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Introduction: The ‘inter’gatories’ of *The Merchant of Venice*

Sarah Hatchuel and Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin

Is this a comedy, a tragedy, or something else entirely? *The Merchant of Venice* is an enigma that seems to evade any kind of definitive discourse. Though the play seems to end well, without any physical deaths, it is riddled with such serious and undecidable issues of religious discrimination, economic power and gender relations that we may wonder what kind of drama this is. In this play written around 1596-97, Bassanio asks his friend Antonio, a Venetian merchant, to lend him three thousand ducats so that he is more likely to seduce a rich and beautiful heiress, Portia. She received the order from her late father to marry only a man who can make the right choice between three caskets, respectively made of gold, silver and lead. The interrogation that is at the heart of this trial of the three caskets epitomizes the enigmatic aspects of the whole play. Antonio, having invested all his fortune in ships that are currently at sea, borrows the sum of money from a Jewish moneylender, Shylock, who sets the security at a pound of Antonio’s flesh. Shylock wishes to trap Antonio, who has insulted and assaulted him. The play thus weaves a web of past and present abusive discourses aimed at Shylock. He reacts to what has become for him an ‘ancient grudge’ (1.3.43) by asking a series of questions in the famous ‘Hath not a Jew eyes?’ soliloquy (3.1.53), a speech which is again emblematic of the way the play cultivates the art of interrogation. Since the questions he raises then are left unanswered, Shylock finds his own answer by seeking reparation for what Judith Butler would call the ‘linguistic injury’¹ he has suffered. His determination for revenge is further fueled by his daughter Jessica’s eloping with Antonio’s friend Lorenzo. Jessica’s escape from a tyrannical father, as well as her rejection of Judaism, triggers the following question: can Shylock’s violence as a father and his relish of a patriarchal system be forgiven or overlooked

¹ Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech. A Politics of the Performative* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 1–41 (‘Linguistic Vulnerability’).

just because he belongs to a discriminated religious minority – one that has experienced one of the most horrendous genocides in human history? The play’s complexity lies partly in its *intersectional* discourse: Shylock is powerful as a father and a usurer, but vulnerable as a Jewish man, thus inciting a kind of sympathy that keeps fluctuating.

As rumors of shipwreck circulate in Venice, Antonio seems ruined and Shylock asks for his due – until Portia, disguised as a judge, intervenes to save Antonio in a trial that leads to Shylock’s forced conversion to Christianity. Depending on the perspective we adopt, the play ends with loving smiles, or in terrible frustration and sadness. Here are Portia’s last words:

It is almost morning;

And yet I am sure you are not satisfied

Of these events at full. Let us go in

And charge us there upon inter’gatories

And we will answer all things faithfully.

(5.1.295–99)

Other plays by Shakespeare, such as *Hamlet* or *Much Ado About Nothing*, end with the idea that the story will be told again and that all mysteries will be elucidated afterwards. Other plays, such as *Henry V* or *Othello*, end with the idea that the story will go on and point to the constraints of a dramatic format that cannot contain everything and where all ‘events’ cannot be told ‘at full’. There are even plays, such as *The Winter’s Tale*, hinting at a world elsewhere, after and beyond the performance, in which questions will be raised and answered. But, at the end of *The Merchant of Venice*, this epilogue has a more specific resonance as it brings us back to a play that has bred interrogations, both in the general and in the legal

senses of the word. In the context of the play, the term ‘inter’gatories’, that is very rarely used by Shakespeare² and that is a syncopated form of ‘interrogatories’,³ suggests that questioning in and on the play will take on a judicial meaning, that what has happened will become not only a story to be told and retold but an object of dispute and contradictory debate.

In his edition, John Drakakis notes that what this epilogue underlines is that the characters will be questioned ‘under oath as though [they] were offenders being formally examined in a court of law’.⁴ This epilogue is emblematic of a play that is full of scenes of interrogation, one that is recurrently charged for its potential anti-Semitism and in which critics and audiences try and find faithful answers. These ‘inter’gatories’ raise religious, economic and gender issues that are particularly relevant to our contemporary world and leave the readers’ and spectators’ minds ‘tossing’ on an ‘ocean’ (1.1.7) of questions that have become more specifically ethical since the Shoah and that, retrospectively, make the play strikingly uncomfortable. The main questions that make an audience uncomfortable are the following: do the anti-Semitic slurs present in the play make it an anti-Semitic play? Are we allowed to criticize Jewish Shylock’s greed, desire for revenge and patriarchal domination after the Holocaust? Is it acceptable and ‘faithful’ to erase the anti-Semitic lines of the play in performance? This introduction is thus going to raise interrogations about a play that has been described by Harry Berger Jr as a ‘comedy of embarrassment’.⁵

² For the other two occurrences, see *All Is Well That Ends Well*, 4.3.183 and *Cymbeline*, 5.5.391.

³ *OED* and John Drakakis, ed., *The Merchant of Venice*, The Arden Shakespeare Third Series (London: Bloomsbury, [2010] 2014), 390.

⁴ Drakakis, ed., 390.

⁵ See Harry Berger, Jr, *A Fury in the Words. Love and Embarrassment in Shakespeare’s Venice* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 12, quoted by Bassi in this volume.

‘Is *The Merchant of Venice* a problem play?’: here is the stimulating question that was tackled by Leo Salingar in 1985, in a volume edited by Michèle Willems, Jean-Pierre Maquerlot and Raymond Willems, entitled *Le Marchand de Venise et Le Juif de Malte, Texte et représentations*. The question reveals that there is even a problem in defining the play as a ‘problem play’, thus turning *The Merchant* into a kind of meta-problematic conundrum. Salingar described Shakespeare as ‘interested in the intertexture of experience and in the strange borderline where “good and evil, joy and sorrow” encroach upon their opposites’⁶ and claimed that ‘*The Merchant of Venice* is the earliest of his comedies, and perhaps the earliest of his plays, where this kind of interest declares itself strongly’.⁷ In the conclusion to his analysis, Salingar noted that, in this play, Shakespeare ‘is interested in the contradictions between irrational emotional impulses and social rationality expressed (for example) by law’.⁸ For him, with *The Merchant of Venice*, the playwright ‘stayed on the side of romance’ but also turned ‘in the direction of [the] future problem plays’⁹ such as *All’s Well That Ends Well* or *Measure for Measure*.

This question of genre emerges regularly in the play’s critical backstory delineated by John Drakakis, from its publication in 1600 as the first quarto, with the title: *The Historie of the Merchant of Venice: ‘VVith the extreame crueltie of Shylocke the Iewe / towards the sayd Merchant, in cutting a iust pound / of his flesh: and the obtaining of Portia by the choyse of three / chests*. Rewritten into *The Jew of Venice* by George Granville, Lord Lansdowne in

⁶ Leo Salingar, ‘Is *The Merchant of Venice* a problem play?’, in Michèle Willems, Jean-Pierre Maquerlot and Raymond Willems, eds, *Le Marchand de Venise et Le Juif de Malte, Texte et représentations* (Rouen: Publications de l’Université de Rouen, 1985), 9–20, 11. Salingar is quoting Samuel Johnson, *Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. Walter Raleigh (London: Henry Frowde, 1908), 15.

⁷ Salingar, 11.

⁸ Salingar, 19.

⁹ Salingar, 19.

1701, the play has quickly become Shylock's, its performance depending on the vision one has of the character. Drakakis notes that the first critical approach to Shakespeare's play dates back to Nicholas Rowe's 1709 edition where issues of genre were tackled. For Rowe, Shylock's part was more tragic than comic and the critical and performance backstory of the play shows it pulls in these 'opposite directions' which have turned the play into a 'problem comedy'. Charles Macklin's 1741 performance of the part at Drury Lane was a key moment in the play's history as it expressed the complexity of the character by pulling away from the comic Pantalone-like figure to emphasize the darker, more serious and ferocious aspects of the part. Drakakis describes the evolution of the stage figure of Shylock from the stock comic villain into a 'character', referring to the 'characterological criticism' epitomized by A. C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1906) and challenged only three decades later by L. C. Knight (1933). Strikingly, Shylock, who only appears in five scenes, seems to swallow the whole play and especially Portia's story, somewhat like Anthony Hopkins's Hannibal Lecter who only has twenty-four minutes of screen time in Jonathan Demme's 1991 *The Silence of the Lambs* but whose presence is obsessive and oppressive from the beginning to the end. The play has been the focus of 'stage-centered criticism', taking into account, as Russell Brown did, the sub-text of the play to try and grasp the thoughts and motivations behind the words. The Holocaust is a key element in understanding the critical backstory of *The Merchant of Venice*, as it deeply and irrevocably questioned the presence of anti-Semitic speeches in the play as well as its classification as a comedy. From then on, more attention was given to the play's historical context while issues of characterization were partly replaced by analyses of dramatic organic structure and language. 'As long as Shylock remained the center of the play, criticism was forced to tip-toe carefully around questions of "race" and especially anti-Semitism' notes Drakakis, before stating that 'in the years leading up to the Second World War and its aftermath, the formal or "folk" features of a play like *The Merchant of Venice*

could be seen as a means of protecting the cultural reputation of Shakespeare against accusations of anti-Semitism.’ It is in this context that the play’s festive dimension has become an object of study, notably by L. C. Barber (1959), and a number of thematic issues, such as the tension between love and money or the themes of justice and mercy have been dealt with. The focus on the character was supplanted by organic visions of the play such as W. H. Auden’s perception of the play’s ‘exclusionist aesthetics’ in 1963. Then came a period of more theoretically-informed approaches to the play focusing on the language of money and the moral and ethical issues it raises in *The Merchant of Venice*. Drakakis notably mentions Walter Cohen’s 1982 study which enjoins us ‘not so much to interpret as to discover the sources of our difficulty in interpreting’ by cultivating a historicized reading of the play. Such a historicized approach has led critics to explore the gender issues in the play, questioning Portia’s dominant role as well as the complexities of the relationship between Bassanio and Antonio. It has also initiated research on how the text represents the figure of the Jew, as explored by James Shapiro’s *Shakespeare and the Jews* (1996) and Martin D. Yaffe’s *Shylock and the Jewish question* (1997). ‘The “uses” to which *The Merchant of Venice* has been put suggests that it has a capacity to provide a mirror for the culture in which it appears’, concludes Drakakis.

This chameleon-like adaptability is confirmed in Jay Halio’s history of the play in performance. The tensions, contradictions and ‘inter’gatories’ that are revealed in the critical backstory find their expression on stage. The title of Q1 may be seen, Halio notes, as an indicator of the prominence of the Shylock plot over the one involving Portia. The play was performed in 1605 before King James and his court and the lack of documents on the original performances makes it hard to reconstitute them except through guess work. Thus, one may only infer that Kemp played the Clown (Lancelot Gobbo). The actors who played Shylock are central in this performance history. When the play was turned into *The Jew of Venice* in 1701,

the first actor known to have played the part is Thomas Doggett who is supposed to have performed it as a comic villain. In 1741, when Charles Macklin restored much of the original script, he chose to play the role as a 'terrifying' villain. In 1814 Edmund Kean wanted, on the contrary, to emphasize the humanity of the character and to provoke sympathy, which initiated a new tradition of representation: Shylock became an ill-used, potentially tragic character. But the performance history cannot be reduced to the various ways in which Shylock was impersonated. With Komisarjevsky in 1932, emphasis was put on a fairy tale design and, for Halio, this production 'signalled the end of the actor-manager tradition of staging Shakespeare's plays'. In the pre-war period, the productions did not seem to take the context of the persecution of Jews into account, while the play could also become a tool of Nazi propaganda. In 1947, Maurice Schwartz's *Shylock and His Daughter* performed in New York aimed at representing Jewish grandeur, with a Shylock unable to spill blood in the end. In 1970 Jonathan Miller's production with Olivier as Shylock emphasized the tragic dimension of the play. A decade later, in his BBC version the same Miller revised this approach to reach a more balanced production where the Jew and the Christians are equally guilty. Halio also focuses on the many RSC productions and especially studies John Barton's two productions in 1978 at the Other Place and in 1981 at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre. The two versions approach the question of Jewishness in different ways: in the 1978 version with Patrick Stewart, Shylock was just a bad man who 'happened to be a Jew' while in the second production with David Suchet as Shylock, 'Jewishness was very much to the point'. These renewed visions by the same director show how the play may pull in opposite directions. Halio's survey of productions in the UK and worldwide reveals that while Shylock is an object of constant reassessment and re-shapings, the fortunes of the part also depend on the way the other parts are performed in a play that articulates the two contrasting worlds of Venice and Belmont where numerous other characters are of interest. The survey shows that

the vision of the play depends on the types of balance that can be reached between its various components and on whether the production can resist Shylock as the only powerful magnet.

As a matter of fact, Shylock, whether we use his name or choose to characterize him as the Jew, like John Drakakis who uses ‘Jew’ as speech heading in his edition of the play, seems to have often been the tree that hides a forest of centres of interest. The state of the art drawn by Shaul Bassi in this volume shows that there are numerous doors through which one may enter a play that he sees as ‘one of the most contemporary of Shakespeare’s plays’. Bassi, who even notes *The Merchant of Venice*’s ‘growing topicality’, chooses not one but four ‘itineraries’ to translate and map the various critical approaches that have been adopted to tackle the play: Jewish question(s); economic tropes; forms of community; global reimaginings. Bassi first signals two monographs that stand out in the recent critical history of the play: Kenneth Gross’s *Shylock is Shakespeare* (2006) and Janet Adelman’s *Blood relations: Christian and Jew in The Merchant of Venice* (2008). He shows how Gross ‘sees *The Merchant of Venice* as a play exploring the dramaturgy and aesthetics of “repugnancy”’ while Adelman considers the ‘central notion of religious conversion’ and the ‘nexus between flesh and spirit’. While Gross focuses on Shylock, Adelman displaces the emphasis on Shylock’s daughter as the ‘irreducibly alien other’, a view that contradicts Lindsay M. Kaplan’s seeing Jessica as the perfect convert. Shaul Bassi first notes that the issue of Jewishness has recently fed much criticism on *The Merchant of Venice*: from James Shapiro’s seminal book (1996) to Emma Smith’s provocative question ‘Was Shylock Jewish?’,¹⁰ critics have analyzed and interrogated the representations of Jewishness. Bassi summarizes Emma Smith’s article as one that aims to show that the anti-Jewish rhetoric may stand for ‘tropes that can be used against other minorities.’ This, we suggest, might to some extent, be connected to what the French theoretician of insults, Évelyne Larguèche, calls ‘non-specific’

¹⁰ Emma Smith, ‘Was Shylock Jewish?’, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 64.2 (2013), 188–219.

abuse, i.e. insults that are not connected to any objective or real specific characteristic of the target and victim of hate speech.¹¹ Stephen Greenblatt, on the other hand, in an article entitled ‘The limits of hate speech’ (2010) contradicts the idea that Shylock is an allegorical character who would represent all types of otherness. The title of Edna Nashdon and Michael Shapiro’s recent collection, *Wrestling with Shylock*, cleverly translates the struggle that the study of this theme and character constitutes for the readers, spectators and critics who see the complexity of the object. The ‘second critical route’ that is explored by Bassi focuses on economic matters which announce the rise of capitalism. Notions such as debt, interest and usury, which can be connected to ‘modern risk’ have been, Bassi shows, the object of many critical readings questioning the relationship between Antonio and Bassanio. We may add here that the ‘pound of flesh’ which is at the heart of the plot connects the worlds of money and carnal consummation, inscribing the unsettling motif of *voluptas carnis* (pleasure of the flesh) in the relationships between Shylock and Antonio, and Antonio and Bassanio. Before concluding with a panoramic view of the dissemination of the play in all its forms throughout the world in the section on ‘global reimaginings’ (a section which is completed by Douglas Lanier’s chapter on Shakespeare on screen), the third section of Bassi’s state of the art focuses on the studies ‘whose common ambit is the configuration of community’. These communities can be religious (Christian and Jew), social (citizen and noncitizen), sexual (queer and heteronormative), human and post-human (human and animal). It is true that one may easily see Shylock’s asking for a pound of flesh as a de-metaphorisation of the figure of the dog, all the more so since the word ‘usury’ is related to the Hebrew word meaning ‘biting’.¹²

¹¹ See Évelyne Larguèche, *L’Effet injure, De la pragmatique à la psychanalyse* (Paris: PUF, 1983).

¹² On the literalization of the dog metaphor, see Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin, “‘You Have Rated Me’: The Insults of *The Merchant of Venice* », *Literaria Pragensia* 23, issue 45, 2013, 82–97.

Sabine Schülting's chapter adds a new direction to the studies of *The Merchant's* communities by focusing on what she calls, after Barbara Rosenstein,¹³ the 'emotional communities' of the play. Schülting reassesses emotions as being part of a social process and shows that the play 'attributes central importance to the negotiation of the emotions.' Emotions, she notes, 'circulate in the play' and they 'establish social connections and intersect with economic relations and transactions'. Starting from Antonio's initial sadness in 1.1., she analyzes the dramatic function of melancholy in the play, showing how Antonio's position of note in the margin 'underscore[s] the happiness of the others' and prevents him from being part of an emotional community. She also suggests that Shylock excludes himself from 'positive affects' and that *The Merchant* 'establishes two emotional communities, one Christian, the other Jewish', 'sociable merriment versus solitary soberness'. Focusing on the economy of love and hate in the play, she notes that 'hate is less the opposite of love than "a negative attachment to other"'¹⁴. Love, hate and disgust, she shows, construct communities. In this context, 'Shylock is an outsider who fails to align affectively (and effectively) with *any* collective'. Taking the example of Jessica's ambivalent status, Schülting shows that in *Merchant* 'emotions are continuously in motion; they circulate not unlike Portia's and Nerissa's rings'.

The analysis of Jessica's uncomfortable, in-between status is prolonged in Janice Valls-Russell's chapter that highlights the final scene of the play and foregrounds a Shylock's daughter who has long remained on the margins of the play and the criticism it has created. For Valls-Russell, the 'mythological material' that Shakespeare inscribes in the play contributes to destabilizing the happy ending convention of the comedy. She reassesses the

¹³ See Thomas Wilson, *A Christian Dictionary* (London, 1612).

¹⁴ Schülting is quoting Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 51.

Ovidian myths, especially the Golden Fleece, Jason and Medea, showing how they ‘create a sense of instability’. ‘Myths’, she argues, ‘are not always in the right place, not really doing what might be expected of them’. Analyzing the duet between Lorenzo and Jessica and the mythological references it conveys, she shows that instead of indicating a happy end, the allusions to Cressid, Dido, Thisbe and Medea (5.1.1–14), point to darker perspectives and a potential discord at the end of the play, which is confirmed by the reversibility of the myth of Orpheus mentioned by Lorenzo (5.1.79–82). In this ‘mythological tapestry’, Jessica is ‘the one most affected by the Janus syndrome’, ‘her cross-gendered potentiality expos[ing] her to a solitary liminality’. The analysis of the fairy-tale and mythological texture of Shakespeare’s play¹⁵ thus allows the spectators to perceive aspects of otherness and identity from what Wilhelm Hortmann has termed a ‘trans-Holocaust’ perspective.¹⁶ This way of reading the play appears, in its very formulation, as full of contradictions, as is suggested by Zeno Ackermann and Sabine Schülting in their recent book on Shylock on the German stage where they ask the question in a section entitled ‘Transcending the Holocaust?’.¹⁷

In the next chapter, Gary Watt, adopting a presentist approach, starts by interrogating a post-truth world whose most disturbing feature is to cast ‘doubt upon the nature and extent of the Jewish Holocaust’. This leads him to analyze what he calls the ‘credit clauses’ in *The Merchant*, such as Antonio’s opening words ‘In sooth’, echoed by Portia’s ‘By my troth’ at

¹⁵ On myth and folklore related to festivity, see François Laroque, ‘Fête, Folklore et Mythe dans *Le Marchand de Venise*’, in Willems, Marquerlot and Willems eds, 111–27.

¹⁶ Wilhelm Hortmann, ‘Wo, bitte, geht’s nach Belmont? Über ein Dilemma von Inszenierungen des *Kaufmann von Venedig* nach dem Holocaust’, *Shakespeare Jahrbuch* 139 (2003): 217–25, 217.

¹⁷ On the contradictions inherent in a post-Holocaust or trans-Holocaust approach, see Zeno Ackermann and Sabine Schülting, *Precarious Figurations: Shylock on the German Stage, 1920–2010* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2019), 175–80.

the beginning of the next scene. Watt puts truth, deceit and trust at the centre of his reading, noting that the play is ‘unique in that [it] is prefaced with a credit clause’. He studies the central ‘casket scene’ as conveying the ‘deceiving capacity of eloquent and ornamental rhetoric’. Watt reminds us that, according to Aristotle, ‘to be credible the rhetor must be ethical’, which allows him to analyze how Shylock, with his ‘merry bond’ (1.3.169), replaces monetary interest by ‘repayment through friendship’, of which he notes that it is ‘the quality most prized by rhetoricians for producing credit of character as an aspect of ethos’. By focusing on ‘false witness and fake news’ in a second section, Watt explores the role played by Salarino and Salanio, whom he describes as ‘devourers and divulgers of news’ and as the embodiments of Rumour and Report in the play. Watt also sees the choice between ‘trust to friendship and trust to law’ as being central to the relationships between Shylock and Antonio. The play is seen as an anatomy of trust which is constantly questioned and put to the test, contributing to making the play an unsettling and unstable ground. Raising the issue of truth and trust finally leads Watt to study how Shakespeare plays with our trust in drama and truth on stage.

After three New directions that have unlocked the play by un-shylocking it, i.e. by focusing on the play as a whole or on marginal characters such as Jessica or the two ‘Sal’ characters, Douglas Lanier brings us back to the obsessive presence of Shylock, as in a kind of ‘return of the repressed’. Whatever we do, Shylock comes back to the forefront and can never be forgotten. Lanier’s history of *The Merchant* on screen from the silent era to the present day shows how cinema has given a prominent place to Shylock, even sometimes expanding the character. Film makers, Lanier remarks, have used various means such as flashbacks, epilogues or prologues to tell more about the character. He also shows that *The Merchant* has been screened in two main genres: melodrama and heritage film. On screen, the Holocaust has had more impact than on stage: according to Lanier, ‘from the 1940s on, the

dark shadow of the Holocaust has hovered over reception of the play and so determined its perceived amenability for film adaptation.’ Lanier explains the popularity of the play on screen in the silent era through several factors: the ‘cultural embrace’ of anti-Semitism, the picturesque potential of Venice and Belmont, the attractive basic design of the conflict between good and evil and the interest in great Shakespearean parts. The longer the films are, the more they include the romance plot. The film that he identifies as the most important in the silent era is Peter Paul Felner’s *Der Kaufman von Venedig* (1922), also known as *The Jew of Mesri* which, he notes, ‘poses an interpretive challenge’, as it both confirms the stereotype of the evil Jew and ‘magnifies his pathos’, signalling a ‘new sympathy in screen portrayals of Shylock’. After a few talkies, the play ‘languished onscreen’ after the Second World War and it was not until 1953 that a French-Italian production was released, directed by Pierre Billon, with Michel Simon as Shylock. This version is emblematic of a displacement of the religious issues onto issues of class, Shylock being identified as a working class character rather than as a Jew. After the Holocaust, *The Merchant of Venice* was regarded as ‘commercially toxic’. That is why it ‘fared better’ on TV than on film. Lanier counts twenty television adaptations in the last seventy years, many of which tend to erase the ‘troubling aspects’ of the play. Lanier notably analyzes John Sichel’s 1973 production with Laurence Olivier as Shylock and describes it as a ‘tragedy of attempted assimilation’. This version is remembered for Shylock’s off-screen scream that unsettles the Christian community while Welles’s unfinished version (1969) throws into relief Shylock’s isolation. Turning to twenty-first-century screen *Merchants*, Lanier shows how the play has been used ‘to address not just anti-Semitism but also other forms of racial and sexual prejudice’, concerns that are essential to Don Selwyn’s *Te Tangata Whai Rawa o Weniti* (2002), ‘the first feature film in the Maori language and the first film of *Merchant* since *Le Marchand* in 1953’. In 2004, Michael Radford’s film with Al Pacino as Shylock and Jeremy Irons as Antonio, ends on images that suggest that Shylock no

longer belongs to any community and that Jessica is both integrated into the Christian society and alienated from it. More recent films show that directors have begun ‘to experiment with updating the play’, by addressing gender issues and extending to ‘new arenas of identity politics’, thus showing that the play can be used to speak to new generations.

That is precisely what the last chapter in this volume wants to show. Even if the play is a ‘difficult’ play, as Lanier notes, or precisely *because* it is a difficult play, Lieke Stelling demonstrates how relevant and useful *The Merchant* is to address issues that trouble our present-day society. In her learning and teaching resources section, she selects four topics (genre, sources and adaptations, religion, and conversions) that have been explored and the complexities of which make them particularly stimulating in the classroom and relevant to young audiences. What the four topics have in common is that they are unsettling, full of paradoxes and tensions. She reveals that questioning the genre of the play feeds different perspectives rather than ‘exclusionary labels’. Comparing *The Merchant* with its main source, a tale by Ser Giovanni Fiorentino dating back to the late fourteenth century and printed in 1558, in an Italian collection of short stories entitled *Il Pecorone* (The Simpleton), demonstrates the greater ambiguity of Shakespeare’s Shylock. The long history of adaptations shows how attractive the play is worldwide and yet how, as Marjorie Garber notes, many adapters have tried to ‘purge it of its [...] disturbing energies’.¹⁸ In her section on religion, Stelling formulates the paradox that ‘For a play that mentions scripture and the term “Jew” so frequently, it seems strikingly unconcerned with the nature of Judaism and Jewishness’ and notes that the Jew probably reminded an Elizabethan audience of another form of religion, Puritanism, the play thus potentially blurring the religious categories and complicating them. This complication is enhanced by the theme of conversion to which Lieke Stelling dedicates her last section. She claims that ‘The pronouncement of Shylock’s punitive conversion

¹⁸ Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All* (New York: Anchor Books, 2005), 311. Quoted by Lieke Stelling.

epitomizes the play's sense of discomfort' and suggests that Jessica's conversion is 'tinged with conflicts'. Working on the trial scene is for Stelling one of the best ways of approaching the play in the classroom and the exercises that she suggests invite the students to work on their emotions and debating skills. According to Lieke, the 'sense of uneasiness' that the play generates definitely 'invites critical reflection'.

Although it makes us feel uncomfortable, or should we say, because it makes us feel uncomfortable, the play and its most striking motifs have left many 'tatters'¹⁹ in all kinds of cultural fields. In a thriller film such as *Seven* (dir. David Fincher, 1995), the play is summoned to refer to the sin of Greed; in the action film *Pound of Flesh* (dir. Ernie Barbarash, 2015), the most thrilling aspect of the play is infused in a title that is evocative of a story of organ theft. These contemporary fragments reveal that the play is disturbing because it is literally thrilling (the word 'thrill' etymologically meaning 'pierce' or 'penetrate') when it represents Shylock piercing through Antonio's flesh. This eagerness to feed on flesh (*caro*) constitutes a kind of *carnival* act (a word based on *caro* and *levare*, meaning 'putting the flesh away'), without which Shylock will remain hungry for revenge and which ironically and paradoxically relates him to the Christian world of revellers that he denounces in the play. This thrilling gesture of cutting a pound of flesh is also mentioned in the context of *The Lion King II* (dir. Darrell Rooney and Rob LaDuca, 1998), suggesting that the act remains so symbolic and bloodless in the play that it can be digested by a comic animated film mainly aimed at children. However, in the popular French comedy *Rio Ne Répond Plus* (dir. Michel Hazanavicius, 2008), the rewriting of the 'Hath not a Jew eyes?' speech into an 'Hath not a

¹⁹ We owe this formulation to Mariangela Tempera, who organized a conference in 2013 in Ferrara entitled 'Shakespeare in tatters', the proceedings of which are forthcoming.

Nazi eyes?’ speech²⁰ is far more disturbing and leaves a rather disgusting taste for an audience aware of the complexities in Shakespeare’s play. The 2009 thirty-minute film by painter-artist Pierre Moignard entitled *Who Chooseth Me*,²¹ is another resurgence of *The Merchant of Venice* which replaces characters and fictional places with real bystanders and locations, with a narration in voice-over that richly interrogates the play in a fragmentary form.

Like Shylock’s paradoxical final words, ‘I am content’, which are supposed to translate his reaction to his forced conversion, the play leaves an abyss of contradictory feelings, which oblige us to be ‘critical readers’ and reflect on the economic system, on the patriarchy, and on gender, religious and emotional relationships in general. The characters, the play itself and our own beliefs will be called to the stand in ceaseless ‘inter’gatories’ until gender, class, race and religion no longer determine the power structures of our societies.

²⁰ See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-2uG2dUMb_U (accessed 24 November 2019).

²¹ Many thanks to Rodolphe Olcèse for his contribution on this film at the ‘Shakespeare on screen in the digital era’ congress in Montpellier in September 2019.