

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



***The Merchant of Venice* presented by Shakespeare's Globe at the Chicago
Shakespeare Theatre, Saturday, August 13, 2016**

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Director Jonathan Munby; Designer Mike Britton; Composer Jules Maxwell; Choreography Lucy Hind; Fight Director Kate Waters, Lighting Designer Oliver Fenwick; Sound Designer Christopher Shutt; Associate Director Kevin Bennett. With Stefan Adegbola as Launcelot Gobbo; Andy Apollo as Lorenzo; Raj Bajaj as Solanio; Jolyon Coy as Gratiano; Dan Fredenburgh as Bassanio; Michael Hadley as the Duke of Venice and Tubal; Colin Haigh as Balthasar; John Hasting as Ensemble; Christopher Logan as Prince of Arragon; Dominic Mafham as Antonio; Brain Martin as Salarino; Dorothea Myer-Bennett as Nerissa; Rachel Pickup as Portia; Jonathan Pryce as Shylock; Phoebe Pryce as Jessica; Giles Terera as Prince of Morocco; and Megan Tyler as Ensemble.

It is inconceivable to stage Shakespeare's comedy today without acknowledging that it relies for its happy ending on the fall of a member of a maltreated people. Though Shylock only appears in five scenes of twenty, his story and how it is presented defines the tone of each production of this problematic play. By keeping the production in an Elizabethan setting, Shakespeare's Globe Company has stressed the sociological mindset of that audience, making a clear connection between today's marginalization of immigrants and the treatment of minorities in the past. This was done in several ways, including through a constant reference to the audience by the performers.

The director Jonathan Munby decided not to disguise the ugliness at the heart of a world that here considered the Jewish people as a type of vermin. As the play opened, the audience was drawn into a carnival celebration, clapping along to the festive music. This was suddenly interrupted when two Jewish men (identified by their red caps) tried

to pass over the stage and were attacked by the crowd, who shoved one to the ground and kicked him until he was rescued by his partner. Since many of the company were playing these celebrants, Munby seemed to suggest that, like groups such as the Klan, the evil persecution by our 'protagonists', Lorenzo, Gratiano, Bassanio, and Antonio, was protected by their masked anonymity.

Even when Venice is the site of such awful behavior, Belmont is often depicted as a semi-paradise, untouched by weightier matters. In this case, on the contrary, we did not leave behind these troubles when we traveled to Portia's estate. Jules Maxwell's score set the tone: instead of Shakespeare's 'Tell me where is fancy bred?' the songs, possibly inspired by Montiverdi with text by Rinuccini, allowed the singers to proclaim, 'E che volete voi che miconforte/In cosi dura sorte, In cosi gran martire?' or 'And whom do you want to comfort me/In such cruel fate/In such a great martyrdom?'

It is a dark comedy indeed when Portia herself, who is often made the model for our own enlightened views, is played as a spoiled noblewoman who constantly displays her own prejudices, whether to Shylock's daughter or to her foreign suitors. Rachel Pickup made it very clear that she found Jessica's presence in Belmont to be distasteful, and nearly cringed whenever she said her name. The imagery of her beautiful language can be a respite from the harsher dialogue on the Rialto, but even her most romantic speech to Bassanio, before he chose from the caskets, was cut. The actress's strongest moments were as the young judge: she did not draw out the suspense, but quickly rendered her final judgement and freed Antonio. The quality of her mercy seemed, in fact, to be straining against her own biases.

The historical background offered Jonathan Pryce's Shylock a giant obstacle with which to struggle. He was a man who carefully tread the path set out for him in an anti-Semitic world. He played the early scenes with careful deference, as if he himself were the 'fawning publican'. This strategy did not prevent him from being openly assaulted throughout the play: when he tried to relate the tale of Laban and his sheep, Antonio grabbed his prayer book from him and dropped it just out of his reach, and then attacked Shylock, grabbing his beard (the ultimate Elizabethan insult) and twisting it painfully as he forced the bargain on him. This clearly justified Shylock's sudden thought that he would ask for a pound of flesh rather than money as his interest. In Shakespeare's Act III, when Shylock told Solanio that he would be exacting his revenge, the latter 'voided his rheum' upon his beard, and he and Salarino appeared ready to 'solve' the Shylock problem permanently until he was interrupted by Antonio's servant. Meanwhile, Gratiano's constant baiting, especially in the trial scene, was nastier than ever. Despite all this, Pryce only raised his voice once: when in court, he insisted one last time on the

bond. 'I will have it' finally burst from him despite his attempts to be 'reasonable'. At the end of the trial, the symbol of his faith, his red cap, was knocked from his head and he was prevented from picking it up as he was dragged away to be converted.

As noted, the title character did very little to arouse our sympathy, embracing his own prejudices completely. Dominic Mafham's Antonio was a tortured soul whose melancholy was clearly his unrequited desire for Bassanio, which was finally revealed when the merchant tried to kiss his friend on the lips after being saved at the trial. (The Bassanio of Dan Fredenburgh, cast as a much larger and dominating figure than most, reacted in disgust, showing that these feelings were definitely one-sided.) It had never been more obvious that the final scene was Portia's test of her husband's loyalty after noting Antonio's hold over him during the trial. At the end of the play, Antonio had to be seen to relinquish the young man's fealty in front of the group.

Audience interaction has become a staple of the Globe company, based on their work in that space over the years, and the actors made a point of delivering certain lines to specific targets in front of them. Launcelot Gobbo (Stefan Adegbola) used two 'volunteers' from the audience to act out the two parts of his conscience, finding humor in a routine that otherwise has gone stale over the years in the playing. (The scene with his father was cut from the production.) The two suitors, Morocco and Arragon, also used their soliloquies as stand-up routines and received laughs from their exaggerated views of themselves. (A nice touch: the 'portrait of a blinking idiot' that Arragon pulled from the silver casket was a hand mirror.) Overall the sense was that we were complicit in whatever feelings or attitudes the characters might have. These feelings were also personified by the actors, who appeared as if from the thoughts of the characters who described them: for example, when Bassanio rhapsodized over Portia, she walked along the front of the stage as an object of his desire. Bassanio's reading of Antonio's letter in Belmont was moved to the end of that scene, and Antonio entered upstage and finished the letter aloud, imbuing it with the feelings that he had for his friend.

Despite the humor that can still be wrung from this 'comedy', the production closed on a very dark note. After the last line, spoken by Gratiano, Jessica began to sing the mourner's Kaddish for her father, and the players then acted out the promised conversion, a terrible ritual which left much of the audience audibly upset, as Pryce flinched and moaned at each pouring of the water over his head by the priest, as if he was being scalded. After the last lines of Latin were intoned, the stage was plunged into darkness and the play ended.