Shakespeare's "lock up my doors" speech, in which Shylock orders Jessica not to even look out the window at the Christians dancing in the streets (2.5.28-39). As he

adds, cuts, and reassigns roles, Schwartz works with a father-daughter conflict already present in *The Merchant of Venice*.

The Father-Daughter Bond and National Identity

Shakespeare's Jessica, like Schwartz's, sees herself as a sinner because she plans to act against her father: "Alack, what heinous sin it is in me / To be ashamed to be my father's child!" (*Merchant of Venice*, 2.3.16-17). Shylock, meanwhile, does invite some sympathy in that he is robbed by the daughter whom he raised. While his cry of "My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter" (2.8.15) can easily be presented as evidence that if he shows any affection towards Jessica, it is of the same nature as the love that he has for his money, the line is reported by Salerio rather than spoken by Shylock. Besides, such an outburst is not uncommon in Shakespeare's works: Polonius, Lear, and Capulet all speak of their daughters in the language of currency.¹¹ Morevski may claim that Jessica is "*nisht kayn Dzulietta*," but her relationship with Shylock often resembles Juliet's relationship with Capulet much more than it does Abigail's with Barabas.

Much like Capulet, Shylock, though sometimes sympathetic, is not exactly an upstanding father: for his daughter, he wishes "would any of the stock of Barrabas / Had been her husband, rather than a Christian" (*Merchant of Venice*, 4.2.293-94). It is precisely because Shylock is not a good father that Jessica cannot win. She is, as Launcelot Gobbo points out, caught between Scylla and Charybdis (3.2.13-25); if she is to marry the lover who would convert her to Christianity, she must disobey her father. Her dilemma is resolved comically, but the dilemma itself results from the fact that she must obey her father, even if he is wrong within the context of the Christian society that the play sets up. As Mary Janell Metzger has noted, even Jessica's conversion to Christianity cannot fully excuse her sin of disobedience: "For Shakespeare's audience," Metzger writes, "patriarchal authority was divinely ordained . . . Jessica's disregard for that authority thus creates the first obstacle to a Christian audience's acceptance of her as a Christian" (Metzger 1998, 59).

For sons and daughters in early modern England, filial obedience was a moral requirement of utmost importance. For instance, the 1603 pamphlet *A Godly Form of Household Government*, a proto-"parenting handbook" attributed to Robert Cleaver, advises that while parents are to some degree responsible for caring for and respecting their children, the father ultimately possesses the "authoritie and power to denie his consent" (Cleaver 1603, 3-4). "Let servants and children do as they list," parents are warned, "they do not onely disobey God, but also hurt those whom they should rule"; disobedient children will become cruel parents (135). Disobedience is forbidden, but if the purpose of the pamphlet's guidelines is to bring the Christian household closer to God, it would seem that Jessica, a Jewish daughter raised in a "hellish" house (*Merchant of Venice*,

2.3.2), should be permitted to act against her father. Marlowe's Abigail supplies an example of why this is not necessarily so: even when she converts, Abigail does not turn against Barabas. She requests that Friar Bernardine not reveal that Barabas is responsible for Mathias's and Lodowick's deaths and that he be converted rather than killed. She thus achieves a saintly (or "Christian") death when, both despite and because of her conversion, she manages to uphold her duties as a daughter. Catherine Belsey points out that the role of parents in Shakespeare's plays is more often than not one of "coercing their children into arranged marriages" (Belsey 1999, 85). She locates the "wholly unsubstantiated fear of female infidelity" that occurs in not only husband-wife but also parent-child relations in plays like *Othello* and *Cymbeline* in the early modern construction of the nuclear family (59). As Belsey's own study asserts, however, there can be no single reading of a text or cultural scenario; there appear to have been wider political implications for the fears of infidelity, miscegenation, and disobedient daughters that pervade *The Merchant of Venice* and other early modern English plays that engage the father-daughter relationship.

As both Ragussis and Shapiro assert, the Jew in English literature represented much more than merely an anti-Semitic stereotype. Ragussis argues that because "Jewish identity and English national identity were mutually exclusive" in the nineteenth century, writers questioned how one could "convert" from one nationality to another. In English literature, he writes, "the impossibility of racial transformation . . . becomes an analogy for the impossibility of religious conversion" (Ragussis 1995, 23-25). Shapiro explains how a similarly "racialized sense of the Jewish nation" developed in early modern England because the Jews did not intermingle (or intermarry) with other nations, as the French and English might. "The Jews," Shapiro writes, "confound and deconstruct neat formulations about both racial and national identity" (Shapiro 1996, 168-70). To the English in both the nineteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Jewish people appeared to constitute a nation that isolated itself within another nation.

Shapiro also finds that the questions that the early modern English had about national identity were similar to the questions that might have been brought up among Jews in the early twentieth century: What did it mean, in sixteenth-century England, "if one's father was French and one's mother was English? What conditions did an alien seeking to become a denizen or naturalized English subject have to meet?" (Shapiro 1996, 8). They, like the nineteenth-century English writers of Ragussis's study, questioned to what degree nationality was racial, and whether it could be changed or, perhaps, "converted."

Francis Bacon, in his account of the Lopez affair — Roderigo Lopez, the physician supposedly responsible for an attempt on Elizabeth I's life and sometimes thought to have been a source for Shakespeare's Shylock and Marlowe's Barabas, was labeled both a Jew and a traitor — suggests that

identity was about more than nationality and that nationality itself was a highly complicated matter: it was dangerous to base assumptions about loyalty on the country of an individual's birth. Bacon differentiates between nation and religion in relation to Jews, labeling Lopez a "*Portugueze*" who was "suspected, to be in sect, secretly, a *Iew*" (Bacon 1667, 154). Lopez, a *converso*, or practicing Catholic originally descended from Jews, is portrayed by Bacon as a man of Portuguese descent who is a subject, perhaps even an instrument, of the King of Spain. Bacon concludes via intercepted letters that before Lopez came to England, he "was won, to the King of Spain: And that, he was ready to receive his Commandment" (158). Lopez is able to serve the conspiracy so well because he is Portuguese and, as Bacon infers, Elizabeth would not have been suspicious of a physician who had been born in a country ruled by a known enemy of the king of Spain. Bacon's report of the affair thus seems to suggest that unanswered or unanswerable questions about national loyalty and naturalization almost led to the English monarch's murder.

Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, which involves an international dispute about one "nation" paying monetary tribute to another, engages issues that are times quite similar to those in *The Merchant of Venice*. Imogen, the king's daughter, has disobeyed her father by marrying Posthumus Leonatus, a man of Roman ancestry who is nonetheless a far more suitable match than her stepbrother Cloten.¹² Whereas Jessica may be at least partially redeemed by her conversion, Imogen's choice means that she dishonors the father who is already being swindled by the queen. Of course, what makes Imogen's dilemma as difficult as Jessica's is that if she marries Cloten, her stepmother's plot will succeed.¹³ Though *Cymbeline* can be read as a pastiche of Shakespearean tragedies-become-comedies, it connects a heightened demand for filial obedience with issues of primogeniture and a problematized concept of nationality. Imogen's husband Posthumus speaks of conflicted identities in a partially Celtic Britain that answers to the Roman authority from whom he descends:

I'll disrobe me
Of these Italian weeds and suit myself
As does a Briton peasant: so I'll fight
Against the part I come with: so I'll die
For thee, O Imogen, even for whom my life
Is, every breath, a death: and thus, unknown . . .
Gods, put the strength o'th' Leonati in me! (*Cymbeline*, 5.1.22-31)

Cymbeline's Britain consists of Celtic Britons, Romans, Renaissance Venetians, and the king's family, which is not identified with a specific ethnic group, but opposes the tribute that Britain continues to pay to Rome. And Cloten, in a moment in which is he talking politics rather than

pursuing Imogen, declares that "Britain's a world by itself, and we will nothing pay for wearing our own noses" (3.1.13-14). With the play's British countrymen, themselves part Briton, part Roman, and part undefined, forced to quite literally pay for wearing their own noses or nationality/race, the king is apparently plagued by the idea that his descendants, Imogen and Posthumus's children, would be Leonati, and therefore Romans.

Following a major break in the line of English kings after Richard II was deposed, succession was no longer a matter of primogeniture, nor was there any guarantee that the next English king would be English. By the time of Elizabeth's supposedly stable reign, there was an awareness that both the Infanta of Spain and several Portuguese princes had claims to the English throne, and might succeed the childless Elizabeth (Parsons 1594, Chapters 7 and 8). In a society in which control over the intertwined political and genetic aspects of royal succession had become critical, marriage without consent may have been considered akin to political treason.

In her study of treason in the early modern era, Karen Cunningham identifies 1534, when Henry VIII decreed that it was treasonous to marry or "defile" one of the king's female relatives without royal consent, as the first time in English history that marriage and treason are linked by law (Cunningham 2002, 30). One of the most disconcerting aspects of treason for perhaps both governments and parents was what Cunningham describes as a complete split between action and thought, such that no one could be believed based on his or her actions. *Othello's* Brabantio alludes to this division when speaking of his daughter: "O treason of the blood! / — Fathers, from hence trust not your daughters' minds / By what you see them act" (*Othello*, 1.1.169-71).¹⁴ Jessica, although *nisht kayn Desdemona* in Morevski's view, can nonetheless be read as exactly like Desdemona in that her actions do not betray her plans to leave her father's house, marry her lover without consent, and perhaps also, from the fathers' point of view, threaten a supposedly stable line of succession through miscegenation.

A number of sixteenth and early seventeenth-century texts, whether dramatic, prescriptive, or descriptive, seem to imply that when life, country, or identity was at stake, children's obedience and marriages were perceived as being of the utmost concern; Schwartz, Morevski, and Bovshover borrow this theme from Shakespeare's play and relate it to twentieth-century Yiddish culture. My purpose in asking what the Yiddish writers might have been reading in *The Merchant of Venice* has been neither to unequivocally link two distinct cultural periods nor to dismiss the possibility that *Merchant* does in fact engage a number of "Jewish questions." Rather, reading the Yiddish adaptations as they "read" Shakespeare's play allows us to examine some of the cultural tropes

engaged by *Merchant* from a stance other than that of the critic situated fully in the present or the "participant" who believes (s)he is situated fully in the past.

Additionally, these readings supply possible explanations for specific questions about the characters in *The Merchant of Venice*. Jessica can be read as a tragicomic character, tragic because she disobeys her father, comic because she and Lorenzo are granted the comic ending that Cordelia, Juliet, and Desdemona are denied.¹⁵ And if her story is tragicomic, then her father's is tragic. Early twentieth-century Yiddish readings and adaptations of the play, despite their moments of bombast and untheatrical telegraphing, brought out this tragic element. They suggested, at a time when anti-Semitism meant not ridicule and stereotyping, but violent death, that *The Merchant of Venice* was not entirely about Judaism or a Jewish question. It was, perhaps above all, a drama that dealt with fathers, daughters, and the ways in which threats to national and cultural identity affected the bond between them.

Notes

1. Konstantin Stanislavski was in attendance at several of the troupe's performances, and purportedly encouraged S. Ansky to translate *The Dybbuk* from Russian into Yiddish.
2. This phrase is taken from Mirra Ginsburg's translation of Morevski's *Shailok un Shekspir*. David M. Schiller notes that were it not for Ginsburg's translation, Morevski "would probably be unknown to the field of Shakespeare studies" (Schiller 2002, 256). The remaining translations of Morevski in this article are my own, and will quote, in YIVO-style transliteration, the original Yiddish from the 1937 Friends of the Jewish Theatre edition.
3. There are a significant number of Yiddish adaptations and translations beyond the three that I discuss here: Chapter 5 of Joel Berkowitz's extraordinarily comprehensive analysis of Yiddish adaptations of Shakespeare's plays discusses four *Merchant* manuscripts archived in the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. The Humanities and Social Sciences division of the New York Public Library holds promptbook fragments from a 1915 Yiddish production, as well as M. Zamler's *Shaylok (Der Soyher fun Venedig): roman fray loyt Shekspirs tragedie* (Warsaw: Heylas, 1929), a novel whose subtitle labels the supposed comedy a tragedy.
4. Though the date of the Hebrew Publishing Company printing (which employs neither page nor line numbers) is uncertain as per the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, Berkowitz identifies an 1899 printing by a "Katzellenbogen" press and dates the Hebrew Publishing Company printing 1911.
5. While it is possible that Bovshover worked from a German or Russian translation — Berkowitz suggests that many Yiddish translators did so — his *Shaylok* seems to line up almost word-

for-word with the text of the Arden edition of *The Merchant of Venice*, edited by John Russell Brown (Shakespeare 2004), which uses a First Quarto copytext and the *dramatis personae* list that first appears in the Third Quarto.

6. All quotations from this play are taken from the Arden edition of *The Merchant of Venice*, edited by John Russell Brown (Shakespeare 2004).
7. *Ayntzamn* is given as the equivalent of "to curb" in Uriel Weinreich's *Yiddish-English Dictionary* (1968).
8. Interestingly, near the conclusion of his book, Morevski considers European anti-Semitism and suggests that European Jews were burned [*gebrent*] for having produced Karl Marx (Morevski 1937, 94).
9. I cite page numbers for Schwartz's play because line numbers are not given in the Yiddish Art Theatre's edition.
10. A number of theater critics and historians have questioned whether Irving intended to portray Shylock as tragic, or if that characterization was a result of cuts to the text and Irving's soft-spokenness as an actor. At the very least, argues Alan Hughes, Irving "failed to convince the audience that Shylock was evil" (Hughes 1972, 249-68).
11. Polonius to Ophelia: "Think yourself a baby / That you have ta'en these tenders for true pay, / Which are not sterling. Tender yourself more dearly, / Or . . . you'll tender me a fool" (*Hamlet*, 1.3.104-109); Lear to Burgundy: "When she was dear to us, we did hold her so, / But now her price is fallen" (*King Lear*, 1.1.197-98); Capulet to Paris: "Sir, I will make a desperate tender / Of my child's love" (*Romeo and Juliet*, 3.4.12-13). Capulet later calls Juliet "a whining mammet, in her fortune's tender" (3.5.184). Quotations from these three Shakespeare plays come from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, edited by G. Blakemore Evans et al (Shakespeare 1997).
12. It is not merely an unsuitable match in a romantic sense; Cloten calls Imogen "sister" (*Cymbeline*, 2.3.86), reminding the audience of the incestuous nature of the potential marriage.
13. Imogen expresses some remorse at having married against her father's orders: instead of encouraging the uncertain Pisanio not to carry out Posthumus's order to kill her in retaliation for her supposed infidelity, Imogen commands him to kill her so that Posthumus will suffer for having "set up / My disobedience 'gainst the king my father" (*Cymbeline*, 3.4.87-88)
14. The quotation comes from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Shakespeare 1997).
15. But even this comic ending is problematic; Jessica and Lorenzo's lovers' talk in 5.1 references some not-so-happy marriages, the first of which is Troilus and Cressida's. Sharon Hamilton

questions the conclusion as well, astutely pointing out that Jessica's last line is "I am never merry when I hear sweet music" (5.1.81) and that she remains silent for the remainder of the final scene, an aspect of the text that could lead to multiple directorial interpretations (Hamilton 2002, 105).

Online Resources

YIVO: Institute for Jewish Research <http://yivo.org/>

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