

## A new introduction to The Merchant of Venice

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**A new introduction to *The Merchant of Venice* for Cambridge University Press**

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[Accepted draft, pre-copy-editing]

The text, first introduction and end materials to this edition of *The Merchant of Venice* are the work of M. M. Mahood and were first published together in 1987. Molly Mahood, who died on 14 February 2017 at the age of 97, had made her name sixty years earlier with her first book, *Shakespeare's Wordplay* (1957), a slim and elegant, verbally inquisitive account of habits of language in plays and poems from across Shakespeare's career.<sup>1</sup> Mahood in that book and in this edition shows how the closest details of Shakespeare's play may have the largest implications for its meaning and impact, both on the page and on the stage.

*The Merchant of Venice* was, for Mahood, a play that challenges its readers and its audiences always to be sceptically alert to the work done by language to scrutinise behaviour.<sup>2</sup> That challenge continues today, for this is a play demanding our scrutiny, now perhaps more than ever. *The Merchant of Venice*, like all of Shakespeare's texts, both benefits from, and refuses to be silenced by, a vibrant scholarly and theatrical tradition. The kinds of scrutiny that Mahood addressed to *The Merchant of Venice* in 1957 and then renewed in 1987 have continued to shape responses to the play.

I offer here first an account of recent criticism of *The Merchant of Venice*, and of important developments in the way that the play's earlier performance history has been understood. I write then about the play in recent performances, on screen and on the stage. In a final section I explore two recent encounters with the play in transposition or adaptation, first by thinking about the New York sale in 2015 of a copy of the play's Second Quarto (1619), and second through a consideration of Howard Jacobson's 2016 novel, *Shylock is My Name*.

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<sup>1</sup> Lyn Innes, 'Molly Mahood (17 June 1919 – 14 February 2017)', *The Guardian*, 26 March 2017; M. M. Mahood, *Shakespeare's Wordplay*, 1957.

<sup>2</sup> See in particular her reading of *venture* (1.3.83) in *Shakespeare's Wordplay*, p.45.

### *Recent criticism*

Reviewers of M.M. Mahood's first edition of *The Merchant of Venice* praised both its introduction and its text, while recognising – as Lawrence Danson put it in his wryly contentious review for *Shakespeare Quarterly* – that the ways in which 'the play has kept itself alive and controversially kicking' may well always mean that no edition might fully control it.<sup>3</sup> Danson here identifies one aspect of a larger truth: since 1987 there have been many new interpretations of, and many new routes taken into, *The Merchant of Venice*, both on the stage and on the page; there have too, over the same period, been many new interactions with, and interrogations of, the older critical and performance history of the play.<sup>4</sup> Whether historically founded or not, all such interpretive engagements with the play have their own qualified force, as the product of particular contingent interactions of interest, intellect and ideology. The things that have happened to, happened with, and happened because of *The Merchant of Venice* since 1987, then, refuse quite properly to content themselves – if we use a verb given powerful agency in the play (4.1.389-90) – either to a single, or to a simple, unitary narrative. One aspect of the play's power has always been, and continues to be, the regularity with which it questions and disrupts the explanatory narratives within which scholars and performers alike have located it.

Central to the power of *The Merchant of Venice* has, of course, been its exploration of religious and cultural identity. James Shapiro's wide-ranging and now classic study, *Shakespeare and the Jews*, provides many overlapping contexts within which to position the play, from the middle ages to the mid-eighteenth century.<sup>5</sup> Shapiro's argument – that Jews and Jewishness provided an 'other' against which the English could define themselves and their Englishness – has been taken forward by Matthew Dimmock, who

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<sup>3</sup> Lawrence Danson, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 40 (1989), 240-43 (at p.243); compare William Montgomery, *Review of English Studies*, 40 (1989), 256-60 ('an excellent introduction' which 'offers a critical reading of the play, but one shaped in such a way as constantly to remind the reader of the dynamics of the play unfolding on the stage': p.260).

<sup>4</sup> See in particular John W. Mahon and Ellen Macleod Mahon, eds, *The Merchant of Venice: New Critical Essays*, 2002; Charles Edelman, ed., *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare in Production, 2002; Miriam Gilbert, *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare at Stratford, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> James Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews*, 1996.

explores the bases of the identities so defined. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Dimmock argues, that otherness is not founded on what might today be ‘contemporary biological-genetic conceptions of race’ but instead marks ‘an explicitly religious distinction’ founded in religious texts. ‘Shakespeare’s recreation of Judaism,’ he writes, ‘is thus primarily a scriptural construction, built from a tissue of quotation, reference, and archetype in order to create the appearance of a coherent theology, but one that is always already past, defeated by the truth of Christ.’<sup>6</sup> That explicitly Christian creation in the play finds a contrast, also, to other non-Christian religions, marked, and given powerful expression by Stephen Greenblatt in an extended reading of *The Merchant of Venice* in his study *Shakespeare’s Freedom*. Testing what he calls ‘The Limits of Hatred’, Greenblatt reflects on his personal history of responses to the play:

Now, more than ever, *The Merchant of Venice* has a weird, uneasy relevance, a sense at once fascinating and disagreeable that it is playing with fire. All my life I thought of the combustible material as anti-Semitism – or, to put it more carefully, Christianity’s Jewish problem. “Go, Tubal, and meet me at our synagogue. Go, good Tubal; at our synagogue, Tubal” (3.1.107-8). But the queasiness of Western cities no longer centers on the synagogue. It takes...only a small adjustment to tap into current fears: “Go, Tubal, and meet me at our mosque. Go, good Tubal; at our mosque, Tubal.”<sup>7</sup>

The historical grounds for that combustibility described by Greenblatt continue to be explored. Stephen Orgel has argued that the apparent connection between the play and the execution in June 1594 of Ruy or Roderigo Lopez, a Portuguese Jewish doctor, for a supposed attempt to assassinate Queen Elizabeth with poison is ‘both dubious and farfetched’.<sup>8</sup> The circumstances in which that connection was first proposed by S.L. Lee in 1880 have been illuminatingly explored by Emma Smith in an iconoclastic article, ‘Was Shylock Jewish?’. Smith explores the ways in which the response of theatrical practitioners – including William Poel – across the turn of the twentieth century, to the nineteenth-century tradition of performance identified with Henry Irving’s famous

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew Dimmock, ‘Shakespeare’s non-Christian religions’ in David Loewenstein and Michael Witmore, eds, *Shakespeare and Early Modern Religion*, 2015, pp.280-99 (pp.284, 291).

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespeare’s Freedom*, 2010, p.52.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Orgel, *Imagining Shakespeare: A History of Texts and Visions*, 2003, p.149.

portrayal of Shylock, was itself part of a scholarly re-imagining of Elizabethan staging practices. Sceptically turning over the archive, and finding little there to authorise many long-running critical assumptions, Smith argues that ‘Shylock’s strongly Jewish identity has actually served as a *post hoc* supplement to Shakespeare’s play rather than an *a priori* essence’. Her proposition is that ‘the original legibility and implication of Shylock’s Jewishness have been overstated’ and that, even with proper attention to, and recognition of, the full twentieth-century history of Jewishness and anti-Semitism, it may now be possible to read the play in which ‘Jewishness is contingent rather than essential – the Jew as semantic, rather than as Semitic, property.’<sup>9</sup>

In *Shakespeare and Comedy*, R.W. Maslen argues that the separations of identity forced through language prove slippery in the play, not only in religious terms: ‘The Christians...have a double capacity both to distinguish themselves from their enemies by calling them names...and to erase distinctions when it serves their interests to do so.’<sup>10</sup> But, so too the play’s scepticism about words is brought to bear on the trustworthiness of language in trade, in the law, and in marriage: a kind of comedy that, in Maslen’s terms can be ‘dangerous’ but may be liberating also.<sup>11</sup> The agency that this comedy gives to its boy actors – cross-dressed in performance as Portia and Nerissa, and then within the playworld re-dressed to become Balthazar and his clerk – can be read as an emblem of the larger freedom with which Shakespeare explores the possibilities of self and society. By making visible the conventions and the constructions through which gendered and sexual identity are structured and performed, the play allows readers and audiences to question the relationships of its heterosexual couples – just as, for a long time, it has been thought to question the relationships of its homosocial, or possibly homosexual, couples. As Tom MacFaul writes, the ‘relationship between Antonio and Bassanio has attracted much comment, most of it inconclusive.’<sup>12</sup> Inconclusive or not, the scholarship of early modern relationships between men – relationships that exceed or complicate the historically-contingent categories, such as the nineteenth-century homosexual, within which they might be understood – has offered rich contexts for reading the play. The

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<sup>9</sup> Emma Smith, ‘Was Shylock Jewish?’, *SQ*, 64 (2013), 188-219; for her account of ‘the terrible cultural work undertaken by destructively anti-Semitic readings of Shylock’s Jewishness’ (p.219), Smith draws on John Gross, *Shylock: Four Hundred Years in the Life of a Legend*, 1992, pp.287-309.

<sup>10</sup> R.W. Maslen, *Shakespeare and Comedy*, 2005, p.110.

<sup>11</sup> Maslen, *Shakespeare and Comedy*, p.124.

<sup>12</sup> Tom MacFaul, *Male Friendship in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*, 2007, p.162.

early accounts by Alan Bray and Bruce R. Smith of this field provide valuable overviews.<sup>13</sup> The influence of Bray and Smith is still felt in the more recent work of scholars such as Paul Hammond, who in his book, *Figuring Sex Between Men from Shakespeare to Rochester* explores Shakespeare's having 'added homoerotic possibilities to his source story' in the Italian *novelle* of Ser Giovanni, *Il Pecorone*.<sup>14</sup> Among other engagements with the play's 'affective irony', Steven Mullaney explores the possibility of 'specifically homosocial sadness' in his book, *The Reformation of Emotions in the Age of Shakespeare*.<sup>15</sup> The play's relationships to the classical narratives of love and loss, mainly drawn from Ovid, that are bounced back and forth by Lorenzo and Jessica at the start of Act 5 (5.1.1-24) have been read by Colin Burrow as providing a different identity for the lovers and for the play that contains them. In their dialogue, Burrow argues, Shakespeare 'is mobilising a language of humanism, in which classical allusions can become part of the texture of conversation, and in which particular texts can be evoked and interpreted differently by different people with different pragmatic and social needs from those texts.'<sup>16</sup>

Other discursive frames for the play's language have been explored. The unavoidable extent to which *The Merchant of Venice* is a play about the law is well stated by Rebecca Lemon: 'Its Venice is not only a multi-ethnic and multi-religious city but also a multi-legal one. The play engages multiple legal issues: property, paternity, marriage, contract, crime, and citizenship. Multiple laws are invoked in the course of the play: Venetian law, natural law, biblical law, and the laws of the market.'<sup>17</sup> The law here as 'social form' – a formulation in which Lemon follows the influential legal historian, Peter Goodrich – reaches out to describe many of the norms through which action is measured, and character constructed in the play.<sup>18</sup> More specific legal investigations in the play, and

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<sup>13</sup> Alan Bray, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England*, 1982, and 'Homosexuality and the Signs of Male Friendship in Elizabethan England', *History Workshop*, 29 (1990), 1-19; Bruce R. Smith, *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England: A Cultural Poetics*, 1991.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Hammond, *Figuring Sex Between Men from Shakespeare to Rochester*, 2002, pp.87-94 (p.94); 'Shakespeare's Male Utopias', *Études Anglaises*, 61 (2008), 266-78.

<sup>15</sup> Steven Mullaney, *The Reformation of Emotions in the Age of Shakespeare*, 2015, p.36; see also pp.76-93.

<sup>16</sup> Colin Burrow, 'Shakespeare and humanistic culture' in Charles Martindale and A.B. Taylor, eds, *Shakespeare and the Classics*, 2004, pp.9-27 (p.24).

<sup>17</sup> Rebecca Lemon, 'Law' in Arthur F. Kinney, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare*, 2012, pp.554-70 (p.562).

<sup>18</sup> Peter Goodrich, *Reading the Law: A Critical Introduction to Legal Methods and Techniques*, 1986, p.20.

readings in particular of Act 4, are contained in essay collections, among them those edited by Constance Jordan and Karen Cunningham, *The Law in Shakespeare*, and that edited by Paul Raffield and Gary Watt, *Shakespeare and the Law*.<sup>19</sup> Among the most striking of these readings is that by Thomas C. Bilello, who argues that 'Portia converts Shylock's demand for legal enforcement into a criminal attempt on Antonio's life.' So radical is this conversion, in Bilello's view, that it questions the very legal basis of the Venetian city-state: 'This nonsensical juridical conclusion suggests that the "law" repeatedly demanded by Shylock is infinitely plastic and exists to be manipulated by a partial – and quite literally false – judiciary.'<sup>20</sup> The particular relationship of Venetian law and the Venetian state, gave it a powerful attraction to Elizabethan imaginings of a would-be republic. For all that, in Andrew Hadfield's phrase, Shakespeare's dramatisation of a legal system founded on equity 'has little to do with the one English travellers described' as they actually encountered it in Venice, the city staged in the play might still have functioned as a thought-experiment in alternative forms of government, as a state 'whose ruler did at least listen to the magistrates he relied upon and was prepared to learn from them how to uphold the law and govern.'<sup>21</sup>

Returning with a fiercely sharp acuity to the play's legal language, Quentin Skinner has attended in *Forensic Shakespeare* to the rhetorical principles that he sees operating in *The Merchant of Venice*. Rather than the play staging 'a confrontation between the claims of equity and the strict letter of the law' in Act 4, the play in Skinner's argument 'is wholly structured around...rhetorical rules'.<sup>22</sup> Readers who lack Skinner's deep and rewarding familiarity with the tradition of classical rhetoric within which this argument locates Shakespeare, will learn much from the clarity of Skinner's expository first chapter, and much, too, about the specific legal rhetorics of *The Merchant of Venice*. A class of specific linguistic usages in *The Merchant of Venice* are treated in equal detail by John Kerrigan. In his *Shakespeare's Binding Language* Kerrigan explores what the book's first sentence enumerates as 'oaths, vows, promises, asseverations, legal bonds, gages, contracts; the whole array of utterances and acts by which people in early modern England committed

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<sup>19</sup> Constance Jordan and Karen Cunningham, eds, *The Law in Shakespeare*, 2007; Paul Raffield and Gary Watt, eds, *Shakespeare and the Law*, 2008.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas C. Bilello, 'Accomplished with What She Lacks: Law, Equity, and Portia's Con', in Jordan and Cunningham, eds, *The Law in Shakespeare*, pp.109-26; this revises and condenses his earlier essay with the same title, *Law and Literature*, 16 (2004), 11-32.

<sup>21</sup> Andrew Hadfield, *Shakespeare and Renaissance Politics*, 2004, pp.159, 163.

<sup>22</sup> Quentin Skinner, *Forensic Shakespeare*, 2014, pp.7, 210-225 (p.7).

themselves to the truth of things past, present, and to come.’ In two rich chapters on *The Merchant of Venice* – the first drawing contrasts with an earlier play, *The Comedy of Errors*, and the second the ‘carnal bonds’ of the play – Kerrigan relates the bonds of trade and friendship to those of marriage, an ‘intricate counterpoint’, as he calls it, of structure and language and thought.<sup>23</sup>

Interactions between *The Merchant of Venice* and other plays in the early modern theatrical repertory have been explored well by others. In his edition of *Three Renaissance Usury Plays*, Lloyd Edward Kermode argues that better to understand Shakespeare’s play within this early modern genre opens up a paradox: ‘*The Merchant of Venice*, for all its breadth, cannot alone represent the quintessential touchstone for the English sense of the genre of the usury plays.’<sup>24</sup> His edited texts of three plays – *The Three Ladies of London* by Robert Wilson (first printed, 1584), *Englishmen for My Money* by William Haughton (first printed, 1616) and *The Hog Hath Lost his Pearl* by Robert Taylor (first printed, 1614) – provide then a rich and useful counterbalance to the many studies that have investigated the apparently simpler bilateral relationship between *The Merchant of Venice* and Marlowe’s earlier play, *The Jew of Malta*. That relationship has proved of such long standing that by 1999 it had generated its own independent bibliographical history of 37 studies.<sup>25</sup> Among the most influential of those studies has been Thomas Cartelli’s, who in his important essay of 1988, ‘Shakespeare’s *Merchant*, Marlowe’s *Jew*’, casts the relationship between the two plays as one in which both explore ideas and representations of ‘cultural difference’, though in characteristically different modes: ‘what in Marlowe may be attributed to irreverence may in Shakespeare be ascribed to a more serious engagement with the problem in question.’<sup>26</sup> For Stephen Greenblatt in 2004 attending again to that narrative of difference-within-similarity that links the two plays and the two dramatists’ careers, *The Merchant of Venice* ‘at once borrows from *The Jew of Malta* and repudiates its corrosive, merciless irony... What sprang up in place of Marlovian irony was not tolerance – the

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<sup>23</sup> John Kerrigan, *Shakespeare’s Binding Language*, 2016, pp.146-208 (p.173).

<sup>24</sup> Lloyd Edward Kermode, ed., *Three Renaissance Usury Plays*, The Revels Plays Companion Library, 2009, p.19.

<sup>25</sup> Julie Davis, ‘An Annotated Secondary Bibliography of Works Comparing Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta* to Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, 1931-1996’, *Bulletin of Bibliography*, 56 (1999), 53-9.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Cartelli, ‘Shakespeare’s *Merchant*, Marlowe’s *Jew*: The Problem of Cultural Difference’, *Shakespeare Studies*, 20 (1988), 266-60 (p.256).



play, after all, stages a forced conversion as the price of a pardon – but rather shoots of a strange, irrepressible imaginative generosity.<sup>27</sup>

One of the areas of enquiry that promise most for future engagements with *The Merchant of Venice* is the developing field of material culture. As will be apparent from one of the fullest recent delineations of that field, it is one with which *The Merchant of Venice* resonates in many and rapid ways: anyone with an interest in ‘the things with which people interacted, the spaces in which they did so, the social relationships which cluster around their associations – between producers, vendors and consumers of various kinds – and the way knowledge travels around those circuits of connection’ will find much to respond to in this play.<sup>28</sup> Early explorations of the play have focussed on the rings through which so many of its interpersonal transactions are expressed – the rings that are, in Catherine Richardson’s phrase, ‘capable of holding different and often conflicting stories, meanings and discourses of value in relation to one another.’<sup>29</sup> Put into movement by the play’s plot, and by any production of the play, the play’s rings – like its other emblematic objects, Portia’s Belmont caskets – symbolise and actualise the weight and the tangibility of its relationships. ‘Shylock’s ring left Venice for Genoa and in doing so entered an uncontrollable and riotous kind of economics, and Portia’s ring leaves the miraculous and shining world of Belmont for the extended exchange networks of Venice, which are altogether less controllable’, Richardson writes – and, as we might add, all of these entries and exchanges are held within the economic world which is the theatre, trading performance for payment with every production.<sup>30</sup>

In her recent study of *Shakespeare and Memory*, Hester Lees Jeffries takes forward the travels of these rings into the play’s fifth act, showing how their materiality, and the memories that are embodied in them, to make connections across the sometimes troubling divide between the main action of the play and what has often seemed its ironic, oddly situated coda. Lees Jeffries writes of the retrospective ease with which

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<sup>27</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*, 2004, 256-87 (p.286).

<sup>28</sup> For a generous overview of the still-developing field, see Catherine Richardson, Tara Hamling and David Gaimster, eds, *The Routledge Handbook of Material Culture in Early Modern Europe*, 2017; I quote here their collaboratively-written ‘Introduction’, pp.3-28 (p.4).

<sup>29</sup> Catherine Richardson, *Shakespeare and Material Culture*, 2011, p.57.

<sup>30</sup> Richardson, *Shakespeare and Material Culture*, p.58.

Bassanio and Gratiano gave their rings to the disguised Portia and Nerissa, and the wrangles that then ensue between the now-not-so-happy couples (5.1.142-235). Lees Jeffries uses the materiality of the rings to demonstrate a powerful continuity within the play. She writes, ‘one of the play’s central concerns thus far has been the way in which contracts can be made material and (mis)interpreted, in the conceit of the pound of flesh: here is the same principle, albeit in a more socially acceptable and familiar comic mode. The rings offer a kind of continuity between the fifth act and the four that have preceded it; they encourage continued scrutiny of the nature of bonds.’<sup>31</sup> In the transposition played out through the rings – from the near-tragedy averted in Acts 1-4 to the not-quite-comedy uneasily performed in Act 5 – the play dramatises, Lees Jeffries argues, both ‘quibbles over the material symbols of bonds and contracts, and the ways in which such devices can become dense signifiers of relationships and identities as they evolve in time’.<sup>32</sup> As I will explore in the final section of this introduction, such transpositions of genre and mode within the play have given rise to some of the most striking and perhaps unexpected recent encounters with the play in our contemporary culture. Material culture reminds us, too, of the vital moment when plays stand up from the page and take to the stage.

### *Histories of performance*

As critical responses to *The Merchant of Venice* have since 1987 continued to tell us new things about the play, so over the same period have we learned more about the play in older contexts, especially through histories of its performance. Writing about performance, and still more so reading others’ accounts of performance, brings with it a different set of challenges from those encountered in a critical or historical encounter with a play text.<sup>33</sup> Recently, though, *The Merchant of Venice* has been part of a reconsideration of the methodological foundations of theatre reviewing, and theatre

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<sup>31</sup> Hester Lees Jeffries, *Shakespeare and Memory*, 2013, p.149.

<sup>32</sup> Lees Jeffries, *Shakespeare and Memory*, p.151.

<sup>33</sup> Stanley Wells, *Shakespeare in the Theatre: An Anthology of Criticism*, 1997, p.2; Wells reprints William Winter’s account of Henry Irving’s Shylock, pp.117-26.

response.<sup>34</sup> Outside the theatre, over and above the meanings of *The Merchant of Venice* on film, the presence of Shakespeare in digital media, among them the live-streaming of theatrical performances to cinema and television audiences, has also been addressed in a fine collection of essays edited by Christie Carson and Peter Kirwan, and in particular by Stephen Purcell.<sup>35</sup>

Other accounts stand out. Barbara Hodgdon's archivally-rich meditation on 'the persistence of rehearsal as and of performance' in her book, *Shakespeare, Performance and the Archive*, brings Ellen Terry's rehearsal scripts for her performance as Portia in an 1875 production of *The Merchant of Venice* into dialogue with Anthony Sher's layered annotations in text and image for his Shylock.<sup>36</sup> This approach complements that of scholars such as Tiffany Stern, who has explored the processes and preconditions of performance.<sup>37</sup> Alongside such work, Michael Dobson has begun to write the history of Shakespearean amateur performance, with *The Merchant of Venice* central to that history. It is not just in its amenable casting and scenic structure, Dobson writes, but 'thematically, too' that *The Merchant of Venice* 'has special potential appeal to amateurs': many groups have chosen it as their first production, setting as it does 'insiders (such as the essentially amateur, not-for-profit moneylender Antonio) against outsiders (the mercenary, professional Shylock)'.<sup>38</sup>

Recent scholarship, as Dobson notes, has reminded us too that *The Merchant of Venice* has been 'among the first Shakespeare plays to be either translated or acted in several countries (including India, China, Romania and Bulgaria)'.<sup>39</sup> That international range and importance of *The Merchant of Venice* has been well captured in a number of recent studies. Two collaboratively-written chapters in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Stage* explore first Asian and then African Shakespeares, and testify both to the challenges and the opportunities of following the play out into the world. In their account of the

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<sup>34</sup> Paul Prescott, *Reviewing Shakespeare: Journalism and Performance from the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, 2013.

<sup>35</sup> Russell Jackson, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, 2007; Christie Carson and Peter Kirwan, eds, *Shakespeare and the Digital World: Redefining Scholarship and Practice*, 2014, in which see Stephen Purcell, 'The impact of new forms of public performance', pp.212-25.

<sup>36</sup> Barbara Hodgdon, *Shakespeare, Performance and the Archive*, 2016, pp.3, 26-31, 41-55.

<sup>37</sup> Tiffany Stern, *Documents of Performance in Early Modern England*, 2009.

<sup>38</sup> Michael Dobson, *Shakespeare and Amateur Performance: A Cultural History*, 2011, p.206.

<sup>39</sup> Dobson, *Shakespeare and Amateur Performance*, p.206.

play's fortunes in Japan, John Gillies and collaborators explore *Sakuradoki Zeni no yononoka* (*Life is as fragile as a cherry blossom in a world of money*), a *Kabuki* adaptation of the play from 1885, one of many 'early localisations' to have its source in 'the pioneering translations and adaptations of Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare* in the Meiji period (1868-1912), when Japan opened its doors to the West and modernity'. The Lambs' *Tales* also provided the inspiration for early Chinese versions of *The Merchant of Venice*, where an adaptation was performed in Shanghai in 1913 with the title, *The Contract of Flesh*.<sup>40</sup>

In Africa, the political imperatives that are visible in these Asian responses are if anything clearer still. As Martin Banham and his collaborators write, the translations into Kiswahili of *Macbeth*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Tempest* and *Julius Caesar* by Julius Nyerere, the first president of independent Tanzania, linked literary and local meanings: 'Nyerere, a Shakespeare enthusiast, seems to have undertaken his translations in the 1960s, initially as a celebration of the richness and beauty of the Kiswahili language, showing – with a clear ideological purpose – that the major indigenous language of the new nations of East Africa was every bit as sophisticated as the language of the world's greatest poet.'<sup>41</sup> For Edward Wilson-Lee that ideological purpose was explicit even in Nyerere's title for his translation of *The Merchant of Venice*, published in 1969, *Mabepari wa Venisi*: 'Nyerere's choice of 'Mabepari' (the Gujarati-derived word for 'bourgeois') to translate 'Merchant' hints at his interest in a Marxist-inspired look at the economic roots of society's ills.'<sup>42</sup>

The refusal to avoid the histories of language and performance is embodied, too, in a brilliant case-study not only of how to write about Shakespeare performance out of the British and North American tradition but of how to write about performance that engages with digital technology. Aneta Mancewicz in her discussion of *Der Kaufmann von Venedig*, directed by Nora Somaini in 2007, explores what she calls 'intermediality',

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<sup>40</sup> John Gillies, Ryuta Minami, Ruru Li and Poonam Trivedi, 'Shakespeare on the stages of Asia' in Stanley Wells and Sarah Stanton, eds, *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Stage*, 2002, pp.259-83 (pp.260, 266); see further, Yoshihara Yukari, 'Japan as 'Half-Civilized': an Early Japanese Adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and Japan's Construction of its National Image in the Late Nineteenth Century' in Minami Ryuta, Ian Carruthers and John Gillies, eds, *Performing Shakespeare in Japan*, 2001, pp.21-32.

<sup>41</sup> Martin Banham, Roshni Mooneeram and Jane Plastow, 'Shakespeare and Africa' in Wells and Stanton, eds, *Shakespeare on Stage*, pp.284-99 (p.284).

<sup>42</sup> Edward Wilson-Lee, *Shakespeare in Swahililand: Adventures with the Ever-Living Poet*, 2016, p.179.

defined as ‘as inter-exchanges of media in performance, activated through digital technology, which involve interactions between mediated (digital) and live elements, in a reflexive manner’.<sup>43</sup> This adaptation of the play makes Antonio its dramatic as well as its titular focus; and its interplay between live and digital elements makes of this a specifically post-World War II German exploration of ‘memory preservation and excavation’.<sup>44</sup>

### *Recent performances*

With Al Pacino as Shylock and a starry supporting cast – Jeremy Irons as Antonio, and a post-*Shakespeare in Love* (1998) Joseph Fiennes as Bassanio – the film of *The Merchant of Venice* directed by Michael Radford in 2004 gave a prominence and a studio-quality glamour to its beautifully-realised Venice and Belmont. Pacino’s Shylock dominates the film, his slightly unruly accent further emphasising his otherness from the play’s locations and societies. The film, Neil Taylor wrote, performs ‘a serious engagement with many of the cultural issues raised by the play, and successfully embeds Al Pacino’s sobering, naturalistic portrayal of Shylock’s ordeal in a city poisoned by ethnic division and shamed by the presence of the Ghetto’.<sup>45</sup> Russell Jackson, writing sympathetically of the performance traditions within which Pacino’s interpretation located itself and of the textual choices (and their consequences) made in Radford’s adapted script – if rather less happily of its politics – praised again the film’s quality. The modernity of the film, itself so carefully historical in its place and approach, Jackson draws out well: ‘The cumulative effect – or at least, intention – of these touches is that of many costume dramas, subtly modernizing the mentality of the play’s world but dressing and setting it meticulously ‘in period’.<sup>46</sup> The film continues to generate thoughtful academic responses.<sup>47</sup>

Pacino returned to the role of Shylock in a stage production in New York, first performed in the summer *Shakespeare in the Park* festival in 2010 and then transferring to

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<sup>43</sup> Aneta Mancewicz, *Intermedial Shakespeares on European Stages*, 2014, pp.3, pp.70-80.

<sup>44</sup> Mancewicz, *Intermedial Shakespeares*, p.78

<sup>45</sup> Neil Taylor, ‘National and racial stereotypes in Shakespeare films’ in Russell Jackson, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, 2007, pp.267-79 (p.274).

<sup>46</sup> Russell Jackson, *Shakespeare and the English-speaking Cinema*, 2014, pp.56-8, 113-14 (p.58).

<sup>47</sup> L. Monique Pittman, ‘Locating the Bard: Adaptation and Authority in Michael Radford’s *The Merchant of Venice*’, *Shakespeare Bulletin*, 25 (2007), 13-33.

the Broadhurst Theatre in the winter of 2010 to 2011.<sup>48</sup> Directed by Daniel Sullivan, the production survived the collision of star power and starry city, and (as Ben Brantley's excitable review put it in the *New York Times*) the final meeting of Lily Rabe's Portia and Pacino's Shylock generated heat and light precisely in this way: 'the collision lights up the sky'.<sup>49</sup> The production survived, too, a high-profile exchange between Stephen Greenblatt and James Shapiro in the pages of *The New York Review of Books* which connected the particular circumstances of this performance right back into its very first performances, and the question of how Shylock might first have been performed, in red wig and prosthetic nose, or not. If the exchange proved anything, Greenblatt wrote, it was the remarkableness of the play for over four centuries: 'a bone', as he put it, 'caught in the throat that can be neither coughed up nor comfortably swallowed'.<sup>50</sup>

The production directed by Rupert Goold for the Royal Shakespeare Company in 2011 reprised, if inadvertently, some of the tropes of Pacino's transition from screen to stage. Goold's production starred Patrick Stewart as Shylock, returning him to the classical theatre, where he had earlier performed the role in 1978 (see Mahood, pp.52-3, and compare Fig. 14 with Image 001). Stewart returned not only to the role of Shylock but from more recent and more distant screen roles, in *Star Trek* and *X-Men*. But, as Stewart recalled in an interview, the transpositions that made this production so startling – its relocation to contemporary Las Vegas, and Lancelot Gobbo 'got up as an Elvis impersonator' – had themselves initially been destined for a screen production, discussed, nearly financed and very nearly produced to a script by John Logan, and brought into being after discussions in the down-time of filming more *Star Trek*.<sup>51</sup> The *Financial Times*, which might perhaps have been expected to approve of a Shylock as 'venture capitalist, practising golf putts with his cane', sounded the mixed note caught in many other reviews: 'the collection of moments and couple of big ideas simply aren't integrated thoroughly enough', wrote Ian Shuttleworth.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> It was performed at the Delacorte Theater, New York City, 8 June-1 August 2010, and revived at the Broadhurst Theater, New York City, 19 October 2010 – 9 January 2011.

<sup>49</sup> Ben Brantley, 'Love and Dirty, Sexy Ducats', *New York Times*, 13 November 2010.

<sup>50</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, 'Shakespeare and Shylock', *The New York Review of Books*, 30 September 2010, with further correspondence on 14 October and 10 December 2010.

<sup>51</sup> Dominic Cavendish, 'A Pound of Flash', *The Telegraph*, 16 December 2014; Patrick Stewart interviewed by Andrew Dickson, *The Guardian*, 22 August 2016.

<sup>52</sup> *The Financial Times*, 20 May 2011.

Jonathan Munby's direction of Jonathan Pryce as Shylock for the 2015 production that began at the Globe in London and transferred subsequently to a North American tour, and a final production in Venice itself, was roundly praised. A Shylock of 'weight, gravity and considerable complexity', Pryce was for Michael Billington part of a production that 'suggested the play was as much Portia's tragedy as Shylock's'; by the time the production had transferred to the United States – in the aftermath of the vote in Great Britain to leave the European Union, and in the atmosphere leading up to the election of Donald Trump as the American President – Pryce as much as his reviewers found that generic ambivalence, even if regretfully, 'poised ambivalently between light and dark'. 'This overriding tone, I'm sorry to say,' wrote Charles Isherwood in the *New York Times*, 'seems eerily attuned to the current troubles that roil the world.'<sup>53</sup>

Troubles that were political and geographical, even more than they were theatrical, shaped directly a strongly contrasting performance that took place as part of year-long Globe to Globe Festival, staged from 21 April-9 June 2012 at Shakespeare's Globe in London, alongside the Olympic games of the same year. The festival brought together, as Susan Bennett and Christie Carson write, 'all thirty-seven plays and *Venus and Adonis* delivered in more than forty different languages (when including the pre-Festival 'Sonnet Sunday')'.<sup>54</sup> Its production of *The Merchant of Venice* was performed by the Habima National Theatre, normally based in Tel Aviv, Israel, and was directed by Ilan Ronan. This was a production in which Alon Ophir as Antonio and Jacob Cohen's Shylock performed within literalised bonds, as Peter Kirwan's review made clear (see Image 002). First used in the trial scene, the ropes that bound Antonio were the same bonds into which 'Shylock was later forced, hanging limply amidst the jeering Christians.'<sup>55</sup> But the production itself – heavily protested outside the theatre by separate groups of pro-Palestinian and pro-Israeli demonstrators, and largely silent protests within the theatre – was bound and bonded in unavoidable respects with the recent history of

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<sup>53</sup> *The Guardian*, 1 May 2015; Pryce interviewed by Peter Marks, *The Washington Post*, 25 July 2016; *The New York Times*, 22 July 2016.

<sup>54</sup> Susan Bennett and Christie Carson, eds, *Shakespeare Beyond English: A Global Experiment*, 2013, p.1; the Festival is explored also in the online [www.yearofshakespeare.com](http://www.yearofshakespeare.com) and in Paul Edmondson, Paul Prescott and Erin Sullivan, eds, *A Year of Shakespeare: Re-living the World Shakespeare Festival*, 2013, and Paul Prescott and Erin Sullivan, eds, *Shakespeare on the Global Stage: Performance and Festivity in the Olympic Year*, 2015.

<sup>55</sup> Peter Kirwan, *The Merchant of Venice*, 28 May 2012 from [bloggingshakespeare.com/year-of-shakespeare-the-merchant-of-venice](http://bloggingshakespeare.com/year-of-shakespeare-the-merchant-of-venice) [accessed 10 July 2017]

the disputed territories. For Suzanne Gossett, herself self-consciously self-aware as (in her own phrase) ‘an American Jewish academic specializing in Shakespeare’ the coming together of play, company and context ‘seemed at once brave, perhaps unwise and finally over-determined’. ‘Overall, then,’ she wrote, ‘a production as sensitive as this to the forms of oppression and suffering created between divided groups in a society, performed in a context of simmering protest on several sides, inevitably raised the question of how, and how much, artistic works should be forced to participate in, or be judged by, cultural conflict.’<sup>56</sup>

If Charles Edelman was able to contrast different kinds of production of *The Merchant of Venice* in 2002 by ‘directorial emphasis’ – whether confrontational in intention, or staged in a particular period by their designers – we here might reflect that performances differentiated on the one hand by the celebrity of their leading performers can on another be differentiated just as starkly by their place in the modern world.<sup>57</sup>

*Adaptation: different stages, different pages*

‘Now, what news on the Rialto?’ Solanio’s bright question at the start of 3.1 marks one of the turning points in *The Merchant of Venice*. Salarino’s gloomy reply – ‘that Antonio hath a ship of rich lading wrecked on the Narrow Seas’ (3.1.2-3) – signals the start of the gathering financial gossip, and the tightening financial circumstances, that will see the merchant on trial, as it seems for his life, in the play’s Act 4. The exchange reminds readers and audiences that *The Merchant of Venice*, in Charles Edelman’s phrase, has always been a play ‘about money: huge amounts of it are borrowed, stolen, spent, lost, recovered and bequeathed.’<sup>58</sup> The variety of those different transactions opens out the ideas I want to explore in this last section: a transposition of the themes of the play into the world of a New York auction in 2015; and a formal adaptation of the play into a novel in 2016. Neither quite critical accounts nor simply performances, these two very recent instances are responses to the things that *The Merchant of Venice* has come to mean today, and may cause us to open out our sense of what constitutes critical or performance history into other locations and other modes.

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<sup>56</sup> Suzanne Gossett, ‘Habima *Merchant of Venice*: Performances inside and outside the Globe’, in Bennett and Carson, eds, *Shakespeare Beyond English*, pp.269-72 (pp. 269, 271).

<sup>57</sup> On this concept see further Fred Inglis, *A Short History of Celebrity*, 2010.

<sup>58</sup> Mahood, rev. Edelman, *The Merchant of Venice*, 2002, p.56.



Solanio and Salarino's exchange focuses on the particular ways in which money interacts with the city of Venice throughout Shakespeare's play, and the ways in which, through the networks of its ramifying financial transactions, Venice interacts with a world of trade and commerce and economics beyond its own borders. Later in the same scene, Solanio varies his question and who he asks it of: 'How now, Shylock, what news among the merchants?' (3.1.19). The information that runs in and out of the city, like the tides and the winds that drive or imperil its trade, flows around the scene and around the play – and, as we have seen, from the play out into the world. This information, as Alan Stewart writes, often takes a material form as letters of credit so vital to the long-distance trading relationships that underwrite Antonio's financial position, and the sealed bond that exposes him to such risk from Shylock.<sup>59</sup> Stewart's reading of the play in the context of the letter from the Stratford resident, Richard Quiney to Shakespeare of 25 October 1598 about a possible loan of £30 complements the less literary reading of the same transaction by Robert Bearman in Robert Bearman, *Shakespeare's Money: How Much Did He Make and What Did This Mean?*<sup>60</sup> In both contexts, credit matters vitally.

Leap forward to December 2015, when trading conditions in a different market were buoyant for *The Merchant of Venice*. On the Upper East Side of Manhattan at the New York offices of the global auctioneers, Sotheby's, a copy of *The Merchant of Venice* was offered for sale. This title-page of this copy of the play claimed that it had been printed in 1600, but in fact rather than being a true first edition of the play, as printed by James Roberts for Thomas Heyes (STC 22296), it was something less authentic and perhaps more interesting. The bibliographical detective work that unpacked that history, begun by W.W. Greg in 1908, is fascinating in itself, revealing from a study of the paper on which they were printed that the stationer Thomas Pavier had in 1619 employed William Jaggard to reprint 10 plays either by, or attributed to, Shakespeare, with fake or falsely dated publication information on their title-pages.<sup>61</sup> Greg thought that Pavier's 'venture' was at the least 'a rather shady bit of business', and the taint of deliberate falsity for a

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<sup>59</sup> Alan Stewart, *Shakespeare's Letters*, 2008, pp.155-92.

<sup>60</sup> Robert Bearman, *Shakespeare's Money: How Much Did He Make and What Did This Mean?*, 2016, pp.93-101.

<sup>61</sup> W.W. Greg, 'On Certain False Dates in Shakespearian Quartos', *The Library*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ser. 9 (1908), 113-31, 381-409.

long time proved hard to remove from these playbooks.<sup>62</sup> More recently, though, Andrew Murphy and Sonia Massai have separately argued for a more positive valuation of Pavier's enterprise.<sup>63</sup>

This renewed understanding of the textual, material and economic basis of this second quarto of *The Merchant of Venice* was discussed in the Sotheby's catalogue note.<sup>64</sup> But it was the book's status as a commodity to be traded – and to be acquired – that most authentically excited the auction house, and which matters most here. Over an estimate of \$250,000 – 350,000, the catalogue praised this 'superb unwashed and entirely unsophisticated copy of one of the rarest of the Pavier-Jaggard quartos'; it noted, too, that as all known, complete copies of the play's first edition were owned by institutions, 'so the Pavier-Jaggard issue is the earliest obtainable printing.' In an article previewing the sale for *Forbes Magazine* ('for those who don't want to read piles of business facts but need to know what to make of them'), Tom Tieholz described his personal encounter with the sale's highlights in the company of Selby Kiffer, Sotheby's International's Senior Book Specialist: 'Kiffer held out before me, a square-ish book from 1619 of Shakespeare's "The Excellent History of the Merchant of Venice"'. Repeating the auctioneers' pre-sale estimate, Tieholz noted why and how this edition was 'notable': 'it was printed prior to Shakespeare's First Folio, as a quarto (a printer's page folded doubly), was probably sold singly, and is one of about 26 surviving copies.'<sup>65</sup> In the rattling numeracy, and the slightly erratic bibliography of such a description, we are, as it may seem, deep in the world of 'merchandise' with which *The Merchant of Venice* begins (1.1.40, 45), and of Shylock's 'dream of money bags' (2.5.18).

This, I suggest, is an auction sale as a performance of *The Merchant of Venice*. In the monied city, the corporate island of Manhattan takes the place of Shakespeare's Venice, as the market that drives them both changes its denominations from ducats to dollars; Shakespeare's supreme play of trade is itself found in, and valued by, the book trade. In this sale, so much was only appropriate, for this copy of *The Merchant of Venice* had

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<sup>62</sup> Greg, 'On Certain False Dates', pp.127, 128.

<sup>63</sup> Andrew Murphy, *Shakespeare in Print: A History and Chronology of Shakespeare Publishing*, 2003, 36-41; Sonia Massai, *Shakespeare and the Rise of the Editor*, 2007, pp.106-35.

<sup>64</sup> *Property from the Collection of Robert S. Pirie*, 2-4 December 2015 (Sotheby's), Lot 727.

<sup>65</sup> Tom Tieholz, 'Pirie's Rare Book Collection to be Auctioned by Sotheby's in Early December', *Forbes*, 23 November 2015.

belonged to the book collector, Robert S. Pirie, ‘a combative corporate lawyer when the risky but lucrative field of mergers and acquisitions was emerging’, in the words of his *New York Times* obituary, ‘and later a prominent investment banker.’<sup>66</sup> Bought in 1965, early in his career as a collector, Pirie’s investment in the venture of *The Merchant of Venice* paid off handsomely at the sale, where it sold to the Brooklyn-based dealers 19<sup>th</sup> Century for \$450,000.<sup>67</sup> Soon afterwards, the book passed into a private American collection, obtained, as the catalogue had promised it might be, not by an institution but by an individual.<sup>68</sup> The connoisseurship that runs through *The Merchant of Venice*, the play’s dynamic attention to the meanings of material objects, here run through *The Merchant of Venice* as a material object for valuation, sale and acquisition.

In the New York December of 2015, then, *The Merchant of Venice* drew together many avenues of thought, ‘argosies’ – to adapt Portia’s phrase – ‘richly come to harbour suddenly’ (5.1.276-77). In the same city in which such handsome return on investment can be realised, Pacino, as we have earlier seen, had performed his Shylock in 2010 and 2011. This production, staged for an economic capital in a world still reverberating with the language and the consequences of the 2008 financial crash, made it possible for Sam Thielman to review the production for *Variety*, with a deliberate nonchalance, as ‘a show that is basically about a credit-default swap gone horribly wrong’.<sup>69</sup> The Sotheby’s auction – a swap gone tremendously right – writes *The Merchant of Venice* into a different economic history of trade and exchange and circulation.

It is possible still to see those exchanges within what Julie Sanders has called the ‘rich lexicon’ of adaptation studies, and the equally rich range of cultural practice that they encompass: ‘version, variation, interpretation, continuation, transformation, imitation, pastiche, parody, forgery, travesty, transposition, revaluation, revision, rewriting, echo.’<sup>70</sup> In the ‘adapative mode’, as Sanders powerfully describes it,

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<sup>66</sup> Sam Roberts, ‘Robert Pirie, 80, Lawyer and Banker in Mergers and Takeovers, Dies’, *New York Times*, 28 January 2015; see also H.R. Woudhuysen, ‘I want, I want’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 25 November 2015.

<sup>67</sup> ‘Sales’, *The Book Collector*, 65 (2016), 115-28 (pp.116-17); Sotheby’s record a hammer price with buyer’s premium of \$550,000.

<sup>68</sup> I am very grateful to Stephan Loewentheil of The 19<sup>th</sup> Century Rare Book and Photograph Shop, Brooklyn, for this information.

<sup>69</sup> *Variety*, 30 June 2010.

<sup>70</sup> Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, The New Critical Idiom, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, 2016, p.25.

Adaptation can be a transpositional practice, casting a specific genre into another generic mode, an act of re-vision in itself. It can parallel editorial practice in some respects, indulging in the exercise of trimming and pruning: yet it can also be an amplificatory procedure engaged in addition, expansion, accretion and interpolation [...] Adaptation is nevertheless frequently involved in offering commentary on a source text. This is achieved most often by offering a revised point of view from the 'original', adding hypothetical motivation or voicing what the text silences or marginalizes.<sup>71</sup>

As I have described *The Merchant of Venice* in a performance transposed in one way to (and by) the different generic mode of auction room in 2015, so the play was remade in a different genre in the British novelist Howard Jacobson's 2016 novel, *Shylock Is My Name*. Jacobson's novel was one of eight commissioned for the Hogarth Shakespeare, a series timed to the celebrations of the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Shakespeare's death in 2016.

In his 'Acknowledgements' to *Shylock Is My Name*, Jacobson brought out directly the financial discourse in which his version of *The Merchant of Venice* had proved so fluent: 'there can be no knowing or requiting the debts a novelist owes: what book, what person, what memory, what forgotten encounter or event'.<sup>72</sup> Translated to Cheshire's wealthy 'Golden Triangle', Jacobson's Shylock is as much his own ghost, or a projection of the novel's protagonist, Simon Strulovich's own imaginings. Strulovich – 'a rich, furious, easily hurt philanthropist with on-again off-again enthusiasms' (p.1) – is a collector, if less happily a family man, his wife, Kay, confined to her bed, and his daughter Beatrice heading into an unhappy relationship with a lower-league footballer, Gratan. The novel's merchant, D'Anton, acts as a curatorial and erotic adviser to its loaded heroine, Anna Livia Plurabelle Cleopatra A Thing of Beauty Is a Joy Forever Wiser than Solomon Christine, known as Plury to her many semi-friends, and benefitting in a rich media career in equal measure as she may not have benefitted from her father's bequest and its conditions. This material world, and the matter of fact way in which its characters use and manipulate one another, cannot quite accommodate Shylock, who never accommodates himself to the climate or the clientele in Jacobson's novel, from first to

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<sup>71</sup> Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, pp.25-6.

<sup>72</sup> Jacobson, *Shylock Is My Name*, n.p.

last, other, unaccommodated, a 'icy blast' as Plury finds him on first, mistakenly, meeting him (p.227). Caustic in its satire on the gilded surfaces of this world, the book – as Colin Burrow wrote – is good in its depths: 'the ghost Shylock (though he can be a bit of a bore) bites away at and reshapes the new Shylock, as though an old play can nag away in the mind and make something new happen.'<sup>73</sup> Changed, transformed, converted, exchanged, collected and traded: *Shylock Is My Name* testifies to that continued vitality of *The Merchant of Venice* that so powerfully keeps it live today, and will continue to do so in the future.

[8,000-words, including annotation]

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<sup>73</sup> Colin Burrow, 'Big Rip-Off', *London Review of Books*, 3 November 2016.