Deconstructing the Transhistorical in

Contemporary Productions of The Merchant of Venice

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Graduate Centre for Study of Drama
University of Toronto

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2010

**ABSTRACT**

This dissertation critiques four 2007 productions of Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* observed in three Anglophone theatrical cultures. The dissertation is a narrative enquiry about how the pulls of the present and the past informed these stagings. It maintains that the deployment of ordering principles promoting balance between tradition and rupture favours compelling results. It examines the stagings’ socio-cultural contexts, publicity and promotion mechanisms, formal properties, and issues of representation.

The Introduction locates the dissertation within the current scholarly discussion about Shakespearean playtexts and their stagings, arguing that it is possible to reconcile the binary established by two mutually exclusive epistemological claims regarding historicism’s function in scripted stagings. It provides explanations of the theoretical and methodological foundations of the work as well as how these foundations relate to the productions studied, determining the organization of the chapters.

Chapter One examines the Theater for a New Audience’s staging, an example of Deconstruction. The chapter discusses how Darko Tresnjak attained the transhistorical by foregrounding the playtext’s open-endedness. It discusses how this staging productively
explored the commonalities between sodomy and homosexuality, ethnic intolerance and anti-Semitism, as well as the emotional tracks of the characters.

Chapter Two analyzes Shakespeare’s Globe’s production, suggesting that this hilarious reading of Merchant suppressed “seriousness” from a limitedly carnivalized show that studiedly avoided criticism regarding the play’s alleged anti-Semitic stance. The chapter expounds how the framing of the theatrical event was consistent with Rebecca Gatward’s materialization of the playtext as “reconstruction.”

Chapter Three discusses Richard Rose’s staging with the Stratford Festival of Canada, elucidating the reasons for this production to be classified as “misconstruction.” Making use of the analytical distinction between ethnic intolerance and anti-Semitism, the chapter argues that this production’s shortcoming derived from the attempt to make socio-political statements that do not inhere in the traces of the text.

Chapter Four analyzes an eccentric staging: the adaptation of Merchant through the eyes of a Holocaust survivor, with additional text by the director Julia Pascal. The chapter demonstrates how a fringe company with postmodernist epistemological claims was far removed from the skeptical imperative of Deconstruction in that it cynically destroyed inheritance instead of surveying its contradictions.

The Conclusion is self-deconstructive and decomposes the narrative inquiry: it exposes how and to what extent the researcher’s reception of the stagings differed from his retrospective reflections on them, mapping out how the problems faced by the critique of each case study shaped a unitary theoretical approach. It argues that the most eloquent scenes and characterizations attained the transhistorical dimension by skeptically deconstructing the playtext, that is, by staging its open-endedness, its conflation of genres, and the emotional traces of the characters.
In the memory of my father
Antonio
both a merchant and an alien
in the country he chose
for me to grow up
a member of the human family
Acknowledgements

As an international student, my most heartfelt thanks are due first and foremost to the University of Toronto, for having offered me the invaluable privilege of both being the recipient of a Connaught Fellowship and the advisee of Professors John Astington, Jeremy Lopez, and Domenico Pietropaolo. This dissertation would not have come into being if my advisory committee had not demonstrated such unwavering enthusiasm for the project and extended so much practical help and candid encouragement.

I am much obliged to the Graduate Centre of Study of Drama: To Prof. Stephen Johnson for his unrelenting pastoral care regarding theoretical, financial, bureaucratic, and existential matters; to Profs. Bruce Barton and Paula Sperdakos for the cross-cultural words of advice through the steps of this rite of passage; to Jean Glasgow, Deborah Loughlin, Luella Massey, Rob Moses, Marc Goodman, and Dr. Paul Stoesser for their friendly disposition and sincere willingness to serve.

I am indebted to many collaborators who contributed inestimable interlocution to the work in progress in a variety of ways: Prof. Mieke Bal, Prof. Ronald M. Baecker, Siegfried Betterman, Lil Blume, Prof. Adam Max Cohen, Prof. Paul Crowther, Prof. Jane Freeman, Prof. Douglas Green, Bob Isenberger, James McKinnon, Prof. Craig Patterson, Karen Rickers, Patrick Robinson, Prof. Skip Shand, Prof. Tania Shepherd, Jan Sommerfeld, Dr. Stephanie Treloar, Prof. Roy Turner, Christian von Seydlitz, Prof. Valery Wayne, and Dr. Kim Yates.

I owe special thanks to the Stratford Festival of Canada: Richard Rose, for having provided me with the opportunity to observe the rehearsals, Ellen Charendoff and Christine Schindler, for having facilitated my access to the Archives; Ruth Stevens, for having always found an affordable space for me to sleep on the lessons learned in Stratford; the cast and crew for not having objected to my presence, particularly the warm welcomes of Sean Arbuckle, Mark Christmann, Phillip Clarkson, Bona Duncan, Bruce Dow, Raquel Duffy, Jacob James, Jean Michel Le Gal, Richard Monette (in memoriam), Severn Thompson, and Scott Wentworth.

I am wholeheartedly grateful to my family and friends, who will add to their qualities the grace of their understanding concerning being anonymously mentioned here due to pragmatic reasons, for now and from now on.
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Introduction

Reaction, reactionary, or reactive are but interpretations of the structure of inheritance. [. . . T]he being of what we are is first of all inheritance, whether we like or know it or not.¹

All art – even when it marks a point of rupture – always has some relation to tradition. Tradition involves the inheritance and modification of media, techniques, styles and motifs.²

Even past meanings, that is, those born in the dialogue of past centuries, can never be stable (finalized, ended once and for all) – they will always change (be renewed) in the process of subsequent, future development of the dialogue [. . . ] Nothing is absolutely dead: every meaning will have its homecoming festival.³

Historicism versus Modernism

This dissertation critiques four 2007 productions of Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice: Darko Tresnjak’s with the Theater for a New Audience (New York); Rebecca Gatward’s at Shakespeare’s Globe (London, U.K.), Richard Rose’s with the Stratford Festival of Canada (Stratford, Ontario), and the radical adaptation by Julia Pascal with the Pascal Theatre Company (London, U.K). I have selected these productions for two reasons. First, they all used more or less stable versions of the original playtext in
English, second, they all ostensibly sought public visibility: all productions framed the theatrical experience similarly; they deployed the same mechanisms of promotion and publicity (advertisements in newspapers and magazines, posters, pamphlets, permanent websites); they made evident use of “symbolic capital,” which Pierre Bourdieu defines as “prestige, reputation, fame, etc. [ . . . ] known or recognised as self-evident;” and they clearly used Shakespeare’s and Merchant’s cultural capital to authorize themselves.

In reviewing stagings of Merchant, I had to grapple with a heated debate implicit in the question *What is the criterion for a compelling production of Merchant today?* This question is particularly contentious because the appreciation of Shakespearean stagings presupposes one’s positioning with respect to the relationship between a given playtext and its performance. Thus, speculation about how the present can make sense of the past and generate compelling productions that communicate pressing issues seems necessary. Accordingly, by way of introduction, I will tackle this question and lay the groundwork for my theoretical approach and its implications.

The relationship between Shakespearean playtexts and their stagings lacks a theory that can explain how the four-century-old residues of early modern theatrical practices can be compellingly staged today. Because this relationship involves old cultural artefacts and a contemporary perspective on them, it is reasonable to consider the effective role that inheritance has in it. Nonetheless, the function of inheritance in this interplay has been under attack because, as W. B. Worthen explains, “[t]he relationship between texts, textuality, and performance is deeply inflected by authority – not so much professional authority, but the stabilizing, hegemonic functioning of the Author in modern cultural production.”

5
Accordingly, my thesis exposes the reality that theatre practitioners may indeed use the authority of “Shakespeare” to reinforce conservative values, especially while promoting themselves. Three of the four companies that I have examined betrayed instances of what Eric Hobsbawn calls “invented tradition,” that is, “a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past.” Correspondingly, the instances of “invented tradition” observed in this study were concessions to, or explorations of, the audience’s general belief that “classical theatre” has a model form to be followed. However, the three companies that resorted to “invented tradition” also offered challenging and creative engagements with the pull of the past, demonstrating that drawing on inheritance does not necessarily mean a politically regressive or aesthetically sterile proposition. Hence, the view that concern with the past consists of a homogeneously negative phenomenon is insufficient as a theoretical underpinning.

Unsurprisingly, the emphasis on historicism’s function in the staging of Shakespearean plays has also enjoyed support. Thus in the broadest sense, the question of how much emphasis should be given to the engagements with the past and the present establishes a clear-cut spectrum of perspectives grounded on disjunctive logic. This dispute presents a puzzle to the researcher who distinguishes sound arguments on both sides. For this reason, the strengths and shortcomings of this debate must be identified.

The debate surrounding the relationship between playtexts and their stagings readily divides “the ‘historians’ [from] the ‘modernists,’” as Alan C. Dessen phrases it. Classifying himself as a “historian,” Dessen defends “the assets in recovering the original
‘logic’ of presentation.” He persuasively argues that often Shakespearean productions that market themselves as being concerned with the “original practices” merely focus on their most obvious historical aspects and miss important images and linkages that were foregrounded to the original audiences. Nonetheless, the inadequacy of Dessen’s rationale is in regarding the past as a fixed parameter: “Can a sense of OP [original practices] that extends beyond period costume and music expand rather than constrict our approach to the surviving playscripts? Whose plays are they, anyhow?” The argument that the plays belong to the early moderns and thus should be re-enacted accordingly fails to take into account that there will always be some aspects of a playtext that are overshadowed by other aspects in the process of staging. This is an inevitable result of the procedures of selecting, editing, and foregrounding involved in mounting an old script.

While Shakespeare’s playtexts were created out of, and for, the culture of the English Renaissance, in being reenacted today, they require a “logic of presentation” that may substantially diverge from the original one in that their current materializations must correspond to the historical context that shapes their reception. This correspondence is imperative because making sense of “the original logic of presentation” of an old script does not exempt contemporary theatre practitioners from the task of producing presence. Because the production of presence requires a positioning in relation to active history, the staging of a given old playtext hinges on developing its content in relation to the present demands of the theatrical medium. Reenacting a Shakespearean playtext with modern staging conventions, such as entrances and exits through the auditorium, may even underscore linkages and images that were obvious to the early modern audiences.
Historicism’s function is not to materially recover “the original logic of presentation” of the old playtexts, but to shed light on the past in order that it may interact with the present. Theatricality as recovery of a form that does not exist anymore is a chimerical endeavour.

Another “historicist,” J. L. Styan, argues in favour of productions that can be “Platonically true to the original idea,” a phrase that definitely does not contribute conciliatory approaches to the dualist argument because it may easily be understood as an endorsement of stasis and, therefore, as an unequivocal, totalizing mode of interpretation. Accordingly, Worthen claims that Styan’s “phrase is a revealing one, correlating three moments where an author-effect is produced in the author’s original intention, in a mode of stage production understood to recover that authority, and in the response of the audience, whose ‘experience’ of the stage reproduces that intention.” Worthen’s response to Styan’s argument attacks the postulate that the intentions of the author have bearings upon the playtext, its staging, and its reception. In reality, Styan’s formulation is subtler: it is about an intrinsic logic whereby stagings can productively feed off the playtext.

Nevertheless, the “modernists” are adamant that any validation of inheritance buttresses authority: Diana E. Henderson describes the pull of the past as “idolatry,” i. e., “the attitude toward Shakespeare as immanent location of what matters then or now;” Susan Bennett names it a “form of commodity fetishism, [which] is used to shore up and maintain the status quo;” and, regarding Shakespearean dramaturgy as drastically tendentious, Marjorie Garber stresses “the ideological danger of fetishizing Shakespeare.” According to Garber, Shakespearean plays, far from subverting the official
culture, actually substantiate it: the entrenched concept of a putatively humanitarian
“Shakespeare” constitutes a perverse authentication of discriminatory practices
introjected by naïve individuals. Irrespective of their socio-political status, these
individuals assume that, in praising Shakespeare’s alleged humanness, they support
revolutionary values, while, in reality, they endorse the reactionary forces that the plays
seek to inculcate. Garber attacks the pull of the past by arguing that it is a surreptitious
perpetration of commodity fetishism:

> what makes Shakespeare fetishized and fetishizing, a scenario of desire
> that has to be repeated with exactitude for every generation, is the way in
> which he has come to stand for a kind of “humanness” that, purporting to
> be inclusive of race, class, and gender is in fact the neutralizing (or
> neutering) of those potent discourses by appropriation and by a
> metaphysical move to the figure.\(^\text{13}\)

To Garber, the fetishization of “Shakespeare” translates into an incongruously obsessive
desire to surrender to an enticing power that deprives individuals from the ability to see
their own racialization, their own economic exploitation, and their own conformism to
stereotypical gender roles – values that inhere in Shakespearean playtexts, according to
her. From this perspective, the fixation on “Shakespeare” is deviant behaviour that must
be brought to consciousness so that bardolaters can salvage themselves from a harmful
dogma that perpetuates oppression by means of fantasy – an approach which implies that
only an overwhelmingly critical engagement with the present can overcome the
alienation for which “Shakespeare” may be responsible.
Garber’s substantialist reading of “Shakespeare” aside, it follows that this critique betrays normative anxieties. Irrespective of the inherent impact of Shakespearean scripts on both spectators and readers, it should be conceded that there is a difference between a merely passionate reader or enthusiastic playgoer, on the one hand, and a compulsive worshipper deprived of critical perspective on the other. This abyssal difference – like the dissimilarity between an artist’s keen follower and a stalker – leads us to reason that fixation *per se* should not be reputed to be unconstructive, dangerous, or self-enslaving. After all, what is in question when viewers praise a Shakespearean staging, or when readers admire a Shakespearean playtext, is the exuberant theatrical culture that was created out of an authoritarian society. Shakespearean dramaturgy does not constitute an overcrowded field because it is univocally identified as a lasting and cunning strategy of political domination, but rather because of formal properties that have largely influenced the world’s cultural production.

**Deconstruction**

The impulse to take sides within the discussion about the importance of the concerns with the present and the past is prompted by the dualistic perspective that the pulls of the past and the present are mutually exclusive. This rationale discounts the notion that culture is transmitted in the flow of everyday life, dialectically conjoining polarities – in accordance with the most important tenet of Deconstruction as formulated by Jacques Derrida, the philosophical movement’s acknowledged father. In a letter to a translator of his work, Derrida said that “Deconstruction” should not be translated as
“destruction [because it] too obviously implied an annihilation.” In the same text, he establishes a difference between his concept and its appropriation by Poststructuralism: the motif of deconstruction has been associated with “poststructuralism” (a word unknown in France until its “return” from the States). But the undoing, decomposing, and desedimenting of structures, in a certain sense more historical than the structuralist movement it called into question, was not a negative operation or a negative reduction much closer perhaps to Nietzschean “demolition” than to the Heideggerian interpretation or to the type of reading that I proposed. Rather than destroying, it was also necessary to understand how an “ensemble” was constituted and to reconstruct it to this end. However, the negative appearance was and remains much more difficult to efface than is suggested by the grammar of the word (de-), even though it can designate a genealogical restoration [remonter] rather than a demolition.14

Stressing that Deconstruction does not mean “destruction,” I will be applying Derrida’s concept in a critical examination of generally accepted ideas. Thus, in this dissertation, Derrida’s concept stands for a tenet whereby an object of study is analyzed so that it can be synthesized again in its integrity. The resulting integrity must not be confused with a naïve objectivist view. On the contrary, this method is important because – in casting doubt on our ability to apprehend the totality of a text, or of reality for that matter – it enables us to avoid dogmatisms, which often lead to cynical relativism. The “genealogical restoration” of Shakespearean playtexts therefore, in contradistinction to an archeological restoration, is a process through which we should access the playtexts as
cultural sources. Even if this view might sound equally objectivist and dogmatic, it differs significantly from objectivism and dogmatism in that it recognizes itself as historically situated and therefore as conscious of the inaccessible dimension of the past.

In the light of Deconstruction, the association of heritage with a monological transmission of culture that forecloses social change, and therefore must be debarred regardless of what it hands down to us, has been a pervasive construct of our time. This construct has neglected the fact that “[i]nheritence is never a given,” as Derrida’s more nuanced view suggests, “but is always a task.” This task consists of the responsibility to discern the difference between the generative underlying sense of the past and its sheer mummification. Finding inspiration in Hamlet, Derrida describes the importance of welcoming the spectral presence of the past: “it is necessary to speak of the ghost, indeed to the ghost and with it, from the moment that no ethics, no politics, whether revolutionary or not, seems possible and thinkable and just that does not recognize in its principle the respect for those others who are no longer.”15 From a deconstructive perspective, no fair project is viable without the acknowledgement of tradition because, in terms of shaping the present, the past is as important as the future: the accountability for both honour and injustice perpetrated by the past is a fundamental driving force. Unwillingness to identify what is not dead in inheritance – under the justification that “Shakespeare” per se is an instrument whereby hegemonic power deceives those it keeps in tutelage for its exclusive benefit – is not a deconstructive position. Whether a production sets out either naïvely to reconstitute the past or disdainfully to destroy it, inheritance is structurally intrinsic to the staging of a Shakespearean playtext. For this
reason, in order for inheritance to generate compelling stagings, it must be acknowledged not as an opposite to the pull of the present but as its counterpoise.

It can be argued that the failure of “modernists” to recognize the importance of the pull of the past derives from the overwhelming visibility of the pull of the present: the deployment of current acting styles, technologies, and modes of signifying old signifiers makes the pull of the present more perceptible than its complement. The conspicuous visibility of the pull of the present has prompted Worthen’s seminal formulation about the determinedness of performance in a Shakespearean staging: the “force in theatrical performance [. . . ] is the interface of the ‘performative,’ the terrain between language and its enactment.”

Aligned with the deconstructive project, Worthen’s reflection that the performance owes its own “force” to the interaction between the script and its staging is one of the cogent arguments foregrounding the importance of a theatrical event’s engagement with the present. If the elements of the production of an old playtext, particularly the actors’ presence, were not paramount to the achievement of Shakespearean productions, there would be no need either for talented professionals who give substance to the performances or for creative ideas that congeal into the stagings.

Also on the grounds of Deconstruction, in emphasizing the sterility of a totalizing gaze of the past, Worthen argues that any attempt to reenact the original practices is utopian and cannot recuperate their meaning. This argument is equally consistent with the deconstructive project because, although historical documents support speculations about early modern theatrical practices, they cannot but give us glimpses of the meanings the original practices could have had for their audiences. Nevertheless, Worthen’s rationale fails to take into consideration the importance of inheritance in “the force of
performance.” Worthen claims that, “[w]hether it is possible to recapture early modern subjects in contemporary performance seems to me at best an open question; however, to do so will require us to imagine a more interactive relationship between the history latent in writing and the theatre’s way of producing the effect of the past in the present of performance.”17 The problem with this assumption is the presupposition that the playtext does not contain instructions about its staging. This rationale, while justifiably implying an objection to the normativity that may derive from the authority of the text, betrays another kind of normativity whereby it is held that the relationship between the playtext and its staging should be free from any transcendental idea of the playtext – as though a given playtext had no formal consistency, that is, expressive properties that distinguish it from other playtexts.

Worthen’s argument raises the question whether it is possible to do away with “[a] transcendental reading.” According to Derrida, the answer is negative: “no text resists it completely. Absolute resistance to such a reading would purely and simply destroy the trace of the text.”18 Thus, according to Deconstruction, it is possible to recapture subject matters (“the trace of the text”) from the past – as long as we do not substantialize them, but view them as dynamic entities in permanent adjustment to time and space. For instance, patriarchal power, ubiquitously present and challenged in Merchant, is often perceived as a culturally specific, an idiosyncratic, or a vanishing practice in the West nowadays; hence, it impossible for a contemporary production to recover in exactitude the effect that the performance of Jessica’s effrontery had on the original audiences. However, in the twenty-first century, playgoers can still empathize with resistance to patriarchal power. For example, if we focus on how patriarchal
oppression is experienced by Jessica as regards the choice of her husband, we can see that this phenomenon still has resonances in the West today, albeit in a much subtler mode. Western parents still have a say (or think they do) in their children’s choices, and this is particularly true in terms of the rapports between fathers and daughters; and even if we could no longer detect traces of patriarchal oppression anywhere, we would still have the capacity to identify with the representation of the conflict by analogy: we can relate to it by amplifying how we live any kind of power relation. If these valences were not possible, a great deal of cultural references of the past, such as the representation of states of affairs whose historical context is patently dated, would mean nothing to us today.¹⁹

**The transhistorical dimension**

In the light of Deconstruction, a more interactive relationship between a Shakespearean playtext and its staging is the transhistorical dimension. In order to formulate this theoretical approach to the stagings of old scripts, I draw upon Paul Crowther, who maintains that artworks embody two historical categories: “synchronic positioning,” which regards “features [that artworks share] in common with other forms of contemporary cultural production;” and “diachronic positioning,” which refers to “styles, values, and sources [that artworks derive] from preceding history.”²⁰ In the same way that themes are reworked in painting, sculpture, and other new media, compelling stagings of Shakespearean scripts shift the focus away from what is no longer communicative towards the pull of the present. The transhistorical dimension is generated through an evenhanded deployment of both the pulls of the past and the present – the
terms I will henceforth employ to designate Crowther’s denser concepts of “diachronic positioning” and “synchronic positioning.”

While we cannot arithmetically quantify the qualifier “evenhanded,” we can identify a balanced engagement with pastness and contemporaneity because the transhistorical, as a conduit of what remains alive in the playtext, is carried in the flow of eloquent stagings of Shakespearean playtexts throughout their performance history in ever-changing recreations: resourceful reassertions in which the productions purge themselves of inertial repetition, which cannot make any contribution either to the play’s performance history or to the scope of the medium. In this light, the performance history of a play resembles the constant reconfiguration of themes in the visual arts in that, as Crowther asserts,

In making a specific kind of artifact, an artist draws on a relevant framework of conventions and techniques which govern work in that medium or those media. The artist’s work is defined in relation to this horizon of tradition. His or her other work can simply exist within it – as an element in the continuity of tradition or nothing more. However, if a work’s style perceptibly differs – if it refines, extends, or innovates in relation to a tradition – then the work changes how we see both past traditions, and its scope for the future.²¹

The transhistorical dimension draws upon tradition and simultaneously renews it, dialectically influencing the future of the medium, which changes its course accordingly. The predicament of the approach that conflates Deconstruction and the transhistorical, and thereby distinguishes “skepticism” from “cynicism.” is to determine where a play’s
horizon of expectations lies, and this is a particularly crucial undertaking with respect to a controversial text such as *Merchant*, which, precisely because it continues to arouse so much controversy as time goes by, seems to be manifestly self-deconstructive and extraordinarily open-ended. In order to support this statement, I must analytically engage with the pull of the past and examine how Shakespeare dealt with the form of his own creations, which were themselves reworkings of old forms redefined in the early modern period. This procedure is meant to determine whether Shakespearean plays are more open-ended than other dramatic works given that this argument is also controversial.

*The Merchant of Venice’s genre*

Considering that contemporary scholarship has acknowledged open-endedness as a noteworthy expressive property of Shakespearean plays, it is appropriate to assert that *Merchant*’s horizon of expectations lies in its enigmatic multiplicity of interpretive gateways. Correspondingly, Oliver Lubrich credibly argues that *The Merchant of Venice* is perhaps the most drastic example of Shakespearean polysemy (at least from a political point of view). Shylock's double legibility is extreme. It appears therein neither coincidental nor chaotic, but purposeful as a structure and meaningful as a composition. The double coding of the text follows a precise dramaturgy. The drama plays virtuously with its audience or rather audiences. It systematically steers its reception. The text directs readers and spectators between opposite statements; it is manipulated back and forth between
opposing statements, it manipulates them back and forth between interpretative potentials moving in opposite directions.\textsuperscript{23}

*Merchant* seems to be structurally designed to put convictions about its narrative into question; it appears reasonable to affirm that the play may manipulate the audience towards a state of bafflement whereby its fictive world is as inapprehensible as it is inadequate.

In addition to *Merchant*’s intricate net of signifiers that resists reduction to univocality, multidimensionality is notoriously constitutive of the play on account of its generic conventions. As a genre, *Merchant* has been classified as a “problem play” and a “dark comedy” exactly because of its alternate use of dramaturgic conventions that imply different prevailing modes. These prevailing modes change from scene to scene; there are nonetheless markers of potential comic relief in scenes of prevailing gravity (e.g., Shylock’s use of puns and repartee) as well as poignancy in comic scenes (e.g., wooers’ reading of the scrolls’ core lines), and romance’s trajectory towards wish fulfillment is typically unaccomplished (e.g., Lorenzo and Jessica’s most intimate interlude is harshly interrupted). Hence, it seems more appropriate to classify the play as a “romantic tragicomedy” in that it conflates the three major traditional genres upon which it draws, and which it counteracts exactly because of their conjunction. Nonetheless, this assertion needs further explanation because the conflation of genres is recurrent in Shakespearean dramaturgy.

R. W. Maslen’s statement that Shakespearean comedy “harbours the potential to change its genre at a moment’s notice”\textsuperscript{24} is also true about tragedy. For this reason, it is fair to state that, in general, the horizon of expectations of a Shakespearean play lies in its
particular set of prevailing modes, in contradistinction to one single prevailing mode: the
comic, the tragic, and the romantic, constantly overlap, blurring and subverting their
limits. *Merchant* appears to be a particular case of semiotic short-circuits. For example,
*Merchant’s* “happy ending” is a striking case in point. While the play has a putatively
positive outcome, which enables it to fit the generic demands of a comedy, the conclusive
scene is problematic and does not easily yield to a well-defined prevailing mode. For this
reason, it is embarrassingly difficult to accept C. L. Barber’s comment that, “no other
final scene is so completely without irony about the joys it celebrates.”

*Merchant’s* irony and dialogism (pillars of Deconstruction that had been around long before
Shakespeare – since the Socratic dialogues ) seem to remind us of the fact that mimetic
art, despite mirroring reality, is necessarily different from it. *Merchant’s* “happy ending”
is an unconvincing resolution to the play’s conflicts from every angle: Antonio’s
unexplained inadequacy throughout the play; Shylock’s exclusion from the final act,
notwithstanding his official inclusion in the community; and the questionably easy
artificiality with which Portia resolves the pending problems. These three outcomes
suggest incompleteness.

Antonio’s solitary fate in a plot where every major character marries appears to be
more than a loose end that Shakespeare did not manage to tie up. Moreover, Antonio’s
isolation in the end is parallel to Shylock’s destiny. As for this parallelism, Janet
Adelman posits a pertinent question: “what if the wealth that runs in Antonio’s veins is
no different from the Jew’s wealth?” Adelman’s reflection suggests an interesting
hermeneutic prospect because it resists closure, remaining instigatingly open:
This is the possibility [ . . . ] that the play comes dangerously close to exhibiting in 4.1. That scene famously worries the signs of difference between Christian and Jew: Portia’s opening question – ‘Which is the merchant here, and which is the Jew?’ – comes in response to the Duke’s asking her if she is ‘acquainted with the difference / That holds this present question in the court,’ (4.1.169.166-7) a formulation that exceeds its application to the legal dispute between Shylock and Antonio, turning the difference between them itself into the question in the court.26

What if Antonio’s and Shylock’s spirits share significant commonalities? After all, the arguably highest metaphysical topic of the play stipulates that what hinders the soul from hearing the celestial harmony is “this muddy vesture of decay [that] / Doth grossly close it in” (5.2.64-5).27 The poetic line delivered by Lorenzo suggests a metaphysical solution to all characters’ enslavement to their passions. Certainly, this is an all-encompassing statement concerning Shakespearean dramaturgy, with notorious echoes in Macbeth and Hamlet, and yet mediated by the unique circumstantialities that frame Antonio and Shylock’s unusually inhospitable interdependence, both making their livings off complementary businesses.

Focusing on the correspondence between the play’s main antagonists, Martin D. Yaffe argues that “Antonio and Shylock find themselves in similar dramatic situations. Each is at the outset of the play, on the point of suffering the forfeiture of a bond that is neither contractual nor political but (we may say) personal and familial. It is in either case a bond of love.”28 Thus, according to Yaffe, the parallel between Antonio’s and Shylock’s trajectories indicates that their main losses are affective. In the case of
Shylock, his emotional deprivations are explicit and result in a violation of his identity: the ring that connects him to Leah’s memory, his daughter and the continuity of a family lineage, his religion, probably his ties with the Jewish community, and even his profession because, as a new Christian, he will not be able to lend money at interest any longer. Shylock’s implicit career move also prompts the question: if Christians persist in converting Jewish moneylenders, from whom will they borrow money? Shakespeare, instead of giving Shylock a closure, is remarkably economical about what will happen to the character after the trial. Shylock’s fate is one of Merchant’s silences, a negative value, as precise and significant as a pause in a music composition. My use of a musical term here is deliberate in that music, a non-representational art form, clearly illustrates how dramaturgical conventions, once they are staged, also acquire meanings through the expression of silences, that is, gaps of information functioning as eloquent signifiers.

Another expressive silence pervades Antonio’s cognitive and emotional immobility; as the character himself suggests in the play’s first line, his sadness, albeit constitutive of his character, is never unveiled or resolved. Hence, can we state that Antonio has a convincing “happy ending?” With this question in mind, Portia’s last line – “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” (5.1.296-9) – sounds like an intimation that the reticent ending suppresses serious matters, which are to be discussed in private, as if the characters vehemently claimed an illusory afterlife away from the observation of the audience. Portia’s discourse suggests that her farcical behaviour, explicitly performed in court, far from being discontinued, has been intensified. As Alan Stewart convincingly suggests,
Perhaps critics are right to see something awry with Portia’s neat production of letters bringing the play to its conclusion. [...] If we are suspicious of the letter that guarantees Antonio his continued solvency, then we must also be suspicious of the letter that will tell the plot, sourced as it is from the phantom Bellario who provides the false credentials for Balthazar as a judge. Or perhaps we should treat Antonio’s final speech with more attention: ‘Sweet lady, you have given me life and living’ (5.1.286). In a play where giving never happens without the incurring of debt, what does Antonio now owe to Portia?²⁹

Stewart’s question also points towards open-endedness, in that it cannot be answered by the play, and yet is consistent with its ordering principles. It might be the case that, from now on, Antonio owes Portia his pound of flesh. The only certainty the text yields, however, is that the “happy ending,” which excludes Shylock, does not reward Antonio’s presence, except for the outstandingly unbelievable restoration of his livelihood, which, in the best circumstances, would allow him to live sadly ever after.

Anti-Semitism and carnivalization

*Merchant*’s “strangely joyless” finale, as Jeremy Lopez appropriately describes it, is “replete with the markers of triumphant comic resolution.” Nevertheless, Lopez also observes, “[T]hey are *merely* markers.”³⁰ Although Lopez’s observation shores up the specific argument of early modern plays’ potential for failure, I draw upon his study in order to illustrate how markers of what is often viewed as a network of opposed systems are but a set of superficial signifiers: usury versus charity, justice versus mercy, oath-
swearing versus untrustworthiness, and Judaism versus Christianity in *Merchant* are representations of systems that lack integrity. Here are a few events that demonstrate how fragile these markers are in relation to the systems they mark: in order to do his nominally Christian charity, Antonio resorts to usury; in order to debase Antonio, Shylock dispenses with usury; Portia requires mercy from Shylock, but she does not offer any in exchange when it is clearly her turn to do so; the use of words that rhyme with “lead” in the song that serves as moral support for Bassanio’s choice of the casket in 3.2 suggests that Portia might be breaking her promise to abide by her father’s will; Bassanio’s and Gratiano’s vows of fidelity to Portia and Nerissa are flagrantly broken; and Shylock’s acceptance of the court’s deal clearly shows that he breaks his “oath in heaven, [ . . . ] lay[ing] perjury upon [his] soul” (4.1.225-6).

The recurrent flawed semiotic representation of the systems that move the play forward brings us to a crucial debate regarding *Merchant* nowadays: *Does the play take an anti-Semitic stance?* This discussion is essential for my study because assumptions that *Merchant* originally staged an anti-Semitic representation of Jews may fashion the horizon of expectations of viewers nowadays. For example, many reviewers take for granted that *Merchant* is an anti-Semitic libel. Although the phrase “anti-Semitism” may, at times, be interchangeable with the portrayal of ethnic or religious intolerance of Jews, it is necessary to problematize the anachronism of the term “anti-Semitism” applied to the early modern societies. It is also important to recognize the extent to which *Merchant’s* anti-Semitism is a construct because this topic has bearings on the play’s transhistorical dimension.
The application of the concept “anti-Semitism” to the early modern period is anachronistic. This assertion does not discount the intersection between the intolerance that early modern Christian Europeans harboured with respect to Jews and the antagonism known as anti-Semitism, which was manufactured by a European intelligentsia in the nineteenth century. I draw upon Hanna Arendt to affirm that the continuity between religious Jewish hatred and anti-Semitism is deceitful because it attenuates an incomparable phenomenon. According to Arendt, the fallacious idea of continuity between Jewish hatred and anti-Semitism perniciously masks a Machiavellian scheme that entrapped European Jewry: the very assimilation of aliens as citizens who had financed the development of the nation-state was the decisive step in converting them into the social scapegoats of a body politic that had never been very promising and was disintegrating. Thus, as Arendt states, “[B]y attacking the Jews, who were believed to be the secret power behind governments, they [anti-Semites] could openly attack the state itself.” Anti-Semitism is a nineteenth-century opportunist racialization of Jews, orchestrated with precise political goals: the creation of exceptionally convenient social scapegoats with the appropriation of their estates. In making this point, I do not at all propose an unfeasible totalizing schema of the perception of race for early modern Europe. I indicate how particular discriminations exist in their own contexts.

By the time Shakespeare wrote *Merchant*, Jews had intermarried with gentiles to the point of being frequently indistinguishable from the continent’s original inhabitants. As Alan F. Corcus concludes, “the conditions for the formation of a distinct race never arose.” In addition, on account of proselytism, long before antagonistic feelings towards Judaism started spreading with the Crusades, there were a large number of Jews who
were not even Semite descendants. It is virtually impossible to determine what physiognomic aspects Elizabethans had in mind when they imagined Jews, who, estimated as a couple of hundreds in London, might never be seen by most people. It is sensible, however, to state that the reasons for intolerance were not repugnance to a biological category such as “Jewish race” – a concept engineered by a political initiative three and a half centuries later. Moreover, the early modern European inconsistency in defining Jewish physiognomy suggests that Jews were genetically heterogeneous; it also implies that the *portmanteau* term “race” was even more imprecise as regards the variety of European complexions than it is nowadays, when, for example, a Southern European such as myself, with the olive skin inherited from ancient Middle Easterners and the lineaments characteristic of Caucasians, may be difficult to classify even in a time of elaborate racial categorizations.

Forms of ethnocentrism have always existed. Before the eighteenth century, however, the justifications for defining the Self in opposition to the Other were either religious or cultural. The concept of “race” marks a new epistemology in terms of hegemonic claims. What distinguishes “racism” from preceding manifestations of ethnic intolerance is the rationalization of self-importance by an ethnic group through “the concept of race,” which, according to Bruce Baum, “provided a means for eighteenth-century European and Anglo-American elites to reconcile emerging egalitarian ideals with the new and pervasive sources of inequality and social instability.” This statement is obviously an extremely succinct account of a complex topic. Nevertheless, it provides evidence that the assumption that *Merchant* takes an anti-Semitic stance is, to say the very least, highly debatable.
The debate surrounding Merchant’s alleged anti-Semitic stance has been particularly relevant for post-Holocaust audiences because the play was indeed manipulated as an anti-Semitic cultural icon by Nazi propaganda. As a case in point, Werner Krauss’ performance in Lothar Müthel’s 1943 production for Vienna’s Burgtheater, as Andrew G. Bonnell tells us, “had been announced as ‘a complete break with the representation of Shylock for 50 years’, indeed correcting the interpretations since Novelli that had suggested that Shakespeare had intended ‘a psychological or even sentimentalized representation of Jewishness.’” We cannot assert that these manifestly biased theatre practitioners were conscious of inventing the “correct” mode of Shylock’s “oversized comic presentation of loathsomeness.” Nonetheless, as this account suggests, the Nazis, who ultimately staged reality itself as it had never been done previously, made Merchant’s malleability fit their aims. Nazi stagings were totalizing and therefore cynical. For this reason, historical factuality obliquely supports the claim that the play takes an anti-Semitic stance.

Beyond academia, this perspective has had a particular influence on the delineation of Merchant’s horizon of expectations because it is particularly usual among viewers acquainted with a kind of popular Shakespearean scholarship; this source of commonly held beliefs about Shakespeare may be emblematized by Harold Bloom’s best seller, translated into numerous languages, Shakespeare: the Invention of the Human, in which he claims that Merchant is “a profoundly anti-Semitic work” and that “we tend to make [it] incoherent by portraying Shylock as being largely sympathetic.”

What Bloom describes as incoherently compassionate may be viewed as potentially dangerous from a perspective inspired by New Historicism. Despite his failure
to recognize formal consistency in early modern characterization, Peter J. Smith claims that *Merchant* “is careful to manoeuvre its audience into a position of complicity with normative Christian value.” From Smith’s perspective, Shylock’s open-endedness serves the play’s framework, designed to undermine the public’s sympathy for the Jew. According to this view, the original audiences could easily identify Shylock as “a Jewish Machiavel” because of the staging conventions deployed by the original players, who purportedly were not concerned with “interiorization.” In addition, Smith claims that Shylock is effective for conveying malevolent ideologies if one is interested to do so, and that naturalistic staging after the Holocaust exacerbates a problem that is always potential with *Merchant*. Thus, this reasoning implies that the horizon of expectations of *Merchant* regarding Shylock’s iniquity is potentialized by a realistic style of acting, which perpetuates anti-Semitism as a form of legitimate social behaviour through the staging of Shylock as a believable human being: “The illusionisation of Shakespearean theatre with its humanisation of stereotype may be finally responsible, not only for a misreading of renaissance drama, but for the implicit communication of a malevolent ideology.”

The thesis that *Merchant* propagates a malevolent ideology, which can be insidiously communicated by realism, the prevailing mainstream performative idiom of our time, sounds contradictory. If we accept that *Merchant* is designed to manipulate the audience to sympathize with Christians and condemn Shylock by means of its structural mechanisms, then we must also accept that the play foregrounds an opposition of subjectivities. These subjectivities are constituted by representational conventions that can only become communicable onstage through the embodied performance of actors, who ultimately give substance to characters. That characters have contradictions does not
prevent the audience from perceiving them as depictions of human beings, regardless of
the acting styles. Moreover, if one admits that structure is a valid analytical category, one
should consequently admit structure’s formal consistency; it follows that characterization,
as an analytical category interdependent with structure, should also be regarded as a
germane parameter of textual analysis. Theatre is action in time and space. For this
reason, no dramaturgical structure can dispense with actions carried out by characters –
even the most abstract of Samuel Beckett’s solos of dismembered body parts. The formal
consistency of character does not depend on interiorization and can be achieved even by
skilfully manipulated puppets.

This view of early modern characterization is positivistic in its evolutive concept
of history, which implies that the original practices could not have developed their own
version of expression for psychological identity. Furthermore, this reasoning is at odds
with the traditions upon which Shakespeare drew: whether or not Merchant indeed
harbours a tragedy within a comedy, it still has romantic overtones. As Helen Cooper
asserts, “romances are rarely interested in defining their precise metaphysical or
theological status except in terms of what they are not: it is frequently insisted that they
are not diabolic.”39 The fact that Shakespeare was his own deconstructivist, instead of
invalidating romance’s impartiality, authenticates this impartiality even if it harbours a
political agenda, as I will demonstrate later in this dissertation.

The view that Merchant contains an anti-Semitic ideology is countered by current
scholarship with a variety of compelling arguments. As a case in point, Steven Marx
observes that “though Jew-baiting rivalled bear-baiting as a form of entertainment in the
Bankside where stage Jews were held up to opprobrium and ridicule, the presence of
Shakespeare’s Shylock did as much to tarnish as to burnish the image of the Christian he was meant to foil. Marx’s observation reveals how Merchant subverts the “official culture,” not by victimizing the Other, but by exposing the indignity of the Self. Because Antonio is not treated as a stereotype either, Merchant’s critique of the Self is subtle. Marx’s view corroborates my thesis in that Merchant’s potential critique is not assertive, but suggestive, like every other aspect of the playtext.

More optimistically, Yaffe argues that Shakespeare wrote Merchant drawing upon the idea espoused by Baruch Spinoza and Francis Bacon that the state should take responsibility for fostering religious freedom. According to Yaffe’s examination, Merchant contains an understated anti-discriminatory plea for political tolerance of religious minorities living in absolutist England. Irrespective of the lack of historical supportability of this thesis, Yaffe’s view is fundamental to this dissertation because it adds important insights to a dialogical reading of Merchant. Correspondingly, Yaffe recognizes that Shylock is not a credible representation of Jewishness: “Shakespeare qualifies Venice’s harsh judgment against Shylock by indicating how Shylock might have avoided his legal catastrophe simply by sticking to the moral teachings of his own religion – its dietary laws.”

From this standpoint, Shylock is a tragic character because he neglects the most fundamental Jewish principles. While he persistently clings to Judaism as an institutional background that defines him as being distinct from Christians, he brings his own destruction upon himself by acting like the Christians. For this reason, Yaffe argues that Shylock could be viewed as “a helpful guide to the self-understanding of the modern
Once more, a marker (Judaism) is identified as an empty signifier with intricate consequences: the tragedy of voluntary cultural uprooting of the Other.

Differing from my view that Shylock is a unique tragic character in Shakespeare’s body of work, Jay L. Halio sees Shylock as a comic character. Nonetheless, Halio’s view of Merchant indirectly corroborates my perspective of the play’s open-endedness for two reasons: in agreement with Yaffe’s thesis, it posits that “many in Shakespeare’s audience would have been well aware of scriptural as well as legal injunctions against personal vengeance”; and also in conformity with Yaffe’s study, Halio’s essay states that “[i]n creating Shylock, Shakespeare was not creating a typical Jew, one designed to be representative of his race or religion, as has sometimes been represented, most notoriously in Germany under Hitler.” Hence, although Halio argues that Merchant is a “full comedy,” he does not regard it as anti-Semitic: he views Shylock as a deliberate depiction of a Jew who does not represent Jewishness in a play that does not claim to be serious about anything in any case. Halio’s interpretation also foregrounds Merchant’s open-endedness in reminding us that a play is only a play, especially a play written to be staged for paying playgoers who craved for entertainment and would intensely manifest disapproval if they were bored. Nonetheless, considering Halio’s perspective, there still seems to be an ingeniously transgressive agenda underneath the surface of Merchant’s interplay between laughter and religion, license and power.

The conflation of the comic and the spiritual in the West is rooted in pre-Christian Greece. As Anthony Gash points out, Erasmus Desiderius “synthesized the Socrates of the Phaedrus who affirms ‘the superiority of heaven-sent madness over man-made sanity’ with St Paul’s numerous references to the ‘foolishness’ and ‘madness’ of Christianity.”
In deconstructing institutional religiosity to the point of denouncing its hypocrisy – with respect to both Christianity and Judaism – *Merchant* actually engages with a subversive tradition that was almost two millennia old in the West when Shakespeare wrote it. From this vantage point, it is possible to understand what Maslen means by his bombastic statement: “Shakespeare’s Venice is a society founded on comedy. Its religion, even, is comic, since it involves the invention by God’s son of an ingenious way to circumvent the severe judicial system propounded in the Old Testament, by substituting himself for sinning humanity in a kind of stupendous practical joke.”^45 However Shakespeare was aware of Erasmus’ work, he was also acquainted with the work of Erasmus’ friend, François Rabelais, whose intertextuality with Shakespeare became a particular object of study when the West discovered Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of carnivalization. In individualizing and locating the emergence of another tradition appropriated by Shakespeare in Bakhtin’s theory of carnivalization, I am not applying this theory to delineate where the horizon of expectations of *Merchant* lies; instead, I am demonstrating that it is Shakespeare’s body of work which is contiguous with the cultural source that inspired Bakhtin’s criticism. Bakhtin, who considered “carnivalization” a form of “artistic thought,” formulated the concept as a “tension between laughter and unofficial seriousness.”^46 “Unofficial seriousness,” in Bakhtinian terms, is a form of the tragic principle developed in the Christian era: “It is the greatest and best-founded claim there can be to eternity and the indestructibility of everything which has once existed (the refusal to accept becoming).”^47 “Unofficial seriousness” is therefore a deliberately internalized mode of conservatism.
In measuring *Merchant* against carnivalization in a Bakhtinian fashion, I do not speak “of the influence of individual themes, ideas, or images, but rather of the deeper influence of *a carnival sense of the world itself.*”\(^{48}\) The relationship between carnivalization and *Merchant* is incongruous with a view of the play as a “full comedy,” a point that I will address in detail in Chapter Two. Moreover, that *Merchant* harbours ideological, or (more correctly) counter-ideological convictions, as suggested before, does not mean that the play is didactic. In exploring “a carnival sense of the world,” Shakespeare created a subversive system of signs protected by the ambiguous signs of fantasy. Through these lenses, it is possible to understand *Merchant*’s confluence of neutrality and transgression, as well as its resistance to univocal readings. *Merchant*’s horizon of expectations lies in readings that, as Rabkin summarizes them, “acknowledge the deep polarities in the comedy while resisting the temptation to see them as conclusively resolved in favour of one character or group of characters, or to see them defined in terms of one issue.”\(^{49}\) Thus, Bakhtin’s concept of carnival is vital to approach the relationship between *Merchant* and its stagings because it can help explain a play that resists reductions to monologism, as its performance history attests.

**A succinct performance history of *Merchant***

Information about *Merchant*’s performance history in the early modern period is scarce: it was probably first enacted with the Lord Chamberlain’s Men in 1596; it was certainly staged twice in 1605 with the King’s Men for James II. History is unclear as to why the king required the play to be staged again: he might have either enjoyed it very much or missed a good part while dozing off during his first reception. There is no record
that *Merchant* was ever mounted again in the seventeenth century. As for the implications of the variations in the play’s title on its staging, Charles Edelman asserts that

it is very possible that our play was not originally known as *The Merchant of Venice*: on 22 July 1598, perhaps a year or two after the first performance, ‘a booke of the Merchaunt of Venyce otherwise called the Jewe of Venyce’ was entered for printing at the London Stationers’ Register. This is both revealing and reassuring, since *The Jew of Venice* is a more appropriate title – when printed in 1600, *The Merchant of Venice* may have been preferred only to avoid confusion with Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta.*

Edelman’s speculation suggests that Shylock may have been *Merchant*’s starring role since the Elizabethan period. Whether or not this hypothesis is historically accurate, the play’s performance history is radically inseparable from Shylock’s history onstage. In addition to the fact that the trajectories of stars are well documented, leading actors in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, often doubling as managers of companies or theatres, could reenact the same roles in repertory for decades, playing against performers who were variables in a system where stars were constants. Correspondingly, Shylock has been *Merchant*’s most coveted role, as it provides actors with more dramatic possibilities than any other roles in the play. Tradition suggests that, if a staging does not have a remarkable Shylock, it does not hit the mark. Although this assumption proves to be true, we must cast doubt on what is known to be traditional as regards *Merchant*.

A scholarly case of “invented tradition” still has bearings on how readers and playgoers imagine Shylock’s original characterization. In 1846, supported by fraudulent
evidence, John Payne Collier wrote in his edition of Shakespearean works that “[w]e learn from the following lines, in the ‘Funeral Elegy’ upon Richard Burbadge, that Shylock had been one of his famous characters, and it proves besides, as indeed Jordan intimates, that the part was always acted in a red beard. ‘Heart-broke Philaster, and Amintas too / Are lost forever; with the red hair’d Jew [. . .].’” This forgery, inspired by a staging convention of the mystery plays whereby Judas Iscarioti and Satan were represented as redheads, demonized Shylock by obliquely ascribing to the character Caucasians’ most recessive somatic feature. Ironically, this physical trait became moderately recurrent after William Poel cast Shylock wearing a red wig for the first time in 1898. We can, hence, conclude that, unless further documentation is found, whatever one states about the specificities of Merchant’s original performances is speculative. Considering that the earliest records available are from the eighteenth century, this is the beginning of Merchant’s performance historiography.

Following a void of 136 years, the first extant historical accounts report that a production which premiered in 1741 at the Drury Lane portrayed Shylock as a tragically irate character. Starring Charles Macklin, the theatre’s manager, this staging consisted of an unusual paradigm shift: it discontinued the tradition of Merchant as a “full comedy” established by another play, George Granville’s adaptation The Jew of Venice, which had completely replaced Shakespeare’s original script onstage since 1701. That Kitty Clive played Portia as a farcical character while Macklin retained the audience’s sympathy by deploying a more natural performative idiom suggests that this production’s staging conventions congealed into a tragicomedy without the unrelated musical interpolations that had characterized Shakespearean productions since the Reformation and would still
linger on for decades. Macklin, a tempestuous man who had killed an actor, made his personality fit the character – a procedure that shares significant commonalities with contemporary codes of acting whereby performers lend their affective memories to the characters they portray. Thus, although his depiction of Shylock is often defined as aggressive and unsympathetic, his charisma as the Jewish moneylender should also be attributed to the range of emotions (consistent with Merchant’s open-endedness) with which he endowed the character, as I will discuss from a comparative perspective in Chapter One. Having played Merchant in repertory for almost fifty years, Macklin set the standards of a portentously bloodthirsty Shylock during a period in which Shakespeare’s canonization started to develop.

Echoes of Macklin’s success were heard in continental Europe: in 1777, Merchant made its way into the Hamburg National Theatre, with its manager Friedrich Ludwig Schröder starring as a tragic Shylock. Using a translation by Christoph Martin Wieland, Schröder did away with nearly all of the fifth act – a choice which suggests that this version was particularly focused on Shylock’s plot. In the 1780s, August Wilhelm Iffland, the manager of the National Theatre of Berlin, “may have been the first actor to play Shylock [ . . . ] as ‘irksome’ and ‘impish’ rather than seriously threatening,” according to Edelman. Thus, whereas Schröder’s production draws on tradition, Iffland’s staging breaks with it. This opposition between an aggressive and an innocuous Shylock during the same historical period is indicative of Merchant’s malleability regardless of shifts in social attitudes.

In 1789, John Philip Kemble, actor-manager of Covent Garden, played Shylock. Like Macklin, Kemble accentuated the character’s resentful humour. Nevertheless, his
production was substantially different from Macklin’s: it did away with Morocco and Arragon; it deleted substantial lines from all scenes except for Shylock’s; and it included musical interpolations sung by Jessica and Lorenzo. Consequently, it is noteworthy that, although “Shakespeare” was rapidly being institutionalized and apotheosized, this *Merchant* made concessions to a horizon of expectations established by the medium as a site for variety shows – a sign that the limits of highbrow and lowbrow cultures were still being delineated.

In the nineteenth century, “Shakespeare” was consolidated as an integral part of mainstream culture as well as an icon of patriotism. Within this context, in 1814, the young Edmund Kean debuted as Shylock at the Drury Lane, the theatre he managed. The illegitimate son of a prostitute, Kean was exceptionally well acquainted with humiliation. Seeming to know everything about outsiders, he portrayed Shylock as a mask that aroused compassion and is often regarded as the first to cast the Jew sympathetically. Drawing upon Thomas R. Gould’s reception of Kean’s last lines in the trial scene, Lelyveld states that

> [he] changed, by the pathos of his voice, the audience’s hatred of Shylock, to one of pity. [. . .] Kean’s entire appearance seemed to change with Shylock’s last speeches. The pause in ‘I am – content,’ as if it almost chocked him to bring out the last word; the partial bowing down of his seemingly inflexible will in ‘I pray you give me leave to go from hence, I am not well;’ the horror of his countenance when he was told of his enforced conversion to Christianity; the combined scorn and pity with which he regarded the ribald Gratiano.”

53
It seems undeniable that Kean’s interpretation of the moneylender was a major breakthrough in *Merchant*’s performance history in that it embodied Romanticism on the boards, being thereby quintessentially representative of the spirit of his time. Moreover, Kean innovated not only *Merchant*’s interpretation but also the theatrical medium: his acting style, which hinged on the multidimensionality of Shylock’s affect, reflected the range of conventionally irreconcilable oppositions transgressed by the framing of the theatrical experience. In this sense, Celestine Woo underlines Kean’s transgression of the “proscriptions of class and gender behaviour; [. . .] the divide between legitimate and illegitimate performance, and between comedy and tragedy.”

In terms of transhistoricism, Kean’s *Merchant* appears to have combined romance, tragedy, and comedy, being therefore closer to this dissertation’s concept that the script weaves the three genres into a vertiginous mesh that raises more questions than it yields answers.

What is incontestable about Kean’s *Merchant* is that his sensitively colourful approach to Shylock established a tradition of tone for most of his successors. Despite not having seen Kean’s characterization of the Jew onstage, Henry Irving’s Shylock, inspired by a Levantine Jew the actor observed on a journey, is described by a critic as someone “whom none can despise, who can raise emotion both of pity and of fear, and make us Christians thrill with a retrospective sense of shame.” Irving’s own conception of Shylock is that the character is a “bloody-minded monster, – but you mustn’t play him so if you wish to succeed; you must get some sympathy with him.” While the arousal of sympathy for Shylock was an effect of both actors, the transhistorical continuity between Kean and Irving is not an inertial imitation: as a romantic, Kean was reacting to the mechanization of the natural world; as a Victorian, Irving was acknowledging the Other –
even if he did so from the patronizing perspective of the Self. Accordingly, Kean underscored Shylock’s humanness; Irving emphasized the character’s victimization.

Every era is an invariably generous source of pressing issues that can transhistorically interact with topics of the past because these issues are shared by the viewing community, which finds gratification in seeing them represented in connection with plays from other cultural sources. For example, at the San Francisco Theater in 1915, convinced that he would overcome Irving’s creation by lending Shylock a special quality with his “authentic” Jewishness, Jacob Adler, who had seen Irving’s Merchant, “followed in the Irving tradition, but ‘not even Sir Henry Irving,’ wrote one critic, ‘has made an appeal for the sympathy of the audience such as Mr. Adler put into his performance.’”\footnote{Certainly the authenticity of a Polish Jew is a disputable proposition – especially from the politically correct perspective of contemporary viewers who are not acquainted with the particulars of life in the Jewish diaspora. Nonetheless, as an immigrant in America, Adler knew that these details evoke affective memories. Accordingly, he benefited from them in his interplay with the Yiddish audience for whom he performed Shylock.}

The first Merchant in the era of directors – or authors of the staging – was Theodore Komisarjevsky’s 1932 production at Stratford, England. A Russian-born, a contemporary of Konstantin Stanislavsky and a Marxist, Komisarjevsky intended to stage a condemnation of social injustice. Contradictorily, he conceived Shylock as a caricature of Capitalism. Nonetheless, because Komisarjevsky did not have much leverage upon the actor Randle Ayrton, who, according to James C. Bulman, “was aware of the role’s complexity and potential for tragic pathos,” the role of the moneylender resulted in a
reworking of the inaugural tradition of Merchant’s performance history. As Bulman states, “A few reviewers recognised in the power of Ayrton’s performance something that transcended stereotype, and the terms in which they describe him are remarkably like those used to describe Macklin’s performance two centuries earlier.” Thus, although the pull of the present was patent and the production of Merchant was praised for its overall aesthetic principles and socio-political agenda, the pull of the past was obvious in Ayrton’s emotional characterization, which, in act 3, scene 1, was highlighted by a thunder storm. In this way, Shylock’s sense of abandonment evoked Lear’s in a comparison that ennobled the Jew’s fury. Also appealing to the senses, one of the legends of our time, Peter O’Toole, who played Shylock in Michael Langham’s 1960 production at Stratford, U.K., is described by A. Alvarez as “imposing on the audience a pressure of emotion and dignity.”

It seems that the more documented Merchant’s performance history is the more we can identify the transhistorical dimension, with its emotional traces, in the productions that made a major mark. In the 1970 staging with the National Theatre, directed by Jonathan Miller, Shylock was on his way towards assimilation, aiming to behave like a member of the English gentry. Set in the nineteenth century, the production emphasized Victorian bigotry – insidiously travestied in exceedingly polished manners; it also foregrounded Merchant’s superficial system of opposing signs in that, as Bulman states, quoting Miller, “What particularly interested Miller was not overt differences between Christians and Jews, but the ways in which ethnic groups ‘look for appearances which will substantiate their prejudices.’” As I argued before, this opposition of feeble markers seems to be inherent in the text and might even have been staged accordingly in
the original practices; nonetheless, if we take into consideration that Merchant’s performance historiography starts in 1741, this concept had never been enacted before. Hence, this was an innovative staging: in highlighting Shylock’s assimilation by a hypocritical society, this production gave relief to the Jew’s victimization. This outcome, however, seems to have a substantial debt to heritage in that Shylock’s characterization evoked a long tradition, which had been concerned with the staging of the moneylender’s emotional responses to his political status as an alien. As Bulman argues: “Olivier seized the opportunity to give Shylock as much psychological depth as a tragic hero, paying careful attention to the subtle ways in which aliens learn to cope in a hostile environment, just as Irving had done a hundred years earlier.”

Bill Alexander’s staging with the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1987 was scandalously daring. Set in pre-World War II Venice and starring Anthony Sher, an ethnically Jewish South African-born actor, it portrayed the stereotype of a non-Westernized Jew, a man of violent actions: he spat on the palm of his hand before outstretching it to Antonio so that the bond be sealed; he intoned a chant in Hebrew, conjuring Jehovah’s vengeance upon the nations that did not know his god. Nonetheless, in a staging decisively above Manichaeist reductions, it was impossible to determine who had started off the aggression, as Christian Venetians such as Solanio and Salerio were threatening to the point of nearly pushing Shylock into the canal. Hence, Alexander pioneered in stretching the playtext’s potential for offence. The emotionality deployed by this staging reflected the reality of peoples who have replaced Jews as targets of Western deprecation and was intent on prompting the audience’s visceral discomfort, thereby challenging viewers to confront the narrowness of contemporary standards of tolerance.
Also set in the thirties, the last remarkable production of the twentieth century was Trevor Nunn’s 1999 staging with the Royal National Theatre, in which Henry Goodman played the role of Shylock. This production focused on the emotionality of a father who could not accept his daughter’s elopement with a Christian. This overview of Merchant’s performance history confirms that its transhistorical dimension is indeed abundant in interconnected possibilities.

Concentrating on Shylock as one of the most important aspects of Merchant, we observe that the play’s performance history has had a pendular dynamics that generates nuances within a spectrum that ranges between two major matrices: Macklin’s tragic fury, which reverberates in Kean’s and Irving’s personal readings with more sympathetic contours, and August Wilhelm Iffland’s comic mischievousness. The number of influential productions nonetheless indicates that the performative tradition inaugurated by Macklin has contributed significantly more compelling productions than Iffland’s. The common denominator in all the important stagings mentioned in this concise history is the emotionality they both stage and arouse. Four hundred years after the conclusion of the medieval romance tradition, with the death of Shakespeare, and more than a century after the decline of Romanticism, Merchant, a script that seems to instill doubts in our ability to gain knowledge, renovates the theatrical medium with a more immediate form of contact with the world: affect – a universal constitutive feature of identity, of an individual’s goals, and of Shakespearean dramaturgy.
The performance of emotions

In arguing that the representation of emotions is a fundamental component of Shakespearean playtexts, I come to another thorny topic. Can emotions be represented in a playtext or are they only communicable by the reception of the embodied performance? According to John Russell Brown, Shakespearean plays do represent affect. Brown has conducted an extensive empirical study across three very distinct theatrical cultures (London, Bremen, and New Delhi) and has identified analogies between the aesthetic emotions described in the Natyasastra, the ancient Sanskrit treatise on the performing arts, and the Elizabethan concept of "humour," or prevailing passion. The comparative results of this intercultural study are less important here than the deduction that a script is written speech, and "all speech, whatever its intended purpose or meaning, derives from the speaker’s state of being and the sensations that lie beneath conscious thought."

“When speech and action derive from the sensation of being[,] . . . an entire person will be presented on stage and Shakespeare’s language becomes a contemporary idiom."\(^\text{62}\)

The actors’ way into the sensorial determinedness of a characterization is therefore the recognition of the “sensation of being” contained in the script. But identifying the representation of emotions in Shakespearean scripts is still problematic because some scholars maintain that emotions are constructed, while others affirm, and even prove, that they are evolved. I will not claim allegiance either to social constructivism or to evolutionary psychology because I agree with Helena Wulff that, “[e]motions weave into cognition and biology.”\(^\text{63}\) Thus, once more I will take a non-dualistic stream: if we pinpoint one of Merchant’s recurrent emotions, humiliation – the continuous humiliation of Shylock by Antonio, Solanio, Salerio, and Gratiano; the humiliation of Antonio by
Shylock’s momentary victory at the trial, the humiliation of Portia by Bassanio’s breach of their vow; the humiliation of Bassanio by Portia’s exposition of his disloyalty – we observe that each character has a distinct content-determining cause of this emotion of humiliation and a distinct perception of it. The different perceptions of these experiences are nurtured by culture: Shylock is harassed for being part of a social minority; Antonio is lawfully held accountable for a debt he has unexpectedly failed to repay; Portia is disappointed by the man with whom she is deeply in love; and Bassanio is exposed in his lack of reliability, one of the fundamental qualities required of a gentleman. On the other hand, emotions transcend social constructs. When we read the scenes mentioned above, we can visualize the four characters sharing a pattern of bodily response; and when we watch them in a production, we do not expect these scenes to portray the humiliated characters dancing in celebration of these circumstances. As William M. Reddy persuasively argues, “Emotions are kinds of thought that lie ‘outside’ of language, yet are intimately involved in the formation of utterances. Emotions [ . . . ] are among the most important of such kinds of thought; and when we speak of our emotions, they come into a peculiar, dynamic relationship with what we say about them.”64 Thus discourse about emotions builds upon fundamental embodied experiences that are recognizable by the entirety of humankind, even if they have different meanings, values, concerns, and frames of reference across cultures.

Affirming that Merchant represents emotions does not imply that it has stable meanings; it only suggests that optimal stagings of the play take account of the prevailing passions represented in the dialogues. The acknowledgement of Merchant’s aesthetic emotions does not preclude the creation of numberless staging conventions – including
those generated by self-deconstructive readings, which refuse to cynically reduce the playtext to a fixed meaning. As a matter of fact, a self-deconstructive, non-dualistic, skeptical reading seems to be the most appropriate approach to giving substance to Merchant’s multiplicity, which involves the conflation of romance, comedy, tragedy, carnival, hypocritical spirituality, bigotry, the pursuit of freedom, socio-political conflict, the subversion of legal practices, gender role transgression, metatheatricality, and doubt as a cognitive mode of engagement with both the world and the universe of the playtext. Hence, I have organized the four analytical chapters according to their explorations of the Merchant’s singular open-endedness.

Chapter outline and methodological frame

In Chapter One, I analyze how the Theater for a New Audience’s production embodied Deconstruction in that it gave substance to a reading of the play that could not be pinned down and yet poignantly addressed the essential themes of Merchant, such as religious intolerance, the Other, the cultural uprooting of the Other, and revenge. Moreover, this staging dealt with the theme of homoeroticism in a paradoxically understated and remarkable mode, innovating thereby the deployment of an interpretative frame that has been reutilized since Tyrone Guthrie’s staging with the Stratford Festival of Canada in 1955. Darko Tresnjak’s recreation of a fifty-year-old staging convention that has been a cliché was noteworthy. Tresnjak’s subtle performance of homoeroticism exemplified an attainment of the transhistorical. Whereas sodomy was a felony punishable by hanging in early modern England, contemporary homosexuality, or the highly politically inflected form of homoeroticism, “gayness,” have prompted laws
against the discrimination of same-sex practices. Nonetheless, although the range of homoeroticism suggested in the early modern theatre expresses nuances that could find expression today, in an era characterized by political activism pro sexual diversity, allusions to same-sex desire are necessarily received as polemical today: same-sex rapports constitute a more or less normalized taboo that claims unconditional normalization and faces socio-political resistance. This staging, in treating the topic with ambiguity, evoked it in a way that could be viewed as an engagement with both the present and with the past simultaneously. This production could also be singled out as compelling because it generated an optimal balance of the comic and the tragic, and could therefore be described as a romantic tragicomedy, the genre that contains the prevailing modes in *Merchant*.

In contrast, balance was absent from the exhilarating production with Shakespeare’s Globe, the case study with which I engage in Chapter Two. I call Rebecca Gatward’s staging a “reconstruction” because the ordering principle that guided the staging is a utopian “reconstruction” of the past – as if a univocal meaning of the playtext could be archeologically recovered. Although, at times, Gatward’s project of “reconstruction” seems to laugh at itself by denouncing the impossibility of reconstructing the original practices, it definitely explores the past both as a marketing tool and as an aesthetic orthodoxy. Because the past cannot be recovered, Gatward’s production, a “full comedy,” had visible structural problems; noticeably, Shylock was downplayed, apparently in order that the theatrical event could avoid the unavoidable: the ambivalence of a character whose reception cannot be dissociated from the Holocaust. In addition, the extraordinary sense of humour of the production, which inevitably brought
carnivalization to mind, foregrounded the gaps that Shylock’s explicitly comic and yet pathetically unfunny presence did not fulfil. Furthermore, the framing of the theatrical event was mediated by an unfriendly scheme of surveillance that distanced the audience from the staging. This distancing effect happened because, in order to remove seriousness from the show, Gatward mounted it as a comedy of manners – a genre that is far removed from Merchant’s distinguished darkness. Hence, in spite of demonstrating how flagrantly this production deployed the pull of the present, I focus on how its engagement with the present was not enough for the theatrical event to contribute a compelling staging to Merchant’s performance history.

Conversely, the Stratford Festival of Canada’s production put the engagement of the present too much in relief. In attempting to portray Shylock as a victim, the director, Richard Rose, staged a Manichean Merchant, in which Christians were flat villains, for the most part. Thus this production was intent on a certain imposition of monological meanings. I call Chapter Three “misconstruction” in that this staging built a structure that was particularly inappropriate for the terrain that supported it. While the inadequacy was patent, there were riveting creations in this production, particularly a few comic scenes, which were arguably criticizable because they poked fun at national stereotypes. While I recognize that stereotyping can be an insidious performative idiom, I think that there are different categories of stereotyping. The fact that, in Merchant, the English are stereotyped as well reveals the power of irony in its deconstruction of the “closure” of the society it addressed and depicted. This assessment implies that this “misconstruction” contemplated a certain amount of Deconstruction. After all, “misconstruction,” like Deconstruction, presupposes “construction,” that is, the manipulation of something that
has a formal consistency. Whereas Deconstruction dissembles constitutive parts of the construction, “misconstruction” erects them inappropriately. Nevertheless, this operation is still an attempt to collaborate with the playtext.

Chapter Four is called “destruction” because the staging studied here set out to transparently destroy the playtext by destroying the playtext’s traces, that is, it cynically imposed a set of meanings on the play and claimed validity for these meanings on a terrain that could not at all support it. While it is a truism that the Pascal Theatre Company’s Merchant, as a radical postmodernist experiment, proposed to resist the text, the director, Julia Pascal, did not accomplish her intent of deconstructing the constructs our world has maintained about the play. A horizon of expectations may be open-ended, as Merchant’s in fact is; nonetheless, however malleable, a horizon of expectations implies instructions, that is, formal consistency. The act of “destruction” deprives a horizon of expectations of its formal consistency – as though the referent were not there in the first place. As a consequence, the Pascal Theatre Company’s radical adaptation of Shakespeare’s Merchant, an eccentric production within the structure of this dissertation, completely disregarded the transhistorical dimension. It required special parameters of analysis for two reasons: first, as a highly contradictory theatrical event that claimed political representation of minorities, this Merchant emerged as an appropriation that aimed to de-authorize “Shakespeare,” and yet it simultaneously used Shakespeare’s cultural capital and the company’s symbolic capital in a mode that revealed undeniable overlaps with mainstream theatre; second, in engaging exclusively with the pull of the present and not living up to the expectations of the vibrancy of fringe theatre in one of its most celebrated venues, the centrality of this production consisted of its context-
dependent properties. In this chapter, I probe the effectiveness of this appropriation as a practice that aimed to promote social cohesion rather than the aesthetic experience it could arguably offer.

Although I give more emphasis to contextualization in the examination of the eccentric production, all chapters contain a section that aims to cast light on audience-governed aspects of reception that are significantly manipulated by the preconditions of a given production. Examining the conceptual conditions of production and reception of the stagings is important because a number of aspects of the theatrical event (location, ticket prices, press releases, websites, etc.) determine which patrons are attracted to a given performance. Simultaneously, however, the preconditions of the production of an essentially communal form of art such as theatre are also dialectically determined by the shared values and experiences of the potential viewing community. Ironically, then, audience members inevitably bring to the theatrical event a horizon of expectations that, on the one hand, is built by the preconditions of the production, and on the other, informs both the production and its preconditions. Hence this phenomenon implies cyclical dynamics: a range of cultural phenomena influence the viewing community’s daily lives and horizons of expectations, which are incorporated by the creative sector. The creative sector in turn generates theatrical events whose interaction with the audience may either challenge or reinforce the status quo in a variety of ways. Because all productions claim recognition, their relationship with the status quo is rather complex.

As a scholar who set out to critique productions of Merchant, my relationship with the status quo is also complex. While, by definition, I am legitimatized by my role as a social actor to assess the engagements of theatre practitioners with Shakespeare’s
most controversial artifact, at a time when contemporary scholarship has avoided judgments of aesthetic value, I definitely have a tricky mission. Nevertheless, because the contours of the aesthetic experience have been blurred to the point that the theatre’s identity is adrift between mainstream and alternative practices, which are often equally deadly, a counterpoise seems in order in the form of a theoretical approach with a flexible and yet rigorous criterion. Although I did not set out to investigate individual performances, the analysis of the relationship between Merchant and its stagings obviously had intersections with the critique of the actors’ presence. Because this dissertation focused on case studies of four distinct theatrical cultures, the parameter against which I measured individual performances had to be sufficiently broad. Thus, what I regard as compelling presence onstage consists of any of the “[t]he various codifications of the performer’s art,” which Eugenio Barba has defined as “methods to break the automatic responses to daily life.” From cinematic realism to bear-taming, every action that is performed outside the scope of ordinary daily life constitutes “an extra-daily codification” and justifies itself as the purposeful use of a technique, a specific kind of occupation that provides playgoers with an experience. The experience of participation in the performance of “extra-daily codifications” differs from other forms of social practices, such as political campaigns, memorial services, classes, inaugurations, and convocations, because the aesthetic-ordering principles are very important components to the appreciation of a theatrical event. Even if they cannot identify why they like or dislike a theatrical event, viewers always express their evaluation of the experience in accordance with non-utilitarian parameters. While theatrical events may diffuse political propaganda, address the viewers’ feelings regarding the deceased person,
educate, and be invested with civic representations, their consumption transcends the other symbolic performances in that they are subjected to aesthetic critique in a way that events with a functional finality are not. Politicians, priests, and teachers may be subjected to critique regarding their aesthetic performances for a variety of reasons, such as lack of charisma, insufficient voice projection, or inadequate rhetoric; however, if they perform according to the expectations of their functions, they may still do justice to their professions. Theatrical events that do not express distinguished theatricality, that is, formal properties that achieve the aesthetic appreciation of a viewing community, do not meet the requirements of the medium.

Because the focus of my inquiry was the critique of four theatrical events, which were observed and analyzed from my own and only perspective – even if they were supported by professional reviewers – I framed my study broadly as qualitative research, and specifically as narrative inquiry. In other words, it was my engagement with diverse productions of the same play from different theatrical cultures in the same year that taught me the methodological approach to the documentation of practice-as-research activities. As a playgoer, I was a participant in the four theatrical events, collecting data to tell four different stories bound by a theoretical gaze that invited the probing of its tenets. The probing of an inductive study turned into a deductive experience in that it demanded the resolution of problems arising from the particularities of each case. Therefore, as D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly state, drawing upon John Dewey, “[T]he answer to the question, Why narrative? Is, Because experience.” The experience storied in the following chapters has an answer to Dessen’s rhetorical
question, “Whose plays are they, anyhow?”: the plays belong to whoever sincerely asks the ghosts that inhabit them how they would like to reincarnated on the boards.

Notes

7 Alan C. Dessen, Elizabethan Stage Conventions and Modern Interpreters (Cambridge: CUP, 1984) 156.
18 Derrida certainly deconstructed “genre” as a normative concept because his aim was to problematize the implications that unreflected standards may impinge on social life. In discussing “genre,” Derrida was approaching the double entendre that the word has in romance languages: “genre” and “gender.” The interview that I quote here took place in 1989 and was translated by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby. Cf. Jacques Derrida, “‘This Strange Institution Called Literature’: An Interview with Jacques Derrida,” Acts of Literature, ed. Derek Attridge (New York and London: Routledge, 1992) 47. (33-75)
19 For example, Antigone’s motivation to go against the logic of the state is dictated by the religious belief that Polynices’ corpse will not find spiritual rest if it does not have a ritualistic burial. Antigone’s circumstance is conditioned by a historical context that justifies the gravity of her motivation. Although Western and westernized playgoers do not necessarily identify with Antigone’s motivation nowadays, they can nonetheless appreciate the character’s conflict between the political and the ethical.
22 For example, Graham Brashaw asserts “Shakespeare is in this respect his own deconstructionist.” More recently, Millicent Bell, locating in early modern philosophical trends Shakespeare’s propensity to create purposeful textures that constitute labyrinths of meanings, persuasively conjectures that, [h]e seems to have
shared with Montaigne, his near-contemporary, not only general doubts of what had long been assumed about the universe and mankind but also doubt concerning the reliability of our own power to perceive and conclude anything. Millicent Bell, *Shakespeare’s Tragic Skepticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002). Graham Bradshaw, (1987) *Shakespeare’s Scepticism* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1990).


27 All references are to the Cambridge “Shakespeare in Production” edition of *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. Charles Edelman (Cambridge, 2002).


31 Carol Rittner and John K Roth state that “‘[a]ntisemitism’ is such a common term that one might suppose it has been around a long time. In fact it was first popularized in the late 1870s by a German journalist and racist ideologue named Wilhelm Marr. He employed the term in speaking about the largely secular anti-Jewish political campaigns that were widespread in Europe at the time. The word derives from an 18th-Century etymological analysis that differentiated between languages with ‘Aryan’ roots and those with ‘Semitic’ ones. This distinction led to the assumption – a false one – that there are corresponding racial groups. Under this rubric, Jews became ‘Semites’, thus paving the way for Marr’s usage. Marr could have used the conventional German term *Judenhass*, but that way of referring to Jew-hatred carried religious connotations that Marr wanted to de-emphasize in favor of racial ones. Apparently more ‘scientific’ the term *antisemitismus* caught on and eventually became a way of speaking about all forms of hostility directed and experienced by Jews throughout history. Carol Rittner and John K Roth, “What is anti-Semitism?,” *The Holocaust and the Christian World: Reflections on the Past, Challenges for the Future*, eds. Carol Rittner, Stephen D.Smith, and Irina Steinfeldt (New York: Beth Shalom Holocaust Memorial Centre, Yad Vashem International School for Holocaust Studies, and Continuum, 2000) 34.


33 The fact that Jews often had to wear badges in order to be distinguished from Christians suggests that they were not regularly viewed as visible minorities in medieval and early modern Europe. In addition, the verification of early modern iconography evidences that European Jewry was represented without specific physiognomic features of Middle-Easterners, or Africans, or Asians. For example, from the perspective of non-Jewish artists, the series of six tempera panels *Predella of the Profanation of the Host*, by Paolo Uccello portrays a white Jewish merchant’s family in which the wife and the pair of children are blond (The National Gallery of the Marches, Urbino, Italy); the oil *Digesta seu Pandectae*, by an anonymous fourteenth-century painter, depicts the Jewish bankers as white (The British Museum, London, England); probably from the perspective of Jewish artists: the *Rylands Haggadah* and the *Golden Haggadah*, both of which date from the fourteenth century and contain illustrations of Spanish Jews represented as whites (The British Library, London, England). Cf. Elena Romero Castelló and Uriel Macías Kapón, *The Jews and Europe: 2000 Years of History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1994) 34-35-36-42-43.
Corcus also states that, in the Ancient period, “conversion to Judaism was also accomplished by force.” Corcus also argues that the number of Jews in the Roman Empire is estimated at 6 or 7 million, or roughly 12 percent of the total population, around 50 million. This substantial proportion cannot be explained by natural increase alone, even if the Jews were very prolific. The surplus must be attributed to conversion, and it is likely that converted Jews far outnumbered original Jews. Alain F. Corcos, The Myth of the Jewish Race: A Biologist’s Point of View (Bethlehem: Lehigh UP, 2005) 93-97.


“Changes to Rabelais,” the text paraphrased and discussed here by Ruth Coates has not been translated into English so far. Ruth Coates, Christianity in Bakhtin: God and the Exiled Author (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1998) 131.


Toby Lelyveld, Shylock on the Stage (Cleveland: The Press of Western Reserve University, 1960) 45.

Celestine Woo, Romantic Actors and Bardolatry: Performing Shakespeare from Garrick to Kean (New York: Peter Lang, 2008) 171.


Joel Berkowitz, Shakespeare on the Yiddish Stage (Iowa City: Iowa UP, 2002) 175.


61 James C. Bulman, The Merchant of Venice (Shakespeare in Performance), (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1991) 79.
Chapter One

Deconstruction: the Theatre for a New Audience’s *The Merchant of Venice*

Comprehension does not mean denying the outrageous, deducing the unprecedented from precedents, or explaining phenomena by such analogies and generalities that the impact of reality and the shock of experience are no longer felt. It means, rather, examining and bearing consciously the burden which our century has placed on us – neither denying its existence nor submitting meekly to its weight. Comprehension, in short, means the unpremeditated, attentive facing up to, and resisting of, reality – whatever it may be.¹

The association of queerness with theater is by no means novel. As a number of historians have pointed out, theaters have long and notoriously been associated with queer bodies and pleasures. Both the early Kabuki and Elizabethan stages were routinely attacked for aiding and abetting same-sex sexual practices.²

In this chapter, I examine the Theater for a New Audience’s *Merchant*, which, out of the four productions observed for this study, was the one that best exemplified how heritage and rupture can be productively conflated. Conspicuously postmodernist, this staging demonstrated that Deconstruction differs from destruction in that it took into consideration the traces of the text and disassembled a few generally accepted constructs
about the play – particularly constructs concerning the representation of the Other, the thorniest aspect of the script nowadays. Furthermore, this production was grounded in an optimal tension between laughter and “seriousness,” the pillars of carnivalization. In 2009, celebrating its thirtieth anniversary, the company, still itinerant, struggles to start the multi-million-dollar project of building its own theatre, whose construction has been temporarily hindered by the economic recession. My analysis of this Merchant is based on the optimistic prospect the company entertained that year.

In 2007, the Theater for a New Audience, founded in 1979 by its artistic director, Jeffrey Horowitz, leased an Off-Broadway venue, the Duke on 42nd Street, discreetly located in an office building. As patrons entered the auditorium, a panel covering the back of the seated risers exhibited artistic renderings of the new home that the company was to occupy in the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) District. These illustrations revealed an ultramodern four-story building whose exterior displayed a mural with an enormous portrait of Shakespeare by the pop graphic designer Milton Glaser. On the one hand, an early modern cultural icon, represented in a style that embodies the cosmopolitan metropolis, sets the tone of the Theater for a New Audience’s rapport with Shakespearean theatre-making: the monumentally intercultural deference of the producing company’s new home indicates that the enduring significance of Shakespeare’s body of work is incorporated into the social fabric of an urban centre that imagines itself as always in touch with the latest cultural trends. In addition, since New York has the world’s second largest entertainment industry after London, the distinguished architecture of the company’s new cultural setting addresses a viewing community that boasts sophisticated standards of consumption.
On the other hand, the Theater for a New Audience’s conflation of “Shakespeare” and pop art suggests a progressive agenda, which nurtures intercultural dialogue. Antony Tatlow accurately observes that “[e]very engagement with a Shakespearean text is necessarily intercultural [because t]he past really is another culture,” and it is ostensibly the case with the Theater for a New Audience’s engagement. Correspondingly, pop art is a groundbreaking form of visual expression, laden with overtones of contemporary aspirations, particularly the aspiration to a non-elitist view of art. In associating “Shakespeare” with pop art, the company projects an instantly recognizable image of an inclusive assimilation of the early modern dramatist’s plays, which are often associated with mainstream theatre. Glaser’s rendition of Shakespeare’s picture constitutes a statement that both the innovative breadth and the high quality of the company’s approach to “classical theatre” are the building blocks of its productions, which attract playgoers who appreciate a daring approach to tradition.

Thus, the Theater for a New Audience’s image constantly vacillates between a reverent and a daring rapport with inheritance. At times, reverence verges on concessions to an irrelevant approach to tradition – as a description of the company’s own new auditorium, furnished with “299 seats maximum,” suggests. This project reveals that the company complies with regulatory authority, particularly regarding Shakespearean productions:

The theater’s auditorium is inspired by the Cottesloe Theatre of Britain’s Royal National Theatre. Its flexible seating and trapped door allows for a wide variety of seating and stage configurations – proscenium, thrust, runway, promenade, courtyard and in-the-round [. . .]. The auditorium is
distinguished by its intimacy, which is vital to the effective presentation of classical theater.  

Hence, the Theater for a New Audience’s account of its new auditorium had the potential to build up a number of layers in the horizon of expectations of its viewing community. Because of the similarities between the Duke’s auditorium (which holds 200 seats) and the company’s auditorium in the BAM District, the Theater for a New Audience reassured Merchant’s viewers that they were in an appropriate venue – an assumption that might have been problematized by those who were aware of the implications of the fact that the same production would be performed at Stratford-upon-Avon’s Swan Theatre, with an auditorium over twice as large as the Duke. Moreover, the company declared its “affiliation” with a prestigious British venue, implying an endorsement of its project on the grounds of correspondence with a well-established model. Additionally, it foregrounded a few important items concerning the BAM’s new auditorium’s design such as the versatility that would allow the company to reproduce a functionally early modern playhouse-like configuration, offering playgoers a viewing situation that would enable a fetishization of the past.

Thus, the Theater for a New Audience’s potential spectatorship’s horizon of expectations of “classical theatre” is, despite the company’s intercultural boldness, partially fashioned upon a fetishistic reproduction of the “original practices.” Certainly, the association of the company’s rationale with the “original practices” cannot per se provide any guarantee of a successful Shakespearean production. Nevertheless, given the frequency with which this rationale is evoked, we can conclude that it draws paying
playgoers whose horizon of expectations is negotiated in interaction with a legitimized form of cultural production.

In validating the viewing situation of its productions, the Theater for a New Audience also underlines the importance of “intimacy,” described as “vital” to “classical theatre.” Consequently, the company defines itself as a maker of “classical theatre” – particularly of plays penned by Shakespeare. The rationale based on the conflation of “intimacy” and “classical theatre” capitalizes on the fact that this assertion is accepted without critical reflection by a substantial number of patrons – attracted by the signifier “Shakespeare” with its fetishistic attributes of nostalgia. Nonetheless, considering that an early modern playhouse could accommodate up to ten times the “299 seats maximum” proposed by the Theater for a New Audience, we can infer that the company’s promotional concept of “classical theatre” was based upon an “invented tradition.” Thus, the company’s rationale of a need for “intimacy” relied on an imaginary continuity with “classical theatre” that has no bearings on the attainment of the transhistorical dimension of a scripted staging.

However invented, the Theater for a New Audience’s governing principle is not completely pointless. The company’s intimacy-oriented relationship with “classical theatre” may be viewed as germane with respect to its disposition to explore scripts of the past: in stating that it “explore[d] the classics with adventurous spirit,” the company implied that its stagings of the prestigious playtexts involved a hazardous enterprise. Although every theatrical event is a hazardous enterprise, mounting an old playtext is even more so. Because the temporal gap between the genesis of the original scripts and their reception today, the engagement with “classical theatre” faces inherently distancing
factors, that is to say, the barriers posed by language and culture. Therefore, the company’s adventurousness is grounded in the assumption that a conscientious engagement with tradition is necessary for the staging of an old script to emerge. Consistent with Derridean Deconstruction, the company presupposes that even the most groundbreaking stagings of “classical theatre” are necessarily rooted in the cultural source and that the relationship of the present with the past determines which productions shake our conjectures of the past, arouse reflection about the present, and give us a speculative glimpse of the future.

Thus, the Theater for a New Audience, an entity that promotes itself as an innovator, is also committed to generating theatrical events that are firmly anchored in tradition. Concessions to marketing aside, “tradition” as embodied by the company does not mean the conservation of objects whose original manifestations are inevitably irretrievable, but, rather, the acknowledgement that heritage serves us – as opposed to the common belief that, by staging “Shakespeare” or any admirable playwright’s works that the past has handed down to us, we pay homage to a praiseworthy legacy. Thus, the company’s concern with Shakespearean authority also springs from an approach to the script as a particularly flexible source of content that requires meticulous reinterpretation in order to generate a fruitful staging.

Furthermore, regardless of the “invented tradition” activated by the company’s promotional strategies, all patrons indeed benefit from a viewing situation in which the inclusive proximity to the stage ensures an optimal reception of the show’s artistic level. The artistic level, in Sauter’s phrasing, “includes the encoded actions presented in a performance, which are mainly characterized by genre, style, and skills.” A clear
perspective of the “encoded actions” in turn improves the reception of what Sauter names “embodied actions,” that is, “the activities of the performer which aim at the presentation of fictional images.” Furthermore, the company’s conflation of “intimacy” and “classical theatre” has devised a policy that aims to attract a “culturally and economically diverse audience,” whereby US$ 10 tickets are available to patrons under the age of twenty five, and discounts of up to more than fifty percent of the box office’s full price of US$ 75 are offered to TKTS-booth-users. It still might be argued that the company’s theatrical experiences are distinctly bourgeois. Nevertheless, considering that the ensemble offers an optimal viewing situation of its high-quality productions and does not count on any state subsidies, even the top prices are proportionally lower than those of Broadway shows.

If closeness is an asset in the reception of a performance, it is even more so when the cast includes a movie star. Celebrity plays an important role in the theatrical communication’s “sensory” level, which according to Sauter, indicates “that the perception of a stage personality in the exhibitory moments causes both automatic responses, which only gradually are processed into understandable cognitive knowledge, and persistent feelings that remain active during an entire performance.” Thus, playgoers may attach value to a transitory familiarity with the presence of a performer whom they know from the larger-than-life and virtual mode of the screen. The Theater for a New Audience’s Merchant, despite featuring actors with credits on Broadway, television, and cinema, such as Kate Forbes (Portia), Tom Nelis (Antonio), and Saxon Palmer (Bassanio), was all packaged around F. Murray Abraham, Academy Award winner for
best actor in *Amadeus*, for which he also received a Golden Globe and a Los Angeles Film Critics Award in 1985.

Abraham was cast to perform not only Shylock but also Barabas in Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta*, directed by David Herskovits, in rotating repertory. Abraham’s picture in contemporary costume and a *kippah* was the “hallmark” of the Theater for a New Audience’s *Merchant*. Likewise, Abraham’s picture in early modern costume illustrated the company’s *The Jew of Malta*’s media release materials. Additionally, Neil Bartlett’s British adaptation of Charles Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* completed the trilogy dealing with “images of Jews as outsiders in the predominantly Christian society of pre-20th-century Europe.” Thus, the question of the Other, particularly focused on European Jews as social scapegoats, conferred thematic unity to the 2007 Theater for a New Audience’s season. In staging *Merchant* and *The Jew of Malta* with a single ensemble in alternating repertory, the company offered “audiences a rare opportunity to discover for themselves the similarities and differences in the two authors’ approaches.”

The company’s statement about the rare opportunity of comparing and contrasting Shakespeare’s and Marlowe’s approaches to Jewishness is factual: the production of both plays back-to-back indeed provided playgoers with an opportunity to verify the dramatization of ethnic intolerance by two early modern authors from a thought-provoking perspective – a combination that is not offered frequently. Grotesquely staged as farce in period costume against a cardboard panel representing Malta, Marlowe’s blatant social satire contrasted even more with the subtlety with which Shakespeare’s dark romantic comedy was treated. Abraham’s Barabbas conspicuously embodied folly, opportunism, and cunning, but so did every other character – as they actually do in
Marlowe’s text. Comparing both plays onstage, it became more noticeable that

*Merchant’s* depictions of vices and follies are not exclusively ascribed to Jews. As discussed in the Introduction, the play suggests that Christian dogmatism is as pernicious as any system that is not tested although Judaism is often viewed as the play’s exclusive target of social criticism.

Any topic regarding Judaism is particularly meaningful in a city such as New York, whose Jewish community makes up twelve percent of a population of more than 8,200,000 inhabitants. Therefore, the Theater for a New Audience, in addressing a viewing community that included a significant number of Jews, could not but be particularly thoughtful about this sensitive state of affairs. In addition, Horowitz himself is Jewish. In a post-matinee talk, I asked Michael Feingold, the company’s dramaturg, how staging *Merchant* in 2007 tied up with the purposes of a company named Theater for a New Audience. He answered that “the company wanted to face the obstacles, the conundrums inside the play… to question why people do what they do… to uncover a connection with us.” Uncovering a connection (of *Merchant*) with us (twenty-first-century viewers) is a key concept in staging such a controversial play, as it suggests an inquiring approach to the poetry that pervades the entire concept of the theatrical event. In addition to the work of a dramaturg who demonstrated particular consideration with the pull of the past, the Theater for a New Audience’s *Merchant* also capitalized on the stellar consultation of the Royal Shakespeare Company’s voice director, Cicely Berry, whose presence on the play board stressed the company’s centrality in making sense of the Shakespearean dramatic poetry so that it could be communicative to contemporary audiences.
In fact, the Theater for a New Audience made it clear at the outset that this *Merchant* was “translating” the past into a style that could be understood today. The high-tech setting, designed by Tony Award winner John Lee Beatty, suggested a near future. When patrons entered the auditorium, they could see three suspended flat screens with the sign: “Please… turn off your cell phones, pagers, and other devices. Thank you.” Each of the three signs was written in a different language: contemporary English, Israeli Hebrew, and standard Italian. Like a kind of uncomplicated puzzle, the preliminary theatrical device reminded the audience of languages simultaneously related to the universe of *Merchant* and to New York’s ethnographic diversity, which encompasses the largest Italian population within the U.S. and the world’s largest Jewish population outside Israel. The liminality of Tresnjak’s *Merchant* established a staging convention that invited the audience to appreciate a witty commentary on the play. This staging convention’s primary function was obviously to domesticate the audience by restraining undesirable disruption; however, it also introduced the aesthetic-ordering principles of the pact that the audience was expected to appreciate. Tresnjak and Beatty’s early establishment of the pact that ruled *Merchant* enabled the audience to initiate a reception of the carnivalizing sense of life that was about to be enacted, regardless of the fact that a tragedy would intertwine its threads with a comedy. As far as historical accuracy is concerned, it is reasonable to assume that only a few spectators noted the imprecision of the three languages in relation to an Elizabethan playtext. On the one hand, signs in early modern English, Venetian, and Ladino would have targeted only a minority and would not have been able to convey the message about contemporary technology. On the other hand, the power of communication of the screen signs resided exactly in the fact that the
languages were easily recognizable. Patrons could effortlessly relate to this Merchant’s preliminary theatrical convention, which functioned as an implement with three interrelated goals: first, the orientation of the performance of a relatively familiar plot; second, the stimulation of a mildly challenging mental activity, which built the patrons’ self-confidence regarding their capacity to make sense of the signifier “Shakespeare”; and third, the activation of audience interaction through laughter, which Peter G. Marteinson calls “the physiological expression of the comic.” At the outset, the Theater for a New Audience’s Merchant explicitly imparted the idea that this theatrical event would deploy the present in order to cast light on the past.

Likewise, Linda Cho’s costumes evoked present-day New York, whose sophisticated system of status ascription stipulates class-stratified fashion codes, which in turn provide models for social identity construction. Thus, the young Venetians in power suits resembled yuppies who aspired to be like the mature tycoon, Antonio. Similarly, Portia and Nerissa (Christen Simon), in black cocktail dresses, denoted the sophisticated background of the contemporary young heiress of an economic empire and her personal assistant. Consistent with the setting and the performers’ actions, Cho’s costumes derived from an engagement with the present and yet reflected a codification that, despite its obviously different formal properties in the Renaissance, also signaled class distinction then.

Similarly, the set pieces suggested that the materiality of Tresnjak’s Merchant emerged from a fictive world whose language referred to argosies in iambic pentameters, but whose staged images reflected the experience of the present. The changing images on flat screens defamiliarized the lines and multiplied the meanings of the linguistic
signifiers to the point of creating a semiotic system that overflowed with multiplicity and open-endedness: the MacBooks that in the first scene served the young Venetian executives became the caskets in the suitors’ scenes, while the flat screens projected the messages of the scrolls; and USBs represented keys that opened the caskets by initializing animated films. Tresnjak’s Merchant was a theatrical event in which distinct media were fused into a hybrid artifact that refined, extended, and renovated the scope of the main medium while reaffirming the transhistorical sense of the script's themes. As Michael Billington notes, “since the choices confronting Portia’s suitors are printed out on video-screens, you become more aware of the situation’s irony - especially that Bassanio, while plumping for ‘Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath’, is actually living on credit.” Moreover, the screens showed myriad ever-changing digits in every scene in the first acts that featured Shylock or the Venetians. The panels of digits appeared to metaphorize the Stock Market as the supreme parameter for every action. Hence, this aesthetic choice, derived from the pull of the present, communicated the underlying concept that, in the Venice of the near future, everyone had a monitorable and fluctuating nominal value.

Tresnjak’s Merchant particularly embodied the staging of the nominal value of the individual when Shylock, against the background of the screens of digits, evaluated Antonio’s judgmental attitude and pondered the paradoxical situation in which he was entangled both as a rejected alien and as an indispensable resource: “Signior Antonio, many a time and oft / In the Rialto you have rated me / About my moneys and my usances” (1. 3.106-110). Accustomed to a world propelled by the ephemerality of stock prices, the audience could relate to Shylock’s cogent reasoning and make sense of the
literal Rialto that regulated their lives in the twenty-first century. This staging convention had a powerful repercussion when Abraham, enthusiastically personifying a highly successful businessman, delivered Shylock’s defence of money-lending at interest, casting light on the drama of individuals who must work harder because of their inferior social status, such as the patriarch Jacob, as well as himself: “This was a way to thrive, and he was blest; / And thrift is blessing if men steal it not” (1. 3. 81-2). Thus, this Merchant’s background of swiftly moving digits suggested the mechanisms of a litigious culture whose legal instruments are a function of the historical periods that fashion distinct social practices, but whose nature is transhistorical. Consequently, this Merchant’s innovation did not consist of anachronistic signs for the sake of denying the centrifugal pull of the past, but of the manipulation of a familiar visual sign system in an insightful mode. Whereas this Merchant’s concern with the present was manifest in the defamiliarization of the most obvious aspects of the “invented tradition,” the concern with the past was explicit in the staging of a genre - namely, tragicomedy. Therefore, the preliminary staging conventions confirmed that the staging’s ordering principles reflected Shakespeare’s poetics. On the one hand, in generating formal elements that represented easily identifiable contemporary circumstances, the company did justice to its postmodernist adventurousness. On the other hand, in anchoring its nearly-futuristic visual metaphors in the situations proposed by the playtext, it drew upon tradition.

Abraham’s performance imprinted a naturalistic characterization of Shylock by expressing an emotional arc that went from forbearance towards desperation and surrender. Abraham’s delivery of his first lines delineated the contours of a classy, cultivated executive used to formal reasoning and public speaking. Gesturing with
composure, he methodically presented his argumentation, effortlessly getting his message across. As Mark Blankenship affirms, “as he faces those who spit in his face, the general stillness lets him cling fiercely to dignity.” Abraham’s initial tone of voice suggested that Shylock, regardless of how much he had been offended, had never thought of revenge prior to his decisive encounter with Bassanio and Antonio. Abraham’s enactment of a character often imagined as Shakespeare’s greatest deviation from the natural order made a significant difference in the overall reception of Tresnjak’s *Merchant* by portraying Shylock as humane. Facing the audience, Abraham exercised the art of persuasion: “I hate him for he is a Christian” (1. 3. 34). Shylock’s aside, rhetorized in lines that can easily convey blatant repugnance in an unsophisticated actor’s inflection, sounded self-possessed in Abraham’s delivery: he was purging frustrations as opposed to harbouring resentment. Nonetheless, as the dramatic action flowed, Abraham’s voice and muscular tension suggested a crescendo of his capacity for resilience. This resilience reached a limit when, unable to be cornered any longer, Shylock was led into an obsessive state of war against his most forceful oppressor. After hearing from Antonio that “I am as like to call thee so [cut-throat dog] again, / To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too” (1. 3. 122-3), Shylock understood that Antonio would never see him as a friend. He decided to humiliate him by proposing the bond of the pound of flesh, whose terms were forged and filed all at once in the heat of wrath. Robert Kole affirms that his “composure made his hatred for Antonio seem more ominous and his revenge more inevitable, than if he had raged.” Shylock’s terms sounded so surprisingly outrageous, that Antonio engaged in a brief physical confrontation with his opponent. This embodiment of physical tension added a syncopated beat to the flow of the action,
weaving together other aspects of the scene: an arrest of Antonio’s self-confident acceptance of the bond, a literalization of Antonio and Shylock’s conflict, the genesis of a mutual hate grown out of an ideological antagonism, and a stimulus for Bassanio to temporarily surrender his claims to the loan. Thus, Abraham’s modulated escalation towards aggressiveness gave Shylock nuances ranging from a state of challenged balance towards justified turmoil.

The fact that Shylock could be perceived as psychologically balanced in his two first scenes enabled the audience to register his contained feelings and gradually build the image of a grief-crazed man who initially demanded justice, but who ultimately replaced this demand with bloodlust. Thus, Shylock’s characterization was manipulated to gradually arouse sympathy for his inflexible demand at the trial scene. In this light, Tresnjak’s staging attained the transhistorical in that it expressed the broad spectrum of aesthetic emotions that Shakespeare’s Shylock potentially has.

In highlighting Abraham’s interpretation of Shylock as particularly responsible for this Merchant’s attainment of the transhistorical, I put my argument to the test: if Abraham’s interpretation was indeed transhistorical, it must find equivalence in examples of Merchant’s performance history. By “equivalence” I do not mean an exact coincidence with another performance of the role – an occurrence that would be a logical absurdity. By “equivalence” I mean a parallel in the concept of a characterization that explores a vast array of emotional possibilities, endowing Shylock with his due multidimensionality and humane impact. Comparing Abraham’s performance with that of Charles Macklin, an actor who preceded the codifications of realistic acting, seems particularly appropriate because both styles are necessarily conditioned by absolutely different historical contexts:
nearly two and a half centuries set their performances apart. In addition, Macklin’s documentation is the oldest account available of Shylock’s performance. William Cooke’s *Memoirs of Charles Macklin, Comedian*, published in London in 1806, records what purports to be Macklin’s description of his first performance of *The Merchant of Venice*: ‘The opening Scenes, being rather tame and level, I could not expect much applause; but I found myself well listened to, – I could hear distinctly, in the pit, the words ‘very well – very well, indeed! – This man seems to know what he is about’, &c. These encomiums warmed me, but did not overset me – I knew where I should have the pull, which was in the Third Act, and reserved myself accordingly. At this period, I threw out all my fire.¹⁹

Even if Cooke’s account is introduced with caution by Lelyveld, its validity was never disputed in its own time; it describes Macklin’s performance of Shylock as an emotional arc that progresses from a self-contained line delivery expressive of the character’s propensity for rational argumentation towards excitement. Macklin makes it clear that he strategically reserves his impassioned appearance for the trial scene – unquestionably the climax of the play. Irrespective of the realistic inputs that shaped Abraham’s embodiment of Shylock, it is undeniable that his interpretation shared commonalities with Macklin’s.

According to this comparison of historically defined styles, the transhistorical dimension of Shylock appears to reside in the character’s potential to simultaneously arouse both compassion and awe regardless of the meanings that the individual actors’ interpretations and the overall stagings might convey. In the case of Abraham’s
interpretation, Shylock’s trajectory embodied the struggle for dignity and hubris. As Jenny Sandman states,

Abraham plays a finely nuanced Shylock, the perfect “villain” for such a polished production. That is to say, he's not really a villain at all. His Shylock strives so earnestly for his revenge in the form of the famous pound of flesh, that we pity him and share his anguish at his daughter's defection and his shame at his forced conversion; and yet we cannot help but note that his pride was his downfall, that he brought it on himself. Sandman’s reception describes Abraham’s ability in manipulating complementary sentiments as diverse as temperance, love, and hatred. Through the manipulation of these feelings, Abraham exhibited a set of formal properties that portrayed Shylock in the proportional complexity that the character indeed has in the playtext. In this way, he generated a compelling performance, that is, the transhistorical dimension of Shylock, rendering the play convincingly communicative to contemporary audiences as a romantic tragicomedy.

Adding consistency to this staging, the transhistorical underlying sense of a romantic tragicomedy also permeated the characterization of Jessica (Nicole Lowrance), who, alongside Shylock in their only scene together, was responsible for the arguably most sublime moment of this staging. A particularly subtle display of affection took place when Shylock gave Jessica the keys to the front door. This moment was an essential building block towards an overall positive reception of both characters, demonstrating that, despite hosting a senior star, the company staged Merchant by giving all actors the opportunity to display their talents. Out of a sense of urgency, Shylock
made eye contact with his daughter, stretched out his hand with unobtrusive earnestness and delivered his pragmatic instructions: “What, are there masques? Hear you me, Jessica” (2. 5. 27-35). Shylock seemed to be entrusting Jessica with the keys to the house for the first time. In so doing, he appeared to suddenly acknowledge that his daughter was no longer an adolescent. Jessica’s delicate gesture of sincere acquiescence to her father’s command suggested that his unusual behaviour made her filial sense of dignity momentarily outweigh her decision to flee from his patriarchal authority. The audience, in linking Jessica’s anguished departure to this fleeting epiphany concerning her father’s esteem for her, was led into nurturing compassion for the young woman’s criticism of her own action when she declared a little later: “I am glad ’tis night, you do not look on me” (2. 6.35). Jessica’s metamorphosis was not just that of her bodily deception, justified as a step towards the fulfilment of erotic love; it embodied a complex decision, tinted with the awareness of treason. Contradicting Michelle Ephraim’s view of Jessica’s departure as aggressive, Lowrance’s action was counterpointed by the fragility of the inexperienced young woman who wholeheartedly seemed to aspire for the impossible: her father’s blessing of her choice. At this juncture, I locate one of these occurrences in which it is not only difficult but also irrelevant to identify whether a particular staging convention resulted from the engagement of the past or the present; Shylock and Jessica’s relationship in this production was poignant to any viewer who could appreciate the representation of the emotional resonances of family ties, probably one of the few universal categories: definitely transhistorical and transcultural.

Jessica’s aspiration for paternal blessing appeared to develop into another kind of sentiment in the scene in which the newly Christianized young woman and Lorenzo
(Vince Nappo) had their last dialogue. In swimsuits, they played a game in which they sensually touched each other’s unguarded bodies with their hands. Within this context, the repetition of the phrase “in such a night” underlined sexual intimacy, indicating that this production staged the exceptionally long license from rule that Jessica and Lorenzo embody in *Merchant*. As Joan Ozark Holmer states, “Jessica, a Venetian Jewess, and Lorenzo, a Venetian Christian, do just that – love together.” Lowrance’s and Nappo’s semi-naked bodies erotically illustrated a catalogue of unfortunate lovers, while their magnetism elevated them to ethereal plenitude. In this way, Jessica and Lorenzo’s liaison mocked the likeness of mythical creatures: their intense need for gratification and the inevitable grief commensurate with this intensity. Tresnjak, while emphasizing the pull of the present as embodied by the young lovers’ casual attire and attitude, alternated it with the pull of the past in that the reference to classic mythology was staged through stylized ecstatic sexual abandon. The young couple’s passionate connection appeared to be sufficient to overcome the differences of colliding belief systems. Inevitably, however, the dialogue between the young couple turned into an argument, which suggested that dissent would sooner or later rise into notice after the fulfilment of desire. Struggling to comprehend that contentment would yield to grief from time to time, Jessica sensed someone’s approach. She was dominated by fear when she warned Lorenzo, “But hark, I hear the footing of a man” (5. 1- 24). Lowrance’s line delivery appeared to indicate that Jessica dreaded a fortuitous encounter with Shylock – a fear that in turn revealed her uncertainty about her choice. Coherently, in the end, Jessica regretted her unblessed choice: on her own, holding a *kippah* in her hand, she reminded the audience of the last time she had been with her father. Shylock and Jessica’s last contact, a rare moment of
family warmth, laid out the intricate relationship in perspective; and later, as memory, this moment cast light on the subsequent scenes, arousing sympathy for both the prodigal daughter’s moral predicament and the father’s emotional devastation.

Therefore, considering Shylock, Jessica and Lorenzo’s subplot, in this postmodernist Merchant, Tresnjak’s Deconstruction seemed to point towards the cultural source not only of the Elizabethan theatre but also of its immemorial origins in the ancient mythology. Deconstructed by diverse perspectives in distinct historical periods, the theme of the impossibility of eternal fulfilment was reenacted through the carnivalized suggestion of a holiday with two hedonistic lovers sunbathing by the pool. Because license, by definition, yields to rule in an endless cycle, Jessica’s unrest reminded the audience that seriousness would always lurk somewhere between an action and its consequences. As for the ending of Merchant with Jessica left alone onstage, it is undeniably a cliché of our time. Nonetheless, in Tresnjak’s staging it was delicate in that it effectively evoked Shylock’s grief, vividly engraved in the audience’s memory.

Abraham’s interpretation of Shylock’s affective connection with Jessica was memorable because it embodied seriousness with a particularly nuanced track of emotional patterns, which made the character believable as a human being. Although the overall performance of Abraham was consistent with subtle variations of mood, a particularly meaningful example of this artifice occurred when Shylock heard details about both Jessica’s post-elopement and Antonio’s imminent defeat from Tubal (Marc Veitor). This information triggered a vast range of feelings, which Abraham materialized with staccato precision, as Michael Basile’s description and analysis demonstrates:
Abraham worked himself up to a fever pitch, a mixture of rage and self-pity, when he learned of all that Jessica had stolen. In an imposing and robust baritone he howled, “Fourscore ducats at a sitting! Fourscore ducats!” When he learned about the turquoise ring, however, the one he had “of Leah when I was a bachelor,” he played the line as a loss of the heart rather than a loss of the purse, in a nearly inaudible whisper. We were intruding on a private pain. Shylock’s vulnerability now fully exposed, he turned vicious in a mercurial instant when he heard that Antonio’s bond was now forfeit. He gleefully assured Tubal that he would “have the heart” of Antonio.23

Basile’s account left no doubt that Shylock was far removed from the formulaic embodiment of a demonized villain: with only one (remarkably brief) comment on his late wife, Shylock communicated a lifetime experience of love and longing. Despite its acclamation, however, Abraham’s performance prompted surprise in a few spectators who spoke in the talk-backs promoted by the company. These playgoers identified a contradiction in the fact that Abraham’s Shylock came across in a sympathetic light; one of them asserted that the Theater for a New Audience’s Merchant “was not how it was meant to be staged…” This viewer’s horizon of expectations was that a racial stereotype was the original conception of Shylock, that Merchant is an anti-Semitic play, and consequently that, although Abraham’s merit was appreciated, this staging would not redeem the Shakespearean artifact. Thus it is ironical that this production deconstructed the generally accepted conceptions about the playtext, succeeded in having the audience’s appreciation for the show, but did not succeed in
changing the crystallized conceptions. This fact suggests how ephemeral the impact of the theatrical medium may be at times – especially when it calls into question a topic that is “fully” and “legitimately” “clarified” by a medium with a more “reliable” “symbolic capital” such as a book written by a renowned professor from a prestigious university.

In any case, that Abraham’s performance was a rare event was unquestionable to the point that his prestige, which probably brought paying playgoers to the theatre, became secondary. In appreciating Abraham’s technical, charismatic, and meaningful presence onstage, the audience processed the initial reverential attitude into understandable cognitive knowledge, as Abraham’s interpretation indeed captivated both audience members and critics. Adam Feldman asserts that “[t]he quality of Tresnjak’s Merchant is mercifully high, and presents the most compelling argument for Shylock in the form of F. Murray Abraham, an actor of tremendous dignity and command.” Pete Wood says that he “play[ed] Shylock for much of the play with a granite-like impassivity, maintaining dignity in the face of the continual hostility.” To Charles Isherwood, “Mr. Abraham acknowledges but doesn’t try to obscure — or even reconcile — the character’s ambiguities, allowing our responses to him to remain equally complex.” Billington opines that “F. Murray Abraham’s excellent Shylock is also a figure of immense outward dignity.” Nevertheless, like any outstanding performance of a scripted staging, Abraham did not have the power to create a poetics that was not suggested by the playtext; his excellence consisted of an exercise of interpretive skills. Both Shylock’s characterization and the overall production were consistent with Feingold’s statement that the company addressed the playtext in order “to uncover a connection with us.” This staging demonstrated that, for the Theater for a New Audience,
“Deconstruction” meant a careful probing of generally accepted constructs: in uncovering a connection with us, as the indefinite article suggests, the company’s discourse in relation to the staging convention of the “Jew” as a social scapegoat was to pose questions rather than providing answers, and to map out perspectives rather than advocating a definitive point of view as an absolute truth.

Tresnjak’s *Merchant* suggested Shylock’s ambiguous role in his downfall: on the one hand, in struggling to keep his cultural identity, he convinced himself of his superiority over Christians; on the other hand, in subscribing to the social codes that likened him to Christians, he nourished the desire for equity. In order to reconcile these opposing drives, he betrayed his religious principles at the cost of his gradual assimilation, which culminated with the forceful conversion. As David Finkle asserts, “Tresnjak finds innumerable ways to make them [the characters] semiotically define a society that then, as now, allowed commerce to corrupt spirituality.”

Thus, this *Merchant* staged the ruling community’s hypocrisy without exempting Shylock from his responsibility in enmeshing himself in this tragic network. Out of the four productions observed, the Theater for a New Audience’s *Merchant* was the only one that emphasized Shylock’s agency in the unfolding of events that prompted his downfall.

While in Shakespeare’s *Merchant*, Shylock’s display of agency is implied in his betrayal of Jewish principles, in Tresnjak’s directorial conception, explicitly engaged with the present, Shylock’s active participation in his downfall derived from his extreme success as a businessman. Shylock’s success aligned him with the Venetians in their capitalist ideology. Nonetheless, his wealth did not neutralize his cultural differences, which were hateful to Christians. One might consider the premise of a staging convention
that implies manifest anti-Semitism in a contemporary Western country implausible. Nevertheless, forfeiting a pound of flesh in Tudor England is no more verisimilar. In boldly highlighting the pull of the up-to-the-minute present, Tresnjak’s production subtly bridged Shakespeare’s playtext to the Holocaust, a historical event that has become a parameter against which every contemporary staging of Merchant is inescapably measured.

The Theater for a New Audience’s Shylock suggested how the Other could be entangled in a circumstance in which assimilation could ironically equal defeat, as the very history of Merchant’s audience reception in pre-Nazi Europe can illustrate. According to Klaus Völker, assimilated Jews rejected anti-Nazi stagings of Merchant because “[t]hey saw themselves as ‘integrated’ Jews, a quality they hoped would save them from the persecution by the Nazis a few years later.” In Tresnjak’s Merchant, Shylock was an assimilated Jew who thought he only differed from his enemies in his principles. Whereas Shakespeare’s Shylock is patently an alien, the Theater for a New Audience’s Shylock was integrated in the same social fabric as his opponents through his successful business. While Elizabethans had aliens, the German state had Jewish citizens. The rationale that set the perverse project of exterminating Jews in motion was exactly the fact that they were integrated. As Marcel Stoetzler asserts drawing upon Hannah Arendt, “the grounds on which emancipation was granted inhere to a large extent in the same on which it was revoked. Emancipation and anti-Semitism were antagonistic moments of the same process, the formation of modern society, its individuals, and its state. The notions of making society ‘productive’ and ‘industrious,’ ‘amelioration,’ ‘marginalization,’ or elimination of unproductive (‘parasitical’) classes
and groups of people, constitute a bridge between the discourse of the nation, that of Jewish emancipation and its rejection. Correspondingly, the Theatre for a New Audience’s Shylock was compelling because Shylock’s forceful conversion could be viewed as a powerful metaphor for “the final solution to the Jewish problem.” Tresnjak’s Merchant staged Shylock as an individual who shared most of the values of the society who oppressed him for his difference. Thus, as in mid-twentieth-century Europe, assimilation meant the imminence of disgrace.

Productions of Merchant have tried to convey that a forceful conversion is equivalent to Jewish suffering during the Holocaust. But this is not an easy proposition to realize effectively. Despite the oppression implied by forceful conversion, it still differs significantly from the Nazi policy: whereas the outcome of historical conversion to Christianity was the authoritarian incorporation of difference into an alleged homogenous body of people, the “final solution” proposed the elimination of difference altogether. In attempting to eliminate difference, the “final solution” both dehumanized the political project that justified it and perpetuated the difference it meant to eliminate. The Holocaust, which caused the death of 6,000,000 people, not only eternalized the memory of these people – as the systematic memorials to the Holocaust throughout the world demonstrate – but also dramatically changed the way Jews are viewed and view themselves. Because Nazis failed in the abject project of removing Jews from the category of humankind, they only proved the impossibility of an absurd ambition. The commonality between the violence of forceful conversion to Christianity and the violence of the Holocaust can only be communicated if expressed by means of subtlety.
Correspondingly, Tresnjak staged a kind of inverted-mirror effect in which the implicit violence of a totalizing assimilation evoked the horror of extermination.

Tresnjak’s ordering principle worked because this production balanced the concerns with the past and the present. Even audience members who did not know the details of Jewish history in Europe could decode that Shylock’s condemnation derived from treachery. Shylock’s bafflement before the court’s verdict indicated that he could have never anticipated such an outcome – similar to Jews under Nazism. After the trial, while leaving the stage, Shylock was indeed devitalized. As a reiterative embodiment of “official seriousness,” Antonio removed Shylock’s kippah and threw it on the floor; a simple staging convention could remind the audience of the culmination of anti-Semitism while Shylock’s physical debilitation metaphorized his moral disintegration. Therefore, Tresnjak manipulated recent history in such a way that the production indeed uncovered a transhistorical commonality between early modern Jewish persecution and anti-Semitism: that the incapacity to cope with difference always deprives individuals of dignity, regardless of how fatal the deprivation is.

Thus, the Theater for a New Audience’s embodiment of the “Jew” as the Other staged horror and communicated its shock without deducing the unprecedented aspects of Nazism from the precedents represented in Merchant. In staging a conception of the Other which was based not on a thesis about the playtext, but rather on the multidimensionality of Shylock and Jessica immersed in their interaction with themselves and other characters, Tresnjak created a performance piece of eloquent resistance to the greatest outrage of twentieth-century history by subverting a pre-conceived horizon of expectations. Furthermore, the Theater for a New Audience’s staging of the more
explicitly tragic part of the tragicomedy invited reflection about how the specific
dramatization of bigotry in Shakespeare’s playtext is prophetic, as it has constituted a
pervasive pattern in the real world.³¹

Discriminatory practices based on race, sexual diversity, class, and cultural
background are so pervasive that they permeate the theatre, an art that has traditionally
been a forum for denouncing them. For example, the insidious “colour-blind” casting
patterns in Western theatrical cultures often limit the degree to which racial minorities are
“allowed” into mainstream companies by casting them in the roles of servants. This fact
is particularly true regarding Shakespearean theatre, for which the audience is almost
universally white. The Theater for a New Audience’s casting system for Merchant was
no exception in that Portia’s and Nerissa’s bodies revealed contemporary issues that
shaped Belmont according to governing principles that were inconsistent with the
portrayal of Merchant’s “other world.” The fact that Nerissa, a well-appointed personal
assistant, was played by an African-American actress confirmed the rule that in the U.S.
the historical marginalization of ethnic groups is mirrored onstage. Conversely, the fact
that Portia was played by an actress with a fair complexion reflected that Caucasians,
particularly those of Northern European stock, still constitute the bulk of the country’s
privileged ethnic groups. Thus, in this Merchant, the relationship between race and class
stratification in Belmont echoed the blatant racial discrimination in Venice. The semiotics
of ethnicity in Belmont adjusted to the logistics of casting categories of the American
show business, even if both worlds contrasted in other aspects, since Venice represented
the old reigning paradigm of authoritarianism, whereas Belmont portrayed its ongoing
dissolution.
Besides the race issue in the casting of the lady and her assistant, a paradoxical exception to Belmont’s liberalism was its most powerful inhabitant, Portia, the poor wealthy woman whose introductory expression highlighted her impending susceptibility to male authority – a characterization that neatly drew upon the past. Correspondingly, Portia entered the stage at the sound of the first bars of an instrumental piece from Glück’s opera *Orpheus and Eurydice* and sat down along the edge of the stage, despondently contemplating the infinite. The musical background that introduced Merchant’s Belmont’s mood indicated that Portia’s characterization was informed by an artistic practice usually regarded as elitist. Nevertheless, this erudite reference was emblematic of the production’s conscious movement between high- and low-culture registers. This Merchant’s confluence of elements as heterogeneous as opera and animation (the visualization of the scrolls of Portia’s suitors) was a transhistorical ordering principle because it implied the permutation of values of both “official” and “popular” culture – a practice of which Shakespeare himself was an adept. Thus, viewed as one among a wide-ranging set of porous elements that blurred the lines between “official” and “popular” cultures, the association of an operatic tune with Portia was carnivalesque rather than elitist. In addition, even if most patrons did not recognize the citation, they could sense that the tune underlined the mighty lady’s awareness of the boundaries of her freedom. Portia’s melancholic intonation of her introductory line, “By my troth, Nerissa, my little body is aweary of this great world” (1.2. 1-2), implied that despite her financial independence, she “[wa]s vulnerable to unwanted courtship,” as Fiona MacNiell reminds us. Thus, Tresnjak’s Merchant, in associating Portia with an operatic masculine role that is often interpreted by a female singer, foreshadowed Portia’s
gender ambiguity, the form that her rebellion against undesired male authority eventually took.

Apart from both the masculine role traditionally interpreted by a female performer and Forbes’ deep speaking voice itself, no other formal elements highlighted that Portia’s womanhood would only develop to the full when she was in a man’s guise: another carnivalized permutation, that is, of gender roles. Initially, Portia and Nerissa exuded femininity, their faces framed by long and voluminous curls, their silhouettes accentuated by cocktail dresses. A conspicuous complicity was established between the powerful heiress and her forthcoming confidant. Drawing upon the centripetal pull of the present, the company significantly deployed this complicity with two taboo-related objectives: the circumvention of the topic of racism and the insinuation of the theme of sexual ambiguity.

First, with regard to the scenes with Morocco, played by the African-American actor Ezra Knight, the complicity between both women was so intense, that Nerissa looked more apprehensive than Portia herself. In this way, the production displaced its anxiety about Portia’s potential racism onto the authorizing body of Nerissa. In so doing, the reception was manipulated in order that Nerissa’s unfavourable perception of Morocco could be shared by the audience: Morocco’s repugnance was not related to skin colour because even an African-American rejected him. Once again, life imitated art, and the ethnic discrimination dramatized in Merchant was subtly replicated onstage.

The second objective of Portia and Nerissa’s performance of complicity was the insinuation of sexual ambiguity. Tresnjak utilized the women’s connivance in order to deepen the implications of their travesty. This device, which would be radicalized in act
five, consisted of a coup-de-scène. Portia and Nerissa arrived at the courtroom with their hair radically chopped at the nape of the neck. This meant that Portia and Nerissa had been wearing wigs. Because the wigs that the actresses were wearing beforehand were made of human hair and matched Forbes’ and Simon’s natural hair, the audience was astounded with the actresses’ engagement with the production: it was clear that the complicity of the characters was shared by the actresses, who made themselves available to the point of giving up a significant component of the personal femininity of their daily lives for the benefit of a strong theatrical impact. Cross-dressing has taken so many forms in recent Shakespearean productions\textsuperscript{34} that it is difficult to be innovative. It is therefore noteworthy that, out of the four stagings observed for this study, Tresnjak’s Merchant was the only one that defamiliarized Portia’s and Nerissa’s cross-dressing in a provocative mode. In the trial scene, the complicity of Portia and Nerissa was extended beyond the simulacrum of the lawyer Balthazar and his clerk. After Portia’s attempt to dissuade Shylock from his intent proved inadequate, it was Nerissa who, in tandem with Portia’s angst, nervously researched an efficacious adjudication to the case on a MacBook. Once again, Portia could be likened to Glück’s Orpheus\textsuperscript{35} in that she undertook a mission that was more than liable to failure and counted on external aid to accomplish it. Nerissa, like a contemporary dea ex machina, intervened in Portia’s arbitration of the trial. As a result, Portia silently skimmed a few lines on the screen of the MacBook and interrupted Shylock’s assault on Antonio by urging: “Tarry a little, there is something else” (4. 1. 301).

In the sequence of innovations that shaped the pair of inseparable heroines of Belmont, the climactic one arguably took place after the trial scene, in act 5. Portia and
Nerissa simply remained in male dress suits, reminding me of Juliet Dusinberre’s argument that, through cross-dressing, “Shakespeare’s heroines integrate their experience as men with their feelings as women, which makes it harder for the dramatist to return them to their skirts.” Nonetheless, Portia’s and Nerissa’s reappearance in Belmont in the lawyer’s and clerk’s dark suits was arguably one of the most challenging staging conventions of this production. The question of how the Venetians did not wonder at the women dressed like the unforgettable pair of men who saved Antonio’s life might have occurred to a number of spectators. Challenging the comfort zone of the audience, however, appeared to be exactly the ordering principle behind this aesthetic choice. I would not go so far as to state, like Theodora A. Jankowski, that Tresnjak’s *Merchant* insinuated a lesbian relationship between Portia and Nerissa, because there were not enough signs for this interpretation. Yet, in any event, the sober “happy ending” of this production enacted a waltz in which the audience could see, in dim light, two male couples dancing: Portia with Bassanio and Nerissa with Gratiano (John Lavelle). With this closing scene, once more, Deconstruction did not bring destruction in its wake:

Tresnjak seemed to have teased out the forces of authority within the script to the limit of *Merchant*’s open-endedness, once more destabilizing our views of the past, stimulating reflection about the present, and providing insight into the future. This *Merchant*’s ending suggested that, in the liberal Belmont of the near future, identity construction was not defined by an opposition between genders, or “opposite sexes.” With this closure, once more *Merchant* emphasized the debatable issue of homoeroticism in Shakespeare’s play by raising questions. The answers to these questions hinged on the ambiguity posited by cross-dressing.
The mockery of cultural markers has the potential to generate perplexities, which stimulate reflection. Shakespearean plays with bold women who disguise themselves as men allude, as Heather James reminds us, “to the passionate Ovidian heroines who violate propriety, custom, and law.”\textsuperscript{38} The defiance of societal norms implied in a bold realization of cross-dressing bridged Tresnjak’s \textit{Merchant} to the cultural source because, for Shakespeare, the recreation of Ovid’s \textit{Metamorphoses} transcended a formal exercise of rhetoric. After all, the artifice of alteration of identity implicated a concern with the present in the early modern period as well. Thus, the artifice that pointed towards a flexible identity potentially raised questions about the system of signs embedded in the perceptions of Tudor culture, with its anxieties about heteronormativity. Therefore, Tresnjak’s staging of the flexibility of the self was indeed a transhistorical and transcultural adventure.

The essential difference between the early modern period and the twenty-first century is that these anxieties are amply addressed today. For this reason, the commercial exploration of same-sex pleasures has been magnified lately. According to David Savran, “[i]n the United States, the ‘gay nineties’ bore witness to an unprecedented efflorescence of cultural productions by or about lesbians and gay men.”\textsuperscript{39} Considering that spectatorship is conditioned by an event’s admission price and that the spectators, who are willing to pay as much as five times the price of a movie ticket for a single performance, desire, as Savran notes, “work that is by and large more aesthetically adventurous, confrontational, and politically liberal than Hollywood product,” \textsuperscript{40} Tresnjak’s staging of the heroines of Belmont stood up to scrutiny. The ordering principles that shaped Portia and Nerissa’s insinuated maleness challenged the presumed
binaries between dissident and normative sexualities, a topic that allowed for this Merchant’s aesthetics to emerge in such a way that the borderline between the traditional and the avant-garde was obscured. Like Shylock and Jessica, Portia and Nerissa were performed with subtlety. Were the heroines connected through homoerotic bonds? Did this Merchant challenge society’s norms of only two sexes and two genders by implying that in Belmont people could be intersexed? Did the two male couples dancing imply that Antonio and Bassanio would find in Belmont a fertile soil for a concealed homoerotic attraction to thrive? The answers were left for the audience members to puzzle out.

Arguably Antonio was the most enigmatic piece of Tresnjak’s riddle. At the sound of New Age music and against the background of the flat screens of fleeting digits, alongside Solanio (Cameron Folmar) and Salerio (Mathew Schneck), Antonio set the tone of this Merchant by dramatizing the nonchalant conviviality of prosperous businessmen of the near future. Carrying crystal glasses and wearing trendy power suits, the attractive middle-aged magnate and his younger friends appeared to be relaxing after a day’s work. The staging convention of changing images on the TV screens was immediately welcomed by the audience, who associated the staging convention of the moving digits with the action onstage. Thus, as Solanio and Salerio checked stock market prices on the versatile MacBooks placed downstage, the action of reflecting upon the reason for Antonio’s sadness was interchangeable with that of speculating about financial investments. Solanio and Salerio’s attempt to raise Antonio’s spirits was interwoven with the screens of digits in such a way that the imagery of their lines conveyed the concreteness of taking risks in order to merit social distinction.
As a case in point, Salerio, judging Antonio’s behaviour according to his own aspirations, diagnosed the older man’s grievance: “But tell not me: I know Antonio / Is sad to think upon his merchandise” (1.1.39-40). Although Antonio sounded honest about denying any distress concerning his business venture, he gave no signs of equivalent confidence in relation to his rapport with Bassanio. In act 1, scene 3, when he joined Shylock and Bassanio in order to negotiate the loan, he looked away from his friend in a stylized gesture that connoted self-repression of a public display of affection. Antonio’s neatly choreographed action was coordinated with Palmer’s Bassanio’s parallel action: both actors made eye contact for a split second and hurriedly turned their necks in opposing directions; then they returned to the initial face-to-face position just to deviate their heads in opposed symmetry again. This defamiliarizing gesture did not take more than a couple of seconds. Nonetheless, the reiterated action in a production of precise and economical movements drew enough attention to signal discomfort, which could not be motivated by any other feeling except for the embarrassment derived from unaccomplished erotic love. After all, whatever the situation was between the older and the younger man, at that moment they were paradoxically united by a crucial move towards disjunction. As the non-verbal innuendo suggested, the interconnectedness between Antonio and Bassanio’s friendship and their community was intentionally unclear.

With regard to the transhistorical dimension, Tresnjak’s conception of Antonio and Bassanio’s rapport could be viewed as a contemporary embodiment of what might have been perceived as a transgressive staging convention by early modern audiences themselves. Antonio and Bassanio’s affinity was attuned with tradition because it
replaced the current cliché of the older man’s unrequited love by an intentionally inscrutable staging convention that invited permanent inquisitiveness. Therefore, this *Merchant* renovated the implied plot motif of homoeroticism between Antonio and Bassanio in such a way that sensationalism, one of the staples of Shakespearean dramaturgy, was enacted without imposing indoctrinatory principles on the audience.

The most sensationalist moment of this staging was the trial scene, arguably the most sensationalist scene of the whole script. Under the pressure of a life-or-death situation, the trial scene featured another short yet noteworthy sequence of gestures that also insinuated homosexuality. After arguing in vain with Shylock, Bassanio walked towards Antonio, whose upper limbs were immobilized and tied to the arms of the chair in which he was sitting. Then Bassanio delivered his line in extreme anxiety: “Good cheer, Antonio! What, man, courage yet! / The Jew shall have my flesh, blood, bones, and all, / Ere thou shalt lose for me one drop of blood” (*Merchant* 4. 1. 111-3). Bassanio kneeled down and hid his face in Antonio’s lap, suggesting same-sex intimate engagement. The association of Antonio with homosexuality is definitely not a novelty. Actually, Steve Patterson describes this intimation as “the modern cliché [. . . ] of Antonio as a lovelorn homosexual vainly in pursuit of the obviously heterosexual Bassanio.”

*Tresnjak’s Merchant*, however, did not fashion its staging conventions upon the rationale that Antonio was a male who felt stirrings of infatuation for another (inaccessible) male. Antonio and Bassanio’s rapport offered the audience the same perspective as the other characters, who, despite noticing slight indications of same-sex attraction, could not ascertain the nature and manifestation of this affection – or to an
even greater degree determine whether or not it consisted of either an interpersonal or an intrapersonal conflict.

With the same governing principles, Tresnjak’s *Merchant* staged Antonio’s impending execution. In court, the defendant was wearing a typical American prisoner’s bright orange jumpsuit. The appeal of both the immobilization and the prisoner uniform could immediately be viewed as a metonymy for a spectacle of civic power in the era of lethal injections. Because the death penalty was officially authorized in most states of the U.S. in 2007, this type of punishment was entirely conceivable as a mode of crime prevention. Thus, the audience could associate the material staging convention of the pound of flesh with their own reality in an exceptionally direct mode of engagement. Considering that the death penalty has been a highly contentious issue that polarizes American public opinion and consequently fuels political campaigns, the audience was emotionally captivated by the horror of a fictive legal system that legitimated a pound of flesh as the bond of a civil suit. In dramatizing Antonio’s trial with Nelis’ arms immobilized in a chair, Tresnjak’s *Merchant* produced a juxtaposition of equivalent metaphors of major impact. The metaphor composed by a contemporary set piece, an easily recognizable costume, and the despair of the actor before the irreversibility of an imminent execution, added a culturally loaded context to the trial scene.

Thus, this *Merchant* enacted the symbolic ritual of punishment in order to assert the legitimacy of state authority, as supported by a majority of Christians. Tresnjak manipulated the scene by raising what has been a crucial topic since the adoption by the United Nations of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* in 1948: the right to life. Thus, the Theater for a New Audience’s enactment of Antonio and Bassanio’s
relationship expanded the spectrum of reflections prompted by the atrocities of World War II in that it raised capital issues that still remained unsolved in the first decade of the twenty-first century. This Merchant’s inscrutable rapport between Antonio and Bassanio transcended the present-day tendency towards the inclusiveness of sexual diversity. Antonio’s and Bassanio’s performances suggested that any imperative (be it economic, heterosexist, or moral), both in early modern England and in the twenty-first-century global village, fashioned not only identity but the entire contexture in which identity was inserted.

Accordingly, Antonio’s response to Gratiano was remarkably resigned: “I hold the world but as the world, Gratiano: / A stage where every man must play a part, / And mine a sad one” (1.1.77-9). In considering that, from Antonio’s perspective, the world was a stage, then agency was merely a role shaped not only by the forces of nature but also – and particularly – by the pronominal triad that constitute theatrical events, the Venice of the near future, and the world. Antonio’s failure to recognize the value of the Other could be viewed as a resentful response to not having his own value as alterity recognized. Tragically for Antonio, however, there was no redemption in his triumph. Like his archenemy, he was excluded from this Merchant’s unfathomable “happy ending,” gaining nothing of value out of his seriousness but the right to ruminate the compliance with normativity that doomed him to isolation.

Tresnjak’s Venice set the norm of decorum against which Belmont was fashioned. Whereas in Venice the elusiveness of Antonio and Bassanio’s bond seemed to derive from a preemptive response to heteronormativity, in Belmont, anxieties with respect to sexual orientation appeared not to exist. In this liberal milieu, not only did Balthazar
(Arnie Burton) “try to get attention by showing off” as numerous Shakespearean servants do, as Judith Weil notes, but he did so by employing flamboyant gestures in order to make sexually charged comments on scenes with male characters. In this way, Balthazar amplified the focus of these scenes by embodying the stereotype of effeminacy. Balthazar’s interactions with the suitors decisively shaped remarkable moments of theatricality. This theatricality resulted from a consistent engagement with the underlying sense of humour of the comic aspects of the playtext, as opposed to the mere illustration of textual meanings; Balthazar’s characterization appeared through unscripted actions that extended the meanings of the scenes, contributing uniqueness to them. As John Russell Brown observes:

The reason why Shakespeare’s comedies remain so broadly popular can scarcely lie in their jokes relating to defunct social customs or in the intellectual cunning of their verbal wit. While these attractions have faded, the one aspect of all the comedies that, to this day, is almost sure to affect an audience is the opportunity they provide for imaginative and individually distinctive performances that speak directly to the senses of an audience, beyond the reach of words.

Therefore, the fact that Shakespeare’s Balthazar has very few lines (and none of them particularly witty) did not prevent Burton from interacting with Morocco and Aragon in comic relief to the tense environment of Venice.

Balthazar’s staging of effeminacy also functioned as a blatant counterpoint both to the suitors’ masculinity and to the latent homoerotic bond between Antonio and Bassanio. Balthazar’s ordering principles seemed to be attuned with Richard Dyer’s
theory that “[t]he role of stereotypes is to make visible the invisible, so that there is no danger of it creeping up on us unawares; and to make fast, firm, and separate what is in reality fluid and much closer to the norm than the dominant value system cares to admit.”

Sprightly, affected, and randy, Balthazar contrasted with the Venetian businessmen’s understated homoeroticism because he unambiguously brought the semiotic of same-sex pleasures into view, carnivalizing the gender roles in force in Venice. Burton’s stylish caricature aroused Homeric laughter on account of its own expressive properties. Nevertheless, audience members could amplify their response by associating Burton’s performance with a type that has been familiar worldwide since the groundbreaking TV series Will & Grace premiered in 1998. Familiar cultural references shared by an international viewing community sooner or later become conventions that acquire the status of common knowledge in urban centres. These conventions provide a common ground with which spectators relate. Thus, Balthazar’s stereotype implied the social acceptance of homoerotic behaviour in Belmont.

My argument may be countered by the assumption that Balthazar’s characterization as a stereotype actually reinforced heterosexism and did not contribute qualitative challenges to conventions. Nevertheless, the funny typification of Balthazar was not prompted by homophobia because the character emerged as lighthearted, self-assertive, confident, satirical and yet loyal to the heroines even in the most critical moments, such as in the trial scene, when he gave moral support to Nerissa’s quest for a loophole in the Venetian legal system. Moreover, despite his irreproachable efficiency, he transgressed standards of subordination by poking fun at his work environment. While calling into question normative cultural ideas, he enabled the audience to laugh not only
at him, but with him, and at Portia’s wooers, the targets of his sexual fantasies. Because
the nature of the service rendered by Balthazar obviously overlapped personal spheres,
his interventions reinforced the ridiculous encapsulated in the casket tests. In ogling
Portia’s suitors, he gave his scenes a twofold effect of defamiliarization and illusionism:
the effect of defamiliarization derived from the affectation that distanced him from the
passions that moved the theatrical narrative forward and reminded the audience of the
artificiality of the performance; the effect of illusion sprang from the intense
lasciviousness that approximated him to the other characters’ visceral motivations.
Balthazar was laden with the suggestion that, if Portia’s wooers had vowed “[n]ever to
speak to lady afterward / In way of marriage” (2.1.41-2), there might be alternatives in
store for them. After all, as opposed to Portia, he reveled in the idea that he might be the
object of desire of one of those exotically virile suitors. In contrast to Shylock, he stepped
out of the role society stipulated for him and got away with it because he did not take
himself seriously. Balthazar fulfilled the transhistorical function of a clown: he was
alluringly irreverent, regardless of his sexual orientation and his peculiar mode of
presenting himself. Thus, in performing the exposition of the delusory quality of
constructs, Balthazar’s hilarious performance dissolved their hold on the audience.

Dissolving the hold of constructs on the audience is arguably the supreme
achievement of a production. Since horizons of expectations of plays are constructs as
well, compelling stagings can dissolve them – even if momentarily, by graciously
challenging them with laughter and thereby purifying them from crystallized conceptions.
Transhistoricism, the parameter against which I have reviewed productions of Merchant,
does not discard Deconstruction. On the contrary, because the transhistorical dimension
results from the tension between the pulls of heritage and contemporaneity, it values Deconstruction (a non-dualistic Deconstruction, a Deconstruction that is not intent on destruction) because it fertilizes the continuous and ever-renewable impetus of tradition. The framing of this theatrical event might have validated a few of the issues that the playtext subverts, such as discrimination, transparent in its politics of casting, and the “official culture,” implicit in its use of “invented tradition.” Nevertheless, as Adam Feldman states, it “has given a sensitive and insightful account;” 49 it gave substance to the stories of love, hatred, and spiritlessness that interweave in Merchant, forming a poignant pretext for the logical scope of the theatre: to free viewers from living the dramas that characters live to their extreme consequences. In comparing Merchant with The Jew of Malta back to back, patrons might have speculated about topics such as which play took a bigoted stance, which author depicted Jews in a favorable or unfavourable light, or which depiction unveiled Elizabethan vices and follies. Irrespective of their conclusions, they were kindly invited to face up to the fact that the horizon of expectations of the Theater for a New Audience’s Merchant would not lie anywhere they had anticipated, yet it was still Shakespeare’s play. It offered analogues and supplements of what is available in the playtext according to its ordering principles. Correspondingly, these analogues and supplements did not deprive the playtext of gaps and absences. Thus, the company staged a non-dualistic Deconstruction of Merchant, with its due skepticism and the possibility of perplexity.

Notes

New York “is still the unrivaled center of the creative economy in the U.S., accounting for 8.3 percent of all creative sector workers nationwide. Internationally, only London, which counts its creative workforce near 525,000, boasts a larger creative workforce than New York.” Nycfuture.org, internet.


I copied this excerpt from the theatre’s panel on March 2, 2007.

The fact that the Theater for a New Audience’s *Merchant* was conceived to perform for two distinct theatrical spaces: a 200-seat auditorium (the Duke on 42nd Street, New York) initially and for a 500-seat auditorium (Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon) later raises questions about the relationship between “classical theatre” and “intimacy.” According to Jay Briggs, the Theater for a New Audience’s assistant to the artistic and managing directors, because “the performance spaces in the Duke and the Swan are equivalent in size,” there was a slight performance adjustment in that “[t]he primary difference in the spaces lies in much of that extra-seating capacity in the Swan being above stage level. Thus, the actors did have to make the adjustment of lifting their focuses and playing to a larger portion of the audience that was seated above them. If anything, this elevated and energized their performances.” In any event, as Briggs’s explanations make clear, the “adaptation” concerning the performance in the Swan only required the actors’ awareness of the verticality of their voice and movement projection, and did not require major alterations of the production. Private correspondence with Jay Briggs on April 6, 2008.


Jeffrey Horowitz (artistic director) and Dorothy Ryan (managing director), *Theater for a New Audience*’s advertising brochure, New York, NY, 2007.


Jeffrey Horowitz (artistic director) and Dorothy Ryan (managing director), *Theater for a New Audience*’s advertising brochure, New York, NY, 2007.


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29 The history of the play in production confirms my perspective on the Theater for a New Audience’s Merchant’s embodiment of Shylock and fleshes out an example of Arendt’s analysis of the insidious development of anti-Semitism, which was only perceived by the diversified European Jewry when the Holocaust was inevitable. Analyzing Jürgen Fehling’s 1927 Viennese production, Klaus Völker refers to the audience reception of the Jewish actor Fritz Kortner’s tragic Shylock as too provocative “because it confronted the prevalent but latent anti-Semitism all too openly. The theatre-going Jewish bourgeoisie especially found their pro-German and even nationalistic sensibilities offended by a role concept that highlighted the unpleasant and ‘evil’ traits in Shylock even if their hearts were touched by his tragic fate. They saw themselves as ‘integrated’ Jews, a quality they hoped would save them from the persecution by the Nazis a few years later. Shakespeare’s truth was more contradictory and closer to reality.” Cf. Klaus Völker, “Fritz Kortner,” The Routledge Companion to Directors’ Shakespeare, ed. John Russell Brown, trans. Wilhelm Hortmann (London and New York: Routledge, 2008) 195.
31 Antony Sher, who played the role of Shylock in the RSC’s production directed by Bill Alexander in 1987. Sher’s experience of interpreting Shylock dawned on him that he should ask himself: “how was it that my family, who had fled anti-semitic persecution in Eastern Europe, how could they have conceivably become people who voted for the Nationalist government in South Africa? How could they, in a very middle-of-the-road way, support apartheid?” Struggling to understand “the syndrome of the persecuted turning into the persecutor”, a perplexing difficulty triggered by his approach to Shylock, Sher concludes that “it is actually a very human state of affairs that is applicable to many of us to a greater or lesser extent. It is not a particularly nice one, but it is one that occurs again and again. We may think of Jews coming from Eastern Europe to South Africa and apartheid; the Afrikaners themselves, they who had been the losers and the victims of the Boer War (the war in which the British invented concentration camps), turn into the Afrikaners of apartheid; Robert Mugabe, a victim of colonization, turns into the monster that he is now; Israel, the children of the Holocaust, turn into the terribly violent, aggressive, unsympathetic Israelis of today.” Cf. Antony Sher, “Conversation with Sir Antony Sher on playing Shylock and on contemporary productions of The Merchant of Venice with particular reference to the 1987 Royal Shakespeare Company production.” Christopher McCullough, The Merchant of Venice: a Guide to the Text and its Theatrical Life (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). 47
32 Certainly, the reference to the mythical character is in Merchant itself. Lorenzo says: “Therefore, the poet did feign that Orpheus drew trees, stones, and floods, since naught so stockfish, hard, and full of rage, but music for the time doth change his nature.” (Merchant, 5, 1, 79-82) The musical piece played by the Theater for a New Audience’s Merchant was specifically the first “Ballo” in act 2, scene 2.
34 Carey M. Mazer lists ten recurrent modes of cross-dressing in Shakespearean productions: “pseudo-Elizabethan, all-male productions, nonhistoriscist, all-male (sic) or all-female productions, across-the-board gender reversal, selective cross-dressing (a female Hamlet, Richard II, or Prospero), “gender-blind” casting throughout the ensemble, changing the gender of the role to match the actor (Prospera, Miranda’s mother, in place of Prospero, Miranda’s father), etc. Carey Mazer, “Rosalind’s Breast,” Shakespeare Re-dressed:

35 This part of the operatic narrative certainly includes the authorship of Ranieri de’ Calzabigi, the librettist of Gluck’s Orpheus and Eurydice. Keith Anderson, booklet, “Christoph Willibald Glück (1714-1787). Orfeo ed Euridice,” Orfeo ed Euridice (First Vienna Version, 1762), CD, Naxos, 2002.


37 Jankowski argues that “If we suspect that Portia stages the casket test in such a way as to ensure Bassanio’s success (Howard 1994: 117), we could also suspect that, as Nerissa implies, they have similarly ensured the failure of undesirable suitors. But if the relationship between Portia and Nerissa is an erotic one, then why does the latter so easy accede to Portia’s plans to marry? There are two possible answers which perhaps are both operative: Nerissa may feel that Portia’s affection for the remarkably inept Bassanio may be no threat to the feelings the two women have for each other; and/or Nerissa may assume that these will continue as Portia’s servant and that her position – both geographical and emotional – transcends and remains unaffected by marriage.” Theodora A. Jankowski, “…in the Lesbian Void: Woman-Woman Eroticism in Shakespeare’s Plays,” A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare, ed. Dympna Callaghan Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000) 308.


39 Savran 56.

40 Savran 86.


42 According to Amnesty International, “[t]he 42 executions in the USA during 2007 – while 42 too many – represented the lowest annual judicial death toll in the country since 1994. This was at least in part due to the moratorium on lethal injections since late September 2007 when the US Supreme Court agreed to consider a challenge to the constitutionality of that method of execution. Amnesty International Report on Death Penalty. Thereport.amnesty.org, Internet.

43 Edith Bogue affirms that “[i]n the United States, opposition to the death penalty has not exceeded 40 percent of the population. The proportion of GSS respondents who opposed capital punishment dropped steadily through the 1990s, even as the Supreme Court decisions limited jury discretion, amplified the appeals process, and overturned its use for the mentally retarded and juvenile offenders. The discovery that several death row inmates were innocent, first in Illinois and then in other states, resulted in an upswing in opposition to the death penalty. In 2004, however, only one out of three survey respondents expressed opposition.” Edith Bogue, “Does the Seamless Garment Fit? American Public Opinion”, Consistently Opposing Killing: From Abortion to Assisted Suicide, the Death Penalty, and War, ed. Rachel M. MacNair and Stephen Zunes (Westport, CT and London: Praeger, 2008) 73.

44 As Rudolph J. Gerber and John M. Johnson point out: “While it [the death penalty] is in reality rarely used, it is front-and-center of state and national debates, and since the debacle of the Willie Horton ads during the Michael Dukakis campaign few office holders or seekers can ignore it. The death penalty is an emotionally charged issue, so those on the campaign trails can tap into it to generate emotional gravitas for their campaign.” Rudolph J. Gerber and John M. Johnson, The Top Ten Death Penalty Myths: The Politics of Crime Control (Westport, CT and London: Praeger, 2007) 121.


48 The challenging aspect of the series derived from the characterization of Erick MacCormack’s Will Truman, who fit well into a main-stream model of masculinity and was meant to be a multidimensional character involved in serious situations. However, the hilariously infantilized Sean Hayes’ Jack MacFarland, the supporting role of a saucy gay man, arguably stole the show, contributing significantly to the popularity of the series. Kathleen Battles and Wendy Hilton-Morrow assert that “[w]hen Will & Grace took to the airwaves in September 1998, it broke new ground, offering the first gay male lead on U.S. broadcast television. By its third season, the situation comedy was one of 22 shows that portrayed gay or

Chapter Two

Reconstruction: Shakespeare’s Globe’s *The Merchant of Venice*

Audiences certainly prefer the more “authentic” modes of production.¹

The Gospel, too, is carnival.²

Inspired by Deconstruction, postmodernity has set skepticism, or the disposition to dismount generally accepted ideas, as its ultimate goal. Because *Merchant* seems to be a particularly open-ended playtext, staging conventions oriented by Deconstruction appear to favour the emergence of its transhistorical dimension, which relies significantly on the concretization of its multidimensionality. Accordingly, self-deconstructive directorial approaches tend to render productions of *Merchant* immune to one-dimensional resolutions and while foregrounding perplexity, that is, stagings that raise more questions than provide answers. On the basis of this argument, any staging of *Merchant* that sets out to use the source text to reconstitute the theatre for which Shakespeare wrote debilitates the playtext’s potential for transhistoricism in that it prioritizes the fossilization of conclusive stances. In this chapter, I examine Shakespeare’s Globe’s *The Merchant of Venice*, a lively production that achieved a reasonably fruitful balance between the concerns with the past and the present except for two essential elements that cost the production an ampler alignment with the transhistorical: the characterizations of Shylock (John McEnery) and Portia (Kirsty Besterman) as stock characters of a comedy of manners. The Globe’s pronouncements about these matters (on the company’s website
Shakespeares-globe.org and in the production’s playbill) imply that the ordering principles for these characterizations derived from the company’s utopian project of reconstructing original practices. Conversely, McEnery’s studied harmlessness suggests the opposite: excessive caution with the political hot potato of Merchant’s alleged anti-Semitic stance might have prompted the actor to downplay his part. Likewise, Portia’s depiction as a prototypical romantic heroine avoided ambiguities inherent in the character. In addition to the shortcomings of Merchant’s staging per se, the company’s politics of audience domestication seriously compromised the production in that it was at odds with the license proposed by carnivalization, which the staging underscored and yet limitedly explored. Despite the absence of a remarkable Shylock and the incongruence between the staging and the machinery that framed it, the Globe’s 2007 Merchant contributed interesting theatricality to the company’s theatrical culture.

Despite having both staged and hosted productions with patently contemporary conceptions of early modern playtexts since its second season Shakespeare’s Globe founded its image upon a concept that could be described as “archeology” of the picturesque when it launched its first season with an all-male-cast-in-period-costume production of Henry V (1997), marketed as a reenactment of the original practices. Thus, despite the fact that the new Globe, as John H. Astington notes, “is not a replica of its predecessor, but a reconstruction based on the best knowledge available at the end of the twentieth century,” its mechanisms of promotion and publicity imply that patrons can journey into the past through the touristic exploration of a building evocative of both the general history of the European civilization and the particular cultural history of the Bankside. For this reason, the audience-governed horizon of expectations of any early
modern play performed at the Globe, irrespective of the styles of its staging, is delineated by a geographically based fetishization of the past. As a case in point, the producing company’s official website, a comprehensive source of information about the arts complex, advertises workshops about “Shakespeare’s scripts in relation to the stage for which they were written.” The Globe, in implying that Shakespeare’s scripts were specifically written for a single type of stage, manipulates a body of knowledge; in doing so, it magnifies the scope of its auditorium, promoted as a site of privilege for the staging of “Shakespeare” because of its “authenticity.” The company’s website does state that the plays were also performed “for the Queen at court and in private houses for important members of the ruling class.” Nevertheless, this conflicting piece of information with respect to the original practices’ need of space adjustment is posted on a different page. Therefore, the contradiction may easily pass unnoticed, particularly by non-specialists.

In addition to the fact that our knowledge about the acting style of Elizabethans and Jacobean players is speculative, it is impossible for a contemporary company to reproduce the working conditions of the original practices for a variety of irreconcilable discrepancies between both historical periods: first, because the early modern troupes changed venues according to the class of their audiences, performance adaptability was an essential condition for them, whereas travelling with a production for contemporary touring companies means that the season at a particular theatrical site has finished; second, the labour regulations that protect twenty-first-century actors prevent them from having to master the large number of parts in rotating repertory that the Tudor and Stuart ensembles had to know by heart; third, current production standards, particularly the consistency in precise blocking, subject actors to directorial control, while the original
players had room for constant experimentation; finally, contemporary safety regulations inescapably impose their mark on both visual and operative aspects of the building. Having strategically minimized these historical discrepancies, the company’s marketing strategy has been bearing fruit. With an identity grounded on what W. B. Worthen calls “theatrical performativity as a field of historical recovery,”\(^5\) the arts complex has become popular: its “three activities [performances, exhibitions, and workshops] together attract more than 750,000 people per annum.”\(^6\) According to Andrew Gurr, the Globe “has turned out to be easily the most commercially successful of all England’s theatres offering Shakespeare onstage.”\(^7\)

Popularity, which is consistent with the Globe’s mythical rationale of authenticity, besides being indeed a high-priority item on the producing company’s agenda, is an essential marketing strategy. For this reason, the horizon of expectations of the theatre’s potential viewing community is delineated with yet another problematic assertion: “During Shakespeare’s time, play-going was a popular activity. People from all social backgrounds attended public playhouses.”\(^8\) My crucial point of contention here is not the historical accuracy regarding the frequency of poor playgoers, but the oversimplification with which the Globe deals with a highly contentious issue. Correspondingly, whilst Ann Jennalie Cook challenges the unrestricted inclusiveness of the early modern lowest social classes by asserting that the “common people [who] worked desperately hard for a few meager pennies [. . . ] had little to spare for luxuries like theater,”\(^9\) Andrew Gurr affirms that, “the yard was for the poor and unemployed,”\(^10\) and Bernard Capp leads us into hopeless skepticism by maintaining that, “[w]e will never be able to establish the precise social composition of playhouse audiences.”\(^11\) The argument against popularity seems to
be objectionable if we consider that Cook herself registers the presence of the “Penny Stinkards”\textsuperscript{12} (as the original groundlings referred to themselves) in the amphitheatres. However, Mary Ellen Lamb’s recent study on English Renaissance popular culture suggests that the concept of popularity associated with the notion that lower and higher status groups shared their subjectivities with a sense of interconnectedness and agency was “produced by elite and middling sorts as a means of coming to their own self-definition.”\textsuperscript{13} Amidst this controversy, what seems to be indisputable is that, regardless of how nuanced the layers of poor playgoers were in early modern London, the very use of the architectural structure of the playhouses leaves no doubt that class distinction was a given in the audience composition of English Renaissance theatre. Whether or not it is correct to characterize these practices as “popular” according to the proportion of poor playgoers who indeed patronized them, the central question here is the importance of historicism in the generative power of the transhistorical: what is at stake is not at all the replication of the socio-economic range of inclusiveness of the original practices but the reconfiguration of the micro-political framing of the theatrical event that unified a heterogeneous viewing community. After all, as Alexander Leggatt persuasively argues, “‘popular’ does not necessarily imply a particular social class; it implies a kind of taste,”\textsuperscript{14} which was shared by the aristocrat, the educated as well as by whoever managed to spare a few pennies for entertainment regardless of how much sacrifice it took for them to afford the experience of bracketing themselves off exploitation for a few hours. In any event, as I will argue later, Shakespeare’s Globe falls short of promoting the sense of “popular” that seems to characterize the English Renaissance theatre. Nonetheless, since the nostalgic interest in an imagined “merrie Engelande” is as old as Renaissance
itself, it does not take much effort for the Globe to generate an expedient conception of the past and inculcate it in the horizon of expectations of its average viewing community, which includes tourists and guided groups of school students (both national and international) on educational expeditions at Southwark.

The nostalgic interest that surrounds theatrical events at the Globe is largely conceived as what the company’s current artistic director, Dominic Dromgoole, calls a “pervasive aura of warmth and enchantment.” Of course this is hardly consistent with the actual atmospheric conditions of the historical Globe. To make it truly authentic, the company would have to resign to present-day asceticism and scatter the grounds with rotting fruit and urine, as well as spread some aggressive prostitutes and fruit-mongers throughout the crowd. Conversely, besides the venue’s architecture, marketed as replicating the amphitheatre of which Shakespeare had a share, the Globe’s particular ambiance owes its attributes to other two important features: its location in central London, two hundred yards northeast from the recently discovered foundations of the old Globe; and the substantial media coverage of which it has been a target even before its construction started. Thus, the Globe’s image, shaped upon the grounds of a past that appears to be more tangible than it really is, has raised the performance venue to the status of one of the “nodal points on the contemporary theatrical map,” as Robert Shaughnessy defines it.

The Globe, being a high-profile arts complex that attracts not only local playgoers but also visitors interested in a reconstructed prospect of history, has been lengthily scrutinized and has generated both supporters and objectors. Claims that the reconstituted playhouse overexpresses its authenticity and, “finds its place,” in Robert Butler’s
phrasing, “on the tourist map somewhere between Madame Tussaud’s, the London Dungeon and the Hard Rock Café,” are countered by the conviction that it constitutes “rarified scholarship.” In fact, since Sam Wanamaker gave substance to the new Globe’s project, the repertory company’s mandate of “authenticity” has been significantly reframed. The utopian agenda of faithfully reenacting the original practices materialized in such an extreme mode, that actors performed wearing replicas of period undergarments. The company declared that this procedure informed the performers’ acting style: their movement was influenced by a certain degree of discomfort, which in turn uncovered knowledge about the original practices. Nonetheless, besides the conclusive evidence regarding the discomfort caused by the early modern clothes, the highly divulged procedure did not have any bearings upon the artistic achievements of this production. Apart from the additional interest that the intimate attire might have added to the fetishization both of the past and of the bodies of the performers, onstage they were not perceptible by the audience, either as visual items or as physical behaviours. This preciousness therefore revealed the amount of cultural and financial capital that did not have any practical application for the scope of the medium except for the Globe’s promotion and publicity. On the other hand, despite resorting to marketing strategies that misleadingly connect its stagings with an “invented tradition” of the original practices, the repertory company soon broke its founding paradigm and started generating what Rob Conkie phrases as “anti-authentic productions.” Thus, the company has also ventured on experimental projects that audaciously distance its practices from the binding form that the Tudor and Stuart theatre might have taken. Hence, the Globe’s present concern with recovering the past is a non-exclusive and yet
fundamental parameter whose scope in fetishizing the past is its touristic appeal rather than the unattainable reproduction of a dead style of staging early modern plays.

The most evident commonality that the Globe shares with early modern repertory companies is the struggle to draw as many paying patrons as possible to its auditorium and to keep rivet them riveted throughout the shows. This challenge causes the specter of profit-making to hang over the enterprise in a crucial mode: although the contemporary spectatorship conforms to highly controlled behavioural norms, its appreciation still functions as much as a dictator as it did when no etiquette prevented playgoers from expressing disapproval. Because the company does not count on state subsidy, it is vital for the Globe to arouse not only favourable response but also its corresponding word of mouth, particularly important for a mode of entertainment that overlaps tourism – since a significant part of a tourist’s routine consists of evaluating the attractions of sites of interest. Accordingly, in terms of the style of its stagings, the company produces what Worthen qualifies as “garrulous and energetic performativity,” that is, codified behaviours that explicitly aim to captivate the attention of viewers. In deploying this vigorous performativity, Shakespeare’s Globe’s productions gravitate towards the transhistorical. On the one hand, the Globe’s concern with success justifies a pull towards the past in that its theatrical events ultimately propose pleasurable storytelling in action. On the other hand, responsive to the current reverberation of early modern dramaturgy, the company fashions staging conventions that transcend the historical period represented and invite the audience to see the unfamiliar with the familiar contour of present-day contextualization: directorial conceptions associate easily recognizable contemporary references with the cultural source of the staged action. As a result, whoever shares
cultural intersections with Shakespeare’s theatre may relate to the situations represented. This is why the company is apt to produce “what we don’t know, yet are obliged to invent,” in Susan Bennett’s phrasing. Invention is particularly compulsory in the performing arts, whose condition of ephemerality requires endless reenactment and reinstating. In this light, the functionality of the reconstructed wooden O is that of a frame, which, although secondary in terms of what really matters for a compelling production, makes a significant difference in the presentation of the theatrical event. In addition, Pauline Kiernan notes that the Globe’s cautious research on a construction technique that “goes back to the year 2400 BC” really amounts to a sophisticated simulacrum that validates the fetishization of the past as an experience of sightseeing.

The visibility of the new Globe’s money-making structure reassures both playgoers and visitors of the transparency of an environment fashioned upon the distant past in order to provide a gamut of experiences that interconnect with tourism. While it is undeniable, as Diana E. Henderson argues, that market forces “have created a strange hybrid at the new shrine,” the promotion of the signifier “Shakespeare” as sightseeing per se is not necessarily a regressive proposition. It is necessary to suspend a scholarly predisposition to view tourist performances as futile entertainment in order to verify whether they generate compelling stagings. After all, Richard Schechner observes, “[i]t is common wisdom to disparage tourism and tourist performances as shallow and tawdry, a pastime for the rich [. . . ]. Tourists yearn for the “authentic” and the “real,” even as most of them know they are being fed the ersatz and the invented. Although all this is too often true, it is not always the case, nor is it the whole story.” In addition, “sightseeing is a form of ritual respect for society,” as Dean MacCannell reminds us. Respect for society
is exactly what progressive values advocate. For this reason, suspending judgment about the Globe’s authenticity and welcoming the venue as the closest existing reconstitution of an original amphitheatre playhouse is a procedure whereby viewers honour that a culture of the past still contributes its legacy to the fruition of the present. Entertainment always requires conscious mechanisms of production and artifices of display in the least manicured sites as in the most staged ones; and even “[h]aving a famous anthropologist,” as MacCannell argues, “explain your experience to you in terms that go beyond touristic representation is staged authenticity par excellence.”²⁵ The Globe’s business enterprise, founded on a geographically-based staged authenticity, which has enabled the new theatre to successfully emerge against a background of well-established cultural attractions counting exclusively on private donations and on its own profit, has found a place of respect in one of the world’s most theatrical societies. My assumption regards not only the frequent and touristic enactment of the state, such as the Change of the Buckingham Palace’s Guards and the unique pomp and circumstance of a cult “family business” that stands out among any other monarchies, but also the Parliament-chartered theatrical culture. According to Jeffrey H. Huberman, James Ludwig, and Brant L. Pope, “[p]robably no other society is as acculturated to theatregoing as the British, who consider accessible theatre a virtual birthright.”²⁶ Exclusively in terms of the Globe’s theatrical events, however, the touristic representation of the past does not replace or overwhelm the force of the present generated by the individual presences of talented actors and the unifying conception of an inventive director.

Although I agree with Shaughnessy that the Globe’s location and configuration promote “a complex, ragged network of encounters, negotiations, and transactions spun
around the stage rather than centered upon it,” as soon as the play starts, the stage becomes the centre of gravity of the theatrical event. If it is patent that “one’s eye is drawn relentlessly away from onstage action and towards fellow audience members,” it is even more the case that at the Globe playgoers are living pieces of a particular kind of performative installation: their agency consists of being visible recipients of a ludic interaction whose essential rule is to exchange the gravity of their daily lives for the lightness of the farcical world represented onstage. Accordingly, the Globe’s trajectory demonstrates that period costume and setting as well as the simulacrum of a genuine thrust theatre, albeit important components of its image, are secondary items for the journey into the interstices of the past and the present; a persuasive embodied performance that tells a well-structured story, on the other hand, is indispensable, particularly if the story is canonical and fuels debate.

It is unsurprising that the Globe had mounted a play that can prompt discussion over its suitability to contemporary stagings such as *Merchant* before. Nevertheless, there must be sufficient time between stagings. The viewing community must be enticed by novelty in most theatrical cultures, particularly in London, where unimpressed responses by viewers over-familiarized with “Shakespeare” onstage are customary. A decade separates the Globe’s 2007 *Merchant* from its 1998 counterpart, directed by Richard Olivier, who was observant both of the genre “tragicomedy” and of the producing company’s emphasis on the engagement with the past. This production, which played in repertory with *As You Like It*, Thomas Middleton’s *A Mad World*, and Thomas Dekker and Middleton’s *The Honest Whore*, was “clearly the centerpiece of the season,” according to Lois Potter. The 1998 *Merchant* is classifiable by Conkie’s nomenclature as
a “mostly authentic” production, with “mixed sex casts,” in contradistinction to “the most authentic: all male, representations of early modern costume and staging.”

The 1998 Merchant explored formal elements from the Commedia dell’Arte and, by mixing period doublets, robes, and dresses with modern styles, “brought to life a sixteenth-century Venetian Rialto as a crossroad of mercantile cultures and races [ . . . ] while slipping out from under the play’s gritty topics.” From Nina da Vinci Nichols’ perspective, the Globe’s first production of Merchant capitalized significantly on the picturesque past and “left behind” a number of “crucial issues” such as “the psychological and moral knot of anti-semitism.” Conversely, “[t]he casting of a German actor,” [Norbert Kentrup] according to Richard Proudfoot, set up an unexpected, and complicating, potential anti-German prejudice against Shylock. This potential was exploited with some skill. To Globe audiences Shylock was audibly alien, while in terms of the play’s dynamic he was also the superior of every other character, until he met his match in Portia. No prejudice against him could extend to Jessica or to his co-religionist Tubal. Otherwise the production did little to massage audience sympathies. Laying its emphasis on clear and detailed story-telling, it allowed those sympathies to grow and change as the play progressed. Agreeing with Proudfoot, Potter asserts that Kentrup’s interpretation was “finely nuanced” and “gave the character not only dignity but an element of mystery.” Alluding to psychological and moral issues triggered by Merchant, Potter adds that, “[w]hat this Shylock had in common with his antagonist Antonio [Jack Shepherd] was a capacity for human affection as well as for hysterical hatred [and w]hat he had in common with [ . . . ]
Portia [Kathryn Pogson] was a respect for argument.” Avowing the stimuli provided by subtleties of staging conventions, Potter adds that, “[Shylock] listened to, and seemed moved by, the famous speech with which she [Portia] answered him.” Apparently the 1998 Merchant was more interesting than what da Vinci Nichols regards as, “a Shakespearean entertainment of some sort.” After all, the characterization of Shylock by a German actor in the country that had a leading role against the Nazi occupation of Europe was an instigating proposition whereby Shylock was embodied by a national who reminded the audience of the most implacable aggression against Jews ever committed. Thus, the archetypal Other played by the archetypal Self turned into the displaced Other by geographical relocation. The memory of numerous British lives claimed by the war against Nazi Germany was an important element of the audience-governed aspects of reception of this staging, especially at a time when Nazism is such a sensitive issue with respect to a new generation of Germans. In addition, the staging of a tragicomedy is a risky form of art because ineffective attempts to elicit laughter and to arouse emotions are among the most frustrating theatrical occurrences from the standpoint of the audience members and the theatre practitioners alike.

It appears that the Globe’s 1998 Merchant took risks in its carnivalizing approach, which provoked “mixed reactions” by blurring the dividing line between life and art. Potter claims that Marcello Magni’s Launcelot: “seemed to be pretty good at guessing which spectators would be least likely to object to ice-cream cones in their hair.” Nevertheless, a number of audience members “threatened to sue,” suggesting that the pact between theatre practitioners and audience members must be grounded on reciprocal respect, particularly when it is authenticated by an institutional framework.
Consistent with its mandate, the Globe’s investment in “symbolic capital” for the 2007 Merchant was allocated in order to validate its image as a transmitter of high culture. The playbill was carefully designed to offer patrons the opportunity to acclimatize with the production-governed aspects of reception and included information on the arts complex, the play, its historical context, and the director’s view. Unsurprisingly, the configuration of the playbill resembled an exhibition booklet, luxuriously protected by a waxed cardboard cover illustrated with a photographic view of the Globe’s stage: a perspective of the painted ceiling foregrounding one of the sturdy Corinthian pillars that support the “heavens.” While implying the smallness of groundlings, the upward viewpoint of the illustration magnified the grandeur and traditionalism of the company that had produced the Shakespearean spectacle. The biographies of the crew and cast laid out well-established credentials for the most part: Rebecca Gatward (director), also a scholar and a dramaturge, was credited with various productions, including three for the Royal Shakespeare Company; McEnery, a renowned veteran with works in the theatre, cinema, and television; Besterman, whose credits included a production of Othello with Cheek by Jowl; Dale Rapley (Antonio), with an extensive career spanning the theatre, television, and radio, had already worked in a staging of Merchant for the Ludlow Festival; and Liz Cooke (designer), who contributed an operatic background to the Globe’s 2007 Merchant.

Cooke’s setting was unusually elaborate for a theatre company that has the reputation for reproducing the original practices: jutting out from the stage right was a massive wooden jetty, and from the stage left an equally solid wooden bridge (the Rialto), which the actors used for entrances and exits; shuttered windows suggested
narrow alleyways of interlinking shops, where anonymous and major characters traded.
The reproduction of Venetian picturesque sites inescapably evoked the past because
Venice itself, at least its historical centre, is indeed an open air museum. In addition,
early modern costumes stressed the pastness of the production. Therefore, regardless of
the Globe’s evident departure from the original practices, the setting was readable as an
engagement with the past by average viewers. Thus, here we come across a curious
occurrence: despite resulting from the pull of the present, the setting was conservative – a
conundrum that prompts the question: how can a contemporary issue generate an
ordering principle that foregrounds preservation of the past? The answer to this question
does not lie, as it could seem at first sight, in transhistoricism, or the creative conflation
between the engagements with the past and the present, but in the relationship of
*Merchant* and the logical scope of the medium: the production of compelling scripted
performativity necessarily involves innovation, which shapes meaning in alignment with
and in opposition to a historically fashioned perspective of the script. Accordingly, an
investigation of the extant iconography of *Merchant*’s performance history reveals that
remarkable settings have explicitly represented Venice at least since the nineteenth
century. For instance, according to James C. Bulman, a chiaroscuro sketch, designed on a
panel by William Telbin for Act 2 of Charles Kean’s 1858 production, portrays the Rialto
with stylized verisimilitude in impeccable perspective. Conversely, Bulman reports,
Theodore Komisarjevsky’s “set for Venice,” for his own 1932 staging, was “a topsy-
turvy array of brightly-coloured buildings and bridges at odd angles, staircases that defied
perspective, dizzying towers, barber poles, and a Bridge of Sighs that split right in two
before the eyes of the audience.” Therefore, whereas the former representation of
Venice deployed the geometrically calculated technique of perspective to create a defined sense of illusion, the latter utilized non-sense to destroy illusion, which had been exhaustively explored before Modernism. Each historical period has its own reasons for fashioning styles. As for the Globe’s 2007 Merchant, although the jetty and the Rialto were finely constructed pieces, they did not contribute any innovative input to the play’s performance history.

The landing jetty and the bridge were indicative of conservatism because they extended the scope of the Globe’s “archeology” of the picturesque as though the replicated playhouse hosted a replica of Venice, itself valuable as fetishization of the past themselves. In order to protect the pieces of setting amidst the yard, the Globe assigned the ushers the role of security guards in disguise. The authoritarian politics of vigilance enacted by the ushers reinforced the intersection shared by the company with museums and art galleries, where the relationship of viewers and the cultural artifacts is often shaped by distance and mediated by surveillance. The fact that the Globe’s artifacts were indeed theatrical props, however, suggested that this intersection impinged on the 2007 Merchant: the journey into the past was accomplished at the expense of the suppression of the groundlings’ sense of partaking in the excitement onstage. Ultimately, although the woodworks added a certain Venetian ambience to Merchant, they subtracted sympathy from the audience reception of the show. The Rialto and the jetty, despite their functionality (that is, enabling actors’ entrances and exits through the yard), did not give much scope for games; more importantly, they were elements of disjunction between the audience and the theatrical event. Incidentally, this is a remarkable example of the encroachment of contemporary safety regulations and liability issues mentioned above.
Gurr regards “such inventions and alterations” as “fashionable but unnecessary extras, the sorts of tricks that can easily be done in other theatres but which are betrayals of the design features of the Globe.” The 2007 Globe’s Merchant’s setting was far removed from the transhistorical because of how it predetermined the politics of interaction with the audience; it completely failed in taking the audience into the heart of the theatrical experience of the cultural source: political license. As Cook reminds us, the original playgoers’ “opportunity to display a power denied elsewhere” was such that “the action in the audiences competed with the entertainment on the stage.” The “Penny Stinkards,” despite being subjects of an absolutist state, experienced a sense of liberation in the theatre, which was a site of subversion of the official culture. In contrast, the principles that governed the Globe’s 2007 Merchant’s conservation of the conservative setting matched the pervasive sense of uneasiness that has filled contemporary London with surveillance cameras everywhere. Thus, mediated by an authoritarian rationale, which took control of every variable of its business machinery, the Globe’s 2007 Merchant reduced groundlings to potential hooligans – spectators not entitled to embody the license dramatized before their eyes. I will return to the politics of vigilance as embodied by the ushers as I explain how the production established its staging conventions and prescribed the protocol of the theatrical event.

A procession of priests equipped with a small but resonant bell made its way from the patio into the auditorium, indicating that the show was starting and encouraging the patrons that were still outside the auditorium to proceed towards their seats or spots among the other standing groundlings. Properties representing commercial goods, such as explicitly anachronistic sacks with the logotype “CAFÉ DO BRASIL,” circulated on the
stage and above the heads of patrons standing in the yard. The establishment of conventions indicated that the production was serious about not being serious. The liminality of the 2007 Globe’s *Merchant* made it clear that the atmosphere to be shared by the audience was buoyed up with lightness. The staging was carnivalized in such a way that the force of the past and the force of the present intertwined without major illusionistic pretensions. In this world of overt make-believe, while Shylock prefigured one of his lines, “What, Jessica” (2.5.3), a large wooden sailing ship was carried onto the jetty, and (obviously) airplanes flew over the Globe, reminding the public of the distance between the early modern period and the twenty-first-century fruition of its echoes. Launcelot Gobbo (Craig Gazey), enunciating his pre-show line with a hilarious Northern English countryman’s accent, assertively instructed the audience to switch off their “futuristic instruments of the devil, including what you call mobiles and cameras.” This absurd turn of phrase, rooted in the interpenetrability of two historical periods with extremely distinguished epochal markers, had the double function of domesticating the public while poking fun not only at the script’s representation of religious austerity, but also at the production’s interplay between the pulls of the past and the present, and at Launcelot’s pronouncement itself. Thus, Gatward deployed carnivalized metatheatricality in order to ridicule a broad range of ordering principles of the production: the theme of cultural intolerance, the fetishization of the past, and the authority of the producing company itself. Nonetheless, in making it clear that no interactive response was expected from the audience except for their laughter, Launcelot also imparted that the authority of the performance was not to go unobserved. The journey into the past was to be taken by the patrons without disruptive behaviour and under the clear leadership of the performers,
whose social safeguards prevented the audience from any mechanical reproduction of the show. Although Launcelot used the imperative playfully, he unambiguously established that comic inversion was only valid within the limits of the performers’ space, which at times merged with the groundlings’ space, but only in terms of physical proximity – never in terms of the distinction between the roles of those who acted and those who passively appreciated the acting. Therefore, the borderline of the ensemble and the spectatorship was blurred in terms of space occupancy, but clearly delineated in terms of the prescriptive roles of actors and spectators. Accordingly, the actors never encouraged the groundlings to participate in the preliminary actions that aimed at firming the pact between theatre practitioners and audience members.

The unambiguous divide between activity and passivity set the tone of the entire theatrical experience. Considering that a high percentage of the groundlings consisted of adolescents, notoriously ready for mockery, the liminal input sounded charming and yet assertive of its establishment of authority. “Performing at the Globe,” as Worthen notes, “involves being given a kind of ‘freedom’ while seeing that it is not ‘abused.’” Like school teachers enacting the motto “Don’t smile at them until Christmas,” the Globe’s 2007 Merchant’s preliminary actions implied that the actors, performing behind a “fourth wall” despite the visibility of the auditorium, would not effectively interact with the audience until the time for gently thanking the applause with rehearsed bows and smiles. This binary of power relations revealed an obsessively methodical practice without equivalent in the early modern theatre.

In this strictly controlled environment, the only transgressive behaviours in the auditorium were performed by the actors: Leander Deeny, dressed as an Elizabethan
woman and covering his face with a Venetian carnival mask, selected a male groundling, took his mask off, revealing that he was a cross-dresser, affectedly blinked at the chosen counterpart, sent him a sensual kiss and masked himself again. Afterwards, he walked over to the next targeted male playgoer in the yard. The reiteration of this action enabled patrons to take account of the cross-dresser’s staged flirtation. Finally, the performer strolled towards the stage, sat on a barrel facing Antonio and replicated the gesture played opposite the male groundlings beforehand. Antonio shied away from the transgendered lady, who immediately left the stage, while Antonio crossed over to his Venetian friends and delivered the play’s very first line: “In sooth I know not why I am so sad” (1.1.1). In employing an early modern staging convention, that is, cross-dressing, the director interlaced the unscripted staging convention with the performance of Merchant in such a way, that Antonio’s alleged homosexuality immediately emerged as an implied hypothesis in the audience’s “horizon of expectations.” The unscripted staging convention that set up Antonio’s characterization was simultaneously an efficient form of engagement with the past (the convention of a cross-dressed male actor) and with the present (the representation of explicit homosexuality). This transhistorical gesture humorously produced concrete meaning out of a notoriously vague opening line. The establishment of staging conventions of the Globe’s 2007 Merchant was consistent with the semantic density of a production pervaded by airy frolicsomeness.

Definitely less playful and charismatic, however, were the interventions of the ushers – all of them volunteers who, apart from preventing excessively enthusiastic groundlings from stepping onto the pieces of setting surrounding the stage, obstinately ensured that anyone who had paid £5 to stand in the yard did not occupy seats that cost
six times more. Worthen has accurately analyzed the Globe’s enforcement of the limitations of the audience’s freedom, and this surveillance was one the most frustrating aspects of the Globe’s 2007 Merchant. The unyielding control of the numerous ushers on the ground level was disruptive of the collective experience of the theatrical event. At the performances I observed from seats in the lower gallery, the borderlines stipulated by ticket prices were subverted by youngsters, who unobtrusively occupied empty seats during the performance. Demonstrating absolute control of the occupancy of the auditorium, the ushers proceeded in accordance with a didactic pattern: they asked the transgressors to show their tickets, lectured them about their wrongdoing, and ordered them to move out of the gallery. While the ushers could not at all be described as rude, their standardized phraseology and intonation rendered their “performance” an act of violation. Besides pointing rather embarrassingly to the theatre’s failure to sell out tickets, the intrusiveness of their enactment of absolute control of the relationship between the environment and the audience debilitated the force of the performance onstage. Although Gatward’s Merchant significantly relied on carnivalization, the production’s comic subversion was contradicted by the display of unrelenting power in the auditorium: apart from the reinforcement of the face value of the tickets, the company’s policy of domestication of transgressors was not prompted by any discomfort of playgoers, who invariably remained indifferent to the moves of the few daring groundlings. On the contrary, it made a few of them feel uncomfortable in relation to a disruptive action whereby the theatrical experience did not gain anything. More importantly, the ushers’ interventions insistently communicated that the production’s subversion did not have reverberating power, not even during the performance’s running
time. The Globe’s politics of domestication therefore neutralized the carnivalization of
the theatrical event, validated the official culture and exposed anxieties concealed
underneath the surface of an otherwise subversive production onstage. The company’s
obsessive concern with the business aspect of the event suggested that the touristic
representation outweighed the theatrical experience: the audience’s physical proximity to
the stage reproduced the viewing situation of sites of touristic attraction, where the
nominal value of the exhibits entailed rigorous amenability.

Commensurate with a managerial rationale that foreclosed any chances of
polemic between ensemble and spectatorship, Shylock was not staged as central to the
“focus of appreciation” of a production that privileged the comic at the expense of serious
considerations. Shylock’s gestures and line deliveries depicted an old Jewish
moneylender whose sweet-and-sour temperament rendered him as innocuous as a
comedy-of-manners grump. Shylock’s frailty was underlined by McEnery’s own, almost
skeletal, physical frame. This low-profile composition of one of Shakespeare’s most
coveted characters by mature actors did not render communicative Shylock’s obsessive
determination, without which his revenge was not received as awe-inspiring, especially
by contemporary audience members, who often regard Shylock as one of the play’s most
important characters, if not the most important. The Globe’s 2007 Shylock, in contrast,
was staged in pastels against a background of brightly coloured characterizations. The
resulting unemotional Shylock was too patent to be missed by critics: Chloe Preece
affirms that, “McEnery never let Shylock’s long-simmering anger at his position in
Venetian society get far from the surface;” Sam Marlowe defines McEnery’s acting as
“underpowered and oddly colourless;” to Natasha Tripney, the “very low-key, shuffling
performance from John McEnery, one free of grandstanding to the point where (sic.) that the most famous of speeches (“if you prick us, do we not bleed?”) is rattled off in an oddly resigned fashion rather than awkwardly fore-grounded as the moral centre of the play;” Lizzie Loveridge adds that, “Shylock (John McEnery) seems exhausted even at the start of the play;” Paul Taylor concludes that, “John McEnery gives such an anæmic performance as a cadaverous Shylock that the character’s memory fails to cast much guilt over the final act.” Hence, it was virtually consensual that the Globe’s 2007 Merchant Shylock’s pale trajectory was unable to arouse the audience’s sympathy for the character, particularly when this sympathy is implicitly solicited by the conclusion of the trial scene, which dramatizes Shylock’s uncommon downfall. McEnery’s performance, neither uproarious nor dramatic, to say nothing of tragic, was consistent and did not uncover any new meaning concerning either Shylock’s grief or the sectarian cruelties that exclude him. As a case in point, Shylock, after hearing the court’s unappealable decision of confiscating his fortune, looked pathetically incredulous; likewise, after learning about his forceful conversion, with the expression of an exposed counterfeit crank reluctantly making amends, he uttered: “I am content” (4.1.389). McEnery’s performance did not foreground the dehumanizing effects of a forceful alteration of identity – as if Shylock’s life as a Christian thereafter were not a predicament. Gatward’s resolution for the conclusive staging of Shylock was compatible with the staging of a “happy ending” that few scholars would regard as unproblematic. Shylock was so predictable, that I abstain from concentrating on the character’s depiction in order to try to explain a semantic density that was not there. Henceforth, instead of exploring the production’s most severe
deficiency, I will focus on its strengths in order to demonstrate how the directorial conception resisted a tragicomedy.

The Globe’s 2007 Merchant emphasized carnivalization in that it generated staging conventions of a comedy of manners, uncovering a strikingly comic reading of the play. Nonetheless, as I will demonstrate, the governing principles of this reading indicate its incompleteness: if Shylock was not part of the staging’s fulcrum, neither was any other character because this production lacked the dialogical power that would have been necessary to neutralize the scapegoat mechanism that is at the root of Merchant. Therefore, from a superficial point of view, this staging proposed an unquestionable carnivalized worldview. Nonetheless, this dimension was hindered from emerging in its plenitude because of the excessive relief given to lightness, a resolution ensuing from the pull of the present despite the historicist image that the Globe has and that Gatward iterated for this production. Discussing Antonio and Bassanio’s trajectories and their intersection with Shylock, I will point out the engagements with the past and the present in the sequence of the plot development.

Antonio was a nonchalant middle-aged gentleman unambiguously attracted to Bassanio (Philip Combus). As Andrew Haydon observes, Antonio and Bassanio “are here presented in an unambiguously romantic friendship, with the older merchant clearly playing sugar-daddy to his young, petty friend. When Antonio speaks of his love for Bassanio we are left in no doubt how serious he is.” Antonio’s infatuation made him pusillanimous, suggesting that he would submit to any of his best friend’s whims in the hope of being requited. Nevertheless, lacking the equivalent affection of the boyish Bassanio, Antonio was satisfied with the mere contemplation of the young man’s
salacious charm. The emphasis on Antonio’s homosexuality clearly resulted from a concern with the present, given that, in the early modern period, the representation of a same-sex rapport was necessarily allusive, as it could not avoid ambiguity: “the proper signs of friendship could be the same as those of same-sex passion,” as Alan Sinfield notes. In terms of the production’s artistic value, this obvious pull of the present was simultaneously unproductive and productive. On the one hand, as a contemporary cliché, Antonio’s homosexual infatuation *per se* did not contribute any revolutionary significance to Gatward’s *Merchant*. On the other hand, the unrequited-love-based interaction between Antonio and Bassanio, viewed through the lenses of (a truncated mode of) carnivalization, rendered a number of humorous gestures that contributed innovation to this *Merchant* – at the expense of producing a flatter result than what it might have been.

For example, in the scene where he persuades Antonio to lend him the money for the expedition to Belmont, Bassanio paused with perfect comic timing in the line: “And her name is Portia” (1. 1. 164), making it clear that he had difficulty in remembering the wealthy lady’s name. This simple comic routine denoted that Portia was a commodity, which, although valuable and genuinely desirable, had not yet been assimilated by the social climber. This initial interaction defined Bassanio as unusually persuasive and unscrupulous. Thus, when Antonio committed to helping him (“Go presently enquire, and so will I, / Where money is, and I no question make / To have it of my trust or for my sake” (1. 1. 182-4)), Bassanio celebrated his first victory by sealing the pact with an enthusiastic kiss on the reserved older man’s lips, prompting the audience to burst into laughter. Although a number of patrons might have laughed at the display of affection out
of homophobia, others were motivated by Combus’ particularly lighthearted manipulation of Bassanio as a saucy exploiter: like an adorable child stepping up mischievousness because his parents could not set limits. Antonio appeared to experience repressed ecstasy out of this insignificant reward. Such a prevailing mood denoted that neither Antonio nor Bassanio gained or lost anything of moral value because love was illusory in the face of the former’s despondency and of the latter’s pragmatism. This reading of Merchant distanced the production from the transhistorical dimension because it reduced Antonio’s embodiment of “official seriousness,” thereby attenuating Shylock’s persecution. Portrayed as entangled in a blind passion for his playful protégé, Antonio did not fully embody Merchant’s most oppressive depiction of the Self. Therefore, in the same way as Shylock’s characterization addressed the propensity for “unofficial seriousness” (his unmoved confrontation of Antonio) and his embodiment of “official seriousness” (his demand for the letter of the law) with discretion, Antonio was almost equally innocuous. This interpretation derived from the pull of the present under the pretense of engaging with the past: the apprehension of approaching Merchant’s intolerance buried irony as a politically strategic mode of discourse.

Fashioned according to the logic of truncated carnivalization, or of comedy barely permeated by seriousness, Antonio’s characterization as a man exceptionally concerned with his unrequited love outweighed his intolerance and therefore the moral unacceptability implicit in the play: Shylock’s social exclusion, or even worse, his perverse inclusion, conditioned by the forceful alterations of his identity. On the contrary, Gatward’s desired effect appeared to be the anaesthesia of the play’s grievances. Hence, in a nearly frivolous production, Antonio’s apparent unconditional Christian love (agape)
was portrayed through partial carnivalizing lenses, which did not explore the full extent of its corruptness. As Janet Adelman observes, Antonio “is a little too willing to embrace the knife, and too eager to have Bassanio witness his own private Imitatio Christi (“Pray God Bassanio come/ To see me pay his debt, and then I care not”; 3.3.35-36).”\textsuperscript{48} Thus, the staging convention of depriving Antonio of a significant part of his gravity departed from a fundamental concern of the play because it obfuscated the tension between laughter and “official seriousness.” Within the framework of carnival, mirth is the counter-ideological force against oppression (“official seriousness” and the willingness to succumb to it (“unofficial seriousness”). Therefore, “official seriousness” and “unofficial seriousness” must be represented so that they may be purified by laughter. Predominantly portrayed as a comic character, Antonio came across as a buffoonized Christian knight in the last Crusade as if he shifted away the focus from the unfulfilment of his homosexual desire towards the questionably fruitful mission of rescuing a Jew from eternal damnation – a reading that reduced Antonio to a flat romantic hero. This conception was certainly distant from Shakespeare’s \textit{Merchant} because Antonio’s sadness and its obscurity are crucial expressive properties of the playtext.

Breaking the production’s paradigm, however, two brief but intense moments of Antonio’s characterization exposed his “official seriousness” (his cruelty towards Shylock) and his “unofficial seriousness” (his deliberate self-victimization), suggesting that his embodiment of Christianity was not nurtured by \textit{agape} but by dogmatism. The first instance derived from an engagement with the past, as it foregrounded seriousness and was not framed by any specifically contemporary engagement: Antonio’s “official seriousness” was first brought forth clearly in the contrast between his interaction with
Bassanio (whom he addressed with obsequious tenderness) and with Shylock (whom he addressed with aggressive intolerance). Antonio’s double standards stood out when, after first appearing as an absolutely tolerant man, he confronted Shylock and aggressively tried to deprive him of the Jewish badge on his arm, scornfully delivering his line: “To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too” (1.3.123). Because Christian precepts, reiterating Jewish scriptures, highlight the importance of respectful treatment towards aliens, this serio-comic inflection suggested that, “[t]he generosity of Antonio might be,” as René Girard points out, “a corruption more extreme than the caricatural greed of Shylock.”

Thus, Antonio’s few instances of performance of intolerance expressed the corruption of Christian values: the refusal to welcome the Other, that is, the element that threatened destabilizing the fixedness of Venice, and consequently the Self, championed by the quixotic merchant. Antonio’s incapacity for resignation was particularly expressed in Bassanio’s reading of Antonio’s letter, in which he declared that, “all debts are cleared between you and I if I might but see you at my death” (3. 2. 315-17), a statement that uses the play’s recurrent lexicon of business in order to attach a condition to a pretense unconditional love. Symptomatically, this rare moment of Antonio’s characterization emerged in his absence from the stage. When Bassanio read the letter, a recording of Rapley’s synthetized voice overlapped Combus’ live reading in perfect sync, defamiliarizing a usually predictable moment of the play. Mediated by the technology of mechanical reproduction, this staging convention was patently derived from an engagement with the present and flagrantly disavowed the Globe’s nominal claims to historicism. This moment was definitely not comic; it modulated the production’s tendency to comicality by setting a deliberately undefined mood, halfway between the
sentimental and the ironic, temporarily suspending the implied major tone of the production; this moment therefore suggested that Gatward’s comedy yielded to gravity at times, and did it productively. The reception of Antonio and Bassanio’s simultaneous reading of the former’s letter oscillated between detachment and sympathy, prompting a defamiliarizing effect that evoked, as J. A. Bryant, Jr. phrases it, “an uneasy suspicion that the stark truth behind the surface of this comedy might just be uncomfortable and perhaps even intolerable.”

Rapley’s recorded voice communicated fear – a feeling opposed to the self-sacrificial impulse of agape in that, according to the Gospel: “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The man who fears is not made perfect in love” (John 4.18). Thus, the Globe’s enactment of the reading of Antonio’s letter disclosed resentment: from the Latin, re-sentire, to feel again. Gatward’s staging of this scene communicated Antonio’s inability to fearlessly set himself free from self-assertive action and disinterestedly lay down his life for his friend. Therefore, Antonio’s characterization imparted that this staging’s carnivalization, albeit incomplete, could disclose important elements of the playtext – particularly elements related to its relationship with the medieval tradition of counter-culture. This tradition still echoes today because it transcends a critique of ideologies. After all, “[t]he primary target of carnival,” as Ruth Coates argues, “is the captivity of the human spirit as such, its enslavement to fear.”

This awe-inspiring moment, however, was an exception in Gatward’s Merchant.

In being consistent with the governing principles of staging comedy, Gatward dramatized the conclusion of the trial scene in an incongruous major key. When Antonio required that, “[Shylock] presently become a Christian” (4.1. 383), he delivered the line
and gestured with unmistakable comic timing. It was not surprising, therefore, that numerous playgoers laughed at Antonio. These playgoers laughed at the line delivery *per se*. In other words, arguably this response did not derive from latent anti-Semitism, but from the astonishment prompted by the unbelievably outrageous rationale with which Antonio maneuvered the situation into Shylock’s forceful transformation. Peter G. Marteinson argues that one of the processes whereby the comic materializes is “relativization,” which is “[a] disjunction between the perception of one cultural entity and that of a second entity.”53 In this light, if viewers could not understand that forceful conversion was at odds with Christian scriptural precepts even by early modern standards, they could perceive the incongruity of Antonio’s behaviour, underlined by Rapley’s performance of immature vanity. Hence, Antonio’s characterization could be read as a comic inversion of the often assumed circumspection of institutionalized Christianity. In this way, Gatward’s *Merchant* exposed connections with early modern comedy and its intertextuality with the medieval tradition of representing the carnivalesque sense of life that Shakespeare borrowed from Erasmus Desiderius’ *The Praise of Folly*: it exposed the paradoxical betrayal of Christian precepts caused by force deployed to advance Christianity. Therefore, the comicality of this *Merchant* illuminated a vital theme of the playtext: hypocritical spirituality as an aspect of culture that suffocates freedom and suppresses difference, the reasons by which *Merchant*’s form is polyphonic. Considering *Merchant*’s polyphony, we must agree on the fact that, regardless of the meaning at which Gatward’s staging hinted, Shylock’s voice was muffled as if his last line was oddly delivered in the major key of the subsequent “happy ending.” As Alistair Smith asserts,
The Jew himself, played as a physically weak, unpleasant and ignoble comic villain by John McEnery, fits the mood of the production perfectly, yet he does not bring to the part the ambiguity which is often found in modern interpretations of the role. In doing this, director Rebecca Gatward’s reading allows us to laugh along with the play’s Christian characters, but ultimately robs the piece of its complexity. In many ways, this production’s greatest strength also proves its principal weakness.\(^5\)

The ambiguity and complexity to which Smith refers are explainable through the logic of polyphony. Thus, the governing principle of carnival demonstrates that pure comicality does not do justice to the staging of *Merchant*.

In foreclosing tension, the Shakespeare’s Globe 2007 *Merchant* could be viewed as the convenient materialization of the company’s framing of the theatrical event. The contrast between the staging’s profuse laughter and the company’s rigid politics of vigilance was illusory. Thus, the misleading disparity of Gatward’s production and its framing reflected the ideological practices that are ubiquitously criticized in *Merchant*’s exposition of the *theatrum mundi*. These ideological practices include the circumspection of high culture, which permeates Shakespeare’s Globe as an organization operating as forcefully as any other capitalist corporation. Since laughter is a powerful tool of Deconstruction, this *Merchant*’s potential subversive meanings might be viewed as a disservice to the new Globe’s management: they could sharpen the audience’s awareness of its repressive surroundings, and consequently of the disproportionate control exerted by the company, particularly of the ushers’ implacable policing of the yard. What is the scope of the theatre if not artistically making us more conscious of, and therefore less
manipulable by, the forces that shape what we call reality, which encompasses theatrical experiences? No wonder that Merchant dramatizes conscience in such an evocative mode in Launcelot’s monologue, which Gazey transformed into remarkable theatricality in Gatward’s production.

David Ellis, discussing “Launcelot Gobbo’s first appearance” in Merchant, states that, “[a]lthough it is a challenge to be funny that most actors habitually fail, the intention is clearly comic.” Gazey rose to the challenge: his performance, as suggested by his prominence in the pre-show, was a triumph of comic effects in this production. Explicitly embodying gluttony and lust, Launcelot expressed a conflict posed by human passions: where to draw the line between vigorously adhering to them and morbidly submitting to them? On the one hand, Launcelot was manifestly founded on the pull of the past because he incarnated the tradition of staging conscience. On the other hand, the fool was no less distinctly based on the pull of the present in that his characterization was grounded on an absolutely humane and communicative connotation, which immediately reminded playgoers of the corporeal experience it took in order that the actor, under the “mask” of a Shakespearean character, could captivate the undivided attention of the audience. Maxwell Cooter defines Gazey’s performance as “a Lancelot Gobbo who’s actually funny.” Alistair Smith asserts that, “Gazey is superb as a scene-stealing Launcelot.” Gazey achieved excellence by foregrounding mankind’s most elementary condition, that is, the experience of embodiment, as no conscience is possible without the mediation of a body. On the Rialto Bridge, Launcelot coveted a tray of beignets carried by a passing woman and stole one of the treats. Then, with the other hand, he took a T-bone out of his pocket and went on delivering his lines as he engaged in an imaginary
conversation with vacuity, the sweet, and the bone. While sorting through conflicting values and competing loyalties, Launcelot reenacted the biblical metaphor for temptation in the three great Abrahamic theological inheritances. Equipped with gestures and intonations that alternated between guilt and desire fulfillment, Launcelot materialized a binary value system in which moral accountability would be inexorably imputed to his decision. After all, moral dilemmas arise at the intersection of overlapping spheres of responsibility. The transgressive lack of gravity in Launcelot’s ridiculously melodramatic performance manipulated the reception of his deadly sins (the ones which refer to bodily indulgence) as charismatic rather than hideous. Laughter from the audience was virtually unanimous. The decision-making course of action reached its climax when Gazey fiercely raised the fist that was clenching the bone in a phallic reference and concomitantly delivered his line as though he were struggling with ravishing sexual desire: “( . . . ) my conscience is but a kind of hard conscience ( . . . )” (2.2.21-2). The barefaced allusion to what Bakhtin calls “material bodily lower stratum” produced an obscene comic permutation between the male genitalia, a bodily element often associated with irrationality, and conscience, an insubstantial element commonsensically viewed as the exclusive locus of rationality. The uncrowning of the seat of reason and crowning of embodied experience elicited the most explosive comic effects of the entire production. On the one hand, the semiotics of the carnivalized body, with its allusion to the grotesque, undermined the concept of a refined audience gathered to appreciate high culture. On the other hand, the staging of conscience reassured the audience about the speculative vigour of an uncomplicated theatrical experience. Just before going off-stage, the ravenous satyr put away the bone back in his pocket and smeared a little whipped
cream off the beignet on his nose, proleptically implying the resolution of his moral dilemma. Thus, by poking fun at the theme of unattainability of pure conscience in embodied experience, explicit in Lorenzo’s discourse on the music of the spheres, the Globe’s Launcelot suggested that, in Venice, the desire for social mobility trumped ethical considerations. As William W. Demastes points out, “[i]ntellectual, discursive insight provides valuable information, but, without a fully experiential, parallel, and multivalent dimension working beneath surfaces, that information promises little or no significantly creative memic growth.” Launcelot’s performance of conscience suggested that the traditional Vice-derived character could be recreated with aplomb in 2007. Thus, although cultural practices and their material bases are historical, moral dilemmas are transhistorical, and so are carnivalesque views of them.

Gazey’s “superficial” performance demonstrated that the Globe’s 2007 Merchant communicated intersubjective meanings, that is, meanings that could be understood by a large number of audience members, if not by all. In contrast to the other Launcelots that I observed for this study, Gazey performed his monologue with such clarity, that his lines reached the audience as if improvised. Thus, Gazey communicated intersubjective meanings not only because of his fine diction of the verbal signs, which ensured a true linguistic understanding among the contemporary playgoers who could understand early modern English, but more determinedly because of his vigorous expression of an experience that all human beings share: embodiment, which is transhistorical. The transhistorical dimension of Launcelot’s individual performance achieved excellence in the medium precisely because of its “recognition and recuperation,” in Michael D. Bristol’s phrasing, of the “initially uncanonical literary and social status” of the early
modern theatre. This recuperation was manifest in Gazey’s performance of conscience in that, as the etymon of “recuperation” suggests, it productively engaged with inheritance and disclosed meanings that are transhistorical and therefore eloquent nowadays. Thus, contrary to a twisted notion of transhistoricism as synonymous with conservatism, Gazey and Gatward’s transaction with the past owed its success to an innovative gaze; in generating an ingenious representation based on an uncommon association, Gatward and Gazey negotiated the performative codes that set standards for future stagings of Launcelot’s challenging monologue. The downside of Gazey’s distinguished performance, however, was not the fact that it made it more difficult for another actor to generate a comparably riveting interpretation of Launcelot, but that his presence was not matched by any other performer in the Globe’s 2007 Merchant.

Outstanding individual performances of minor characters, albeit memorable, cannot fill in the void left by less exciting protagonists, possibly underplayed due to a directorial conception, as was probably the case with Gatward’s comedy. Like Shylock’s characterization, Portia’s suffered from oversimplification. As Portia and Nerissa (Jenniffer Kidd) casually savoured spoonfuls of ice-cream, the cartoonish bust of an imposing male elder presided over the scene, highlighting that, “[i]n The Merchant of Venice,” as Edward Berry observes, “paternal control, while indirect, is absolute. Although Portia’s father is dead, his will dictates, to her dismay, the choice of a husband.” Making use of the false pull of the past, the Globe’s 2007 Portia was a formulaic romantic heroine who attained a “happy ending” by means of her tenacity in the face of obstacles. This depiction of Portia did not derive from an engagement with the past because Shakespeare’s Portia is not a cliché of romance. In addition, as has been
explained in the introduction, *Merchant’s “happy ending” is highly debatable, and Portia’s participation in the plot’s conclusion is exceptionally relevant to its reticent ambiguity. Therefore, the misleading pull of the past at stake in Gatward’s directorial conception was that of a concept handed down to us from a tradition that, albeit incorporated by Shakespeare, is deconstructed in *Merchant. Consistent with the overall principles of the staging, however, Portia’s characterization relied mostly on Besterman’s masterly comic timing. As Andrew Haydon affirms, “Kirsty Besterman makes a splendidly perky, saucy Portia.”

Rolling her eyes and gesturing like a comedy of manners stock character, Besterman set the psychological and emotional patterns of a bored and affluent heiress while the stereotyped wooers described by Nerissa materialized onstage. The pacing of Portia’s line delivery and body movement was consolidated when Nerissa asked her whether she remembered “a Venetian, a scholar and a soldier” (1.2.93). Besterman’s face glowed, hinting at fantasies that patrons could supply with their imaginations. Portia, enraptured by the stimulating remembrance of the young man, enthusiastically delivered the line: “Yes, yes, it was Bassanio!”, and hurriedly sounded evasive: “– as I think so was he called” (1.2.95). Thus, Portia was depicted as an adolescent in quest of her way into adulthood. Because her path towards adulthood was so full of obstacles, claiming her conscientious action, her trajectory was teleological in the sense that it pointed towards the acquisition of self-knowledge. Because this concept is profoundly embedded in romance material, Besterman’s interpretation could lead us to conclude that it attained a transhistorical dimension of Portia. After all, the medieval romance theme staged in this production still echoed in 2007. As Helen Cooper notes, “[e]ven now, journeying is deeply integrated with an idea
Nevertheless, the staging of Portia’s quest of identity resulted from an engagement with the forces of the present: Gatward’s show drew upon a reading of the script that, notwithstanding its connections with the past, discounted the complexity with which Portia is portrayed in *Merchant*.

Portia’s characterization as a capricious heiress humbled by the moral teachings of her journey is a present-day projection of the original practices. Shakespeare’s Portia, despite her subversion of the established order in terms of gender issues, embodies “official seriousness” when she denies Shylock the mercy she has previously required from him. In doing so, Portia paves the way for Antonio to suggest Shylock’s forceful conversion to Christianity. Portia’s embodiment of the *status quo*, even if momentary, is therefore a transhistorical aspect of the character. In depicting Portia as an impartial personification of justice, Gatward romanticized the past and engaged with the present just as when she jokingly broke the paradigm of travelling back in time by staging Portia and Nerissa leaving Belmont carrying travel satchels of distinctively contemporary design. The staging convention of setting time was briefly suspended by an alienation effect, which reminded the audience that sense of humour prevailed over any other governing principle in this “mostly authentic” production.

In order that sense of humour could prevail in Gatward’s *Merchant*, however, a few adjustments were needed. As a case in point, one of Portia’s most disgraceful lines nowadays, that is, “Let all of his complexion choose me so” (2. 7.79), was cut. Considering that this line’s editing is recurrent in contemporary productions, Gatward’s resolution was probably motivated by the historical, linguistic and cultural gap between the early modern period and the twenty-first century. Although the word “complexion” is
inevitably racialized nowadays, it “is not necessarily limited by Elizabethans to our modern sense of skin colour: for them that was merely one aspect of the human disposition dictated by *humour* theory,” as Hugh Macrae Richmond attests. According to the OED, “complexion” in the sense of “the natural colour, texture, and appearance of the skin” was registered for the first time in the extant literature in 1568 whereas, in the sense of “temperament,” its occurrence dates back to the thirteenth century with Chaucer. Hence, Portia’s line might have been a pun on Morocco’s ludicrously sanguine disposition and on his alien background. Because the word “complexion” has only one denotation in our time, it cannot serve as raw material for the enunciation of a pun. As a consequence, Portia’s line today is inescapably received as laden with repugnance. Consequently, Garward’s directorial editing betrayed the anxiety of dealing with a sensitive issue that did not fit into the Globe’s 2007 *Merchant*’s ordering principles. Gatward’s directorial editing was effective and craftily carried out by the tight transition between Portia’s exit and the entrance of numerous actors, who staged a lively masked pantomime of Jessica’s elopement and the consumption of her union with Lorenzo. Although editing the playtext was a normal procedure of the original practices, the elimination of Portia’s infamous line was prompted by a concern with the present: it was probably deployed in order to spare the production from issues that could have spoiled the desired effect of merrymaking. Therefore, the motivation for sweeping a sensitive line under the carpet of modern dramaturgy was grounded on the potential audience rejection of what would have been a racist feature of Portia. The editing was seamless because a mesmeric dumb show of Jessica’s elopement functioned as an interlude, reasserting the staging conventions of a comedy.
Therefore, it is remarkable that the Globe, despite its image of fetishization of the past, generated a *Merchant* whose underlying principles harboured the new in such a self-conscious mode. Presentness was particularly obvious when Bassanio commemorated the triumph of his expedition with the gesture of a football player after scoring a goal. The gimmick worked like a charm in that it made the spectatorship burst into laughter while accruing to the optimal flow of the performance. Nonetheless, in doing so, Combus considerably reduced Bassanio’s ambiguity. Hence, Bassanio conspicuously commodified Portia, who, cognizant of this state of affairs, came across as completely submissive to her infatuation. The fact that Portia’s acknowledgement of Bassanio’s priorities did not have any consequences upon her successive lines discredited both the gimmick and her unrealistic behaviour, which revealed a resigned woman.

The Globe’s 2007 *Merchant*’s predominant sense of humour dictated comic inputs even in the arguably most dramatic segment of the play, the trial scene. When Portia self-confidently addressed Shylock and Antonio: “I am informèd thoroughly of the cause. / Which is the merchant here and which the Jew?” (4.1.169-70), she realized, from the look of astonishment of the Venetians, that she had just committed a blunder, which was obviously unbecoming to a renowned judge. Her facial expression changed to embarrassment, and from this sudden state to hesitancy, with which she resumed her dialogue with the plaintiff and the defendant. Similarly to Combus’ sportive celebration of Portia’s conquest, the problem with Besterman’s gag at the trial scene was not circumscribed to its specific moment, which in reality had a transhistorical resonance. After all, as Maslen sensibly argues, Portia “embodies comedy in its most dangerous form, as the moralists saw it. She is a woman who smuggles herself into the male sphere,
thus feminizing it: a boy actor in drag: a prankster in the law courts, who plays with the letter of the law and makes it ‘light’. The inadequacy of this gesture was that, despite having indeed modulated her inflection, Besterman did not work out the psychological and emotional tracks suggested by her subsequent lines: in setting the trial scene’s initial tone as a prevailing pattern, Besterman did not make the transition to her embodiment of “official seriousness,” which makes Portia a hypocrite. Portia’s failure in carrying out the quality of mercy herself, precisely for its brevity and decisiveness, arguably dramatizes Merchant’s deepest fissure between the sacred and the secular, suggesting that she is as much of a deserter of the sacred order as Antonio and Shylock. Although this meaning may not be received by the audience, Portia’s betrayal of Christianity is engraved in the playtext, which implacably portrays a godless world. Subtracting Portia’s seriousness in the trial scene debilitates the power of laughter by exempting it from its purifying scope. Besterman’s interpretation ascribed impartiality to Portia, who thereby was readable as the personification of secular justice, beyond good and evil. Once more, the governing principle that transformed Portia into a lighthearted romantic heroine reduced the impact of the actress’ presence and consequently of the overall production.

According to the ordering principle of carnivalization, Gatward’s Merchant was deficient in composing the tension between the comic and the serious. Combus’ characterization as quintessentially comic was unproblematic because Bassanio does not seem to embody the two types of seriousness targeted by laughter, that is, oppression and self-victimization. On the contrary, McEnery’s, Rapley’s, and Besterman’s characterizations of Shylock, Antonio, and Portia lacked a fundamental dimension of their seriousness: Rapley, somewhere between his hysterical derision of Shylock and his
obsequious admiration for Bassanio, despite having expressed Antonio’s resentfulness, failed in giving relief to his penchant for dogmatism; McEnery, in depriving Shylock of his tragic facet, fulfilled an unfunny function in comedy where there was little room for him; Besterman, in dramatizing a vivacious champion of justice and self-emancipation, did not tie up the loose ends of Portia’s trajectory. As has been pointed out in the course of this chapter, the Globe’s 2007 Merchant set out to make Shakespeare’s playtext sound sweeter than it is.

The Globe’s status as a site for mainstream entertainment, the dramaturgical operations, and the framing of the production suggest that the governing principles of the theatrical event consciously suppressed the playtext’s determinedness concerning sensitive issues. As Lindsay Gardner puts it, “Gatward prefers to take the easier option of playing for laughs. It is certainly fun. In fact, it is quite the jolliest Merchant I have ever seen. But it feels like a cop-out, as if the director hopes that by playing up the slapstick we won't be too worried by the anti-semitism. You can mask it, but there is nowhere for it to hide.” Assuming that Gardner uses the term “anti-Semitism” in the sense that the playtext portrays ethnic intolerance, she identifies the fulcrum of Gatward’s Merchant’s shortcomings. Indeed, the theme of ethnic intolerance cannot be hidden, particularly from viewers who are aware of it. Nonetheless, Gatward’s production was a lesson that imparted how significantly this theme could be intelligently minimized, especially for spectators who are a hybrid of tourists and high-culture seekers, some of which had never had any other contact with the playtext – as multilingual recapitulations of the plot among audience members in intermission suggested. Thus, this staging of Merchant, on the one hand, was captivating in the sense that it skillfully manipulated the play in order that it
resulted in an incontrovertibly palatable theatrical event to the Globe’s viewing community. On the other hand, the show’s deliberate superficiality - like an unstated disclaimer whereby the producing company was exempted from eventual complaints – foreclosed further reflections on it. Hence, the Globe’s 2007 Merchant did not make a major mark in the performance history of the play because it did not invite the audience to visit the play’s integrity, only attainable through the confrontation of its polyphony. Instead, because the tragicomic nature of the carnivalizing script was too transgressive to be viewed by the Globe’s spectators, Gatward set the boundaries of the touristic exploration of the past by generating a theatrical event that globalized their tastes. Like a citric fruit genetically modified under the allegation that its natural tartness must be eliminated in order to suit mass consumption, Merchant’s subversion turned into undisturbed harmony.

Since aesthetic principles reflect their political underpinnings, it is important to conclude this chapter by remembering that the carnivalized uncrowning and crowning of authority in a contemporary liberal democracy does have transhistorical intersections with absolutist England. Nevertheless, audience reception appears not to be one of these commonalities, particularly with respect to the Globe’s 2007 Merchant. In addition to the fact that early modern playgoers were diligent listeners, the most striking difference between the original practices and the Globe’s production is that for Renaissance playgoers the theatrical experience was not framed by the excessive control of variables aiming at undisturbed success. Ironically, what could be further from the carnivalesque than a legally and culturally sanctioned performance of a Shakespeare play at the “authentic” Globe? Thus, in terms of the interaction between ensemble and spectatorship,
contemporary groundlings seem to have become less deserving of freedom of expression than the “Penny Stinkards.” Therefore, the transhistorical intersections between the original practices and the Globe’s 2007 *Merchant* can also be located in the political spheres that encapsulate both theatrical cultures. As Peter Baofu states, “[l]iberal democracy and authoritarianism do not have to be two mutually exclusive opposites as is misleadingly understood in conventional political wisdom of our time. In this way, democracy and non-democracy are much closer to each other than conventionally understood.” The Globe’s 2007 *Merchant* invites reflection about the contemporary view that the cultural source that provides the artifact for this staging is necessarily inferior to the culture that reenacts it. It is a tendency of our time to imagine technological progress as a parameter against which all other aspects of life should be measured, privileging the present over the past. In terms of performance behaviour, our time is bound to forget that, “[t]he great actor in every age has been distinguished by an uncommon ability to stretch the boundaries of the presiding conventions,” as Peter Thomson observes. Stretching boundaries of presiding conventions of scripted stagings corresponds to adjusting their materializations to historically conditioned axial perspectives. In other words, balancing the pulls of the past and of the present is the means to generate compelling productions of old scripts. The Globe’s 2007 extraordinarily amusing *Merchant*, in neglecting the script’s seriousness, did not renew the logical scope of a medium that has the inexhaustible potential to recreate the past. The Globe would have contributed a new paradigm to the performance history of *Merchant* if the “full comedy” had been a “full tragicomedy,” or a “full problem comedy.” Considering *Merchant* as a playtext, we can deduce that the past was as capable of
producing polyphonic theatrical events as our era is capable of underestimating the parameters of reception of contemporary playgoers.

Notes

4 Shakespeares-globe.org, internet.
6 Shakespeares-globe.org, internet.
8 Shakespeares-globe.org, internet.
15 Shakespeares-globe.org, internet.
19 Worthen 101.
20 Susan Bennet 35.
39 Ironically, London shares its high rate of CCTV equipment with the emerging superpower that has been the main target of Western criticism because of its authoritarian practices: China, which, according to Naomi Klein, “is building the prototype of a high-tech police state.” Naomi Klein, “China’s All-Seeing Eye,” Global-Sisterhood-Network, originally published in Rolling Stone, issue 1053, May 29, 2008, posted at Global-sisterhood-network.org, internet.
47 Alan Sinfield, “How to Read The Merchant of Venice Without Being Heterosexist,” Feminism and Gender, ed. Kate Chedgzoy (Basingtoke: Palgrave, 2001).
49 Although there are other references both in the Jewish and Christian scriptures, two of them pointedly prescribe the good treatment of aliens: the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke, 10: 25-37 and Leviticus 19: 33-4.
51 J. A. Bryant Jr., Shakespeare & the Use of Comedy (Lexington: Kentucky UP, 1986) 82.
54 Alistair Smith, “Merchant of Venice,” The Stage, Thetstage.co.uk, internet.
55 David Ellis, Shakespeare’s Practical Jokes: An Introduction to the Comic in His Work (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 2007) 190.
56 Maxwell Cooter, “The Merchant of Venice (Globe),” WhatsonStage?, whatsonstage.com, internet.
57 Alistair Smith, “Merchant of Venice,” The Stage, Thetstage.co.uk, internet.
59 The theme of unattainability of pure conscience emerges in Lorenzo’s explicitly metaphysical description of the angelical music orchestrated by heavens: “Such harmony is in immortal souls, / But whilst this muddy vesture of decay / Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.” (Merchant 5.1.63-5).
66 Maslen 121.
Chapter Three

Misconstruction: The Stratford Festival of Canada’s 2007 *The Merchant of Venice*

Somewhere in this compost of *cuius regio eius religio* Shakespeare’s skepticism took root.¹

Human social activities, like some self-reproducing items in nature, are recursive. That is to say, they are not brought into being by social actors but continually recreated by them via the very means whereby they express themselves as actors. In and through their activities agents reproduce the conditions that make these activities possible.²

The attempt to reconstruct the staging conventions of the theatre for which Shakespearean playtexts were written is utopian because we do not have enough information about the original practices. In addition, even if we had comprehensive information about the early modern acting styles, staging conventions, and framing of the theatrical event, we would not appreciate the original practices as the Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences would have; the original practices would look and sound like museum pieces for us today, whereas for the original playgoers they looked and sounded fresh. A directorial conception inspired by reconstruction may partially achieve engaging results. But it will always leave something to be desired in that it will both miss the original presentness of the pull of the past and a great amount of freshness of the
pull of the present. Conversely, genuine attempts to deconstruct the playtext, that is, to
decant it from the accumulated sediments of “invented tradition,” may result in
misconstruction. Misconstruction is the process through which a directorial conception
replaces old constructs by new constructs. In this chapter, I analyze the Stratford Festival
of Canada’s Merchant, a production that alternated a few interesting occurrences of the
transhistorical dimension with numerous unjustified uses of the pull of the present. The
number of disengaging scenes with exclusive emphasis on contemporary issues
significantly accounted for the misconstruction of the playtext. The result was a show
that, contradictory to the repertory company’s prevailing image associated with
“tradition,” did not at all reverberate with the cultural source. A combination of tricky
exegesis and tentative indoctrination, this staging did not conquer either the public or the
theatre reviewers. In addition to the inconsistent set of staging conventions created by the
director Richard Rose, the absence of a significant Shylock was also decisive in the
unsatisfactory result not only because the Jewish moneylender has been the centre of
attention of Merchant but also because the high expectation surrounding the Oscar
nominee and native Canadian Graham Greene was unfulfilled. Locating both fluid and
turgid staging conventions, I identify corresponding eloquent and unproductive scenes
and discuss how the governing principles that frame the Stratford Festival’s theatrical
culture have been, as a rule, unpropitious to Shakespeare theatremaking.
Examining “[t]he larger discursive context within which the 1993 season produced its
meanings,” Ric Knowles observes that the company does “not point toward social
solutions” and that the “effacement of the historical and social, together with the
envisioning of any social change that they might offer, could hardly be more thorough.”³
Knowles’ assumption that the theatre’s scope is to suggest solutions to social issues prompts a crucial point of dispute. Although the theatre may compellingly propagate social responsibility, it does not have to make a self-conscious statement about its impetus in order to percolate in the playgoers’ collective sentiments. As a case in point, *Merchant* is a playtext with serious socio-political implications. These implications have been staged from a number of divergent perspectives, which invariably arouse critical debate even when they set out to avoid polemicizing, as the case study of the Globe’s production demonstrates. In order that critical debate, which depends on divergent perspectives, may be possible, we should recognize that there is a patronizing quality in the missionary zeal of demanding social accountability from the theatre. Although it is fundamental to remake the world, it is important to do so with the awareness that ideologies risk engaging in power relationships, exclusions, and moral dualisms. Thus, I proceed from the standpoint of acknowledging the importance of the Stratfordian project with respect to the plethora of interest groups that have justified its existence for over half a century. Although it is indubitable that the theatrical events of the Stratford Festival of Canada are unaffordable to many potential playgoers as well as unappealing to many others, its audience members are specialist consumers; their spectatorship practices carry their own distinctive criteria of relevance. These criteria may not prioritize transgression and overestimate escapism. Nonetheless, in assailing these criteria, scholars fall into the trap of an oddly elitist anti-elitism, oblivious of popular culture attachments, a number of them carefully transvested in highbrow praxis – as is the patent case of the Stratford Festival of Canada.
The motto of the city of Stratford, *industria et ars*, suitably describes the internal coherence of the Stratford Festival of Canada’s mandate in that it is virtually an industrial enterprise. Since its operational beginnings in 1953, the company has staged over 400 productions; roughly fifty percent of these productions were stagings of Shakespearean plays. Although the repertory company laid its foundations on the signifier “Shakespeare,” it has also mounted a variety of plays by emerging dramatists. This fact suggests that its tenets are less regressive and more financially risk-taking than what they may appear. Since 1959, the company has mounted fifty-five plays involving the work of Canadian playwrights, adapters and translators. Moreover, its payroll comprises a few hundred beneficiaries. In 2007, the company was the city’s major employer with 1,733 jobs. In addition, the Stratfordian theatremaking boosts the tourism sector in a city whose other attractions would hardly suffice to entice its 600,000 annual visitors.\(^4\)

Notwithstanding its importance for the city’s economy, owing to the world economic recession, as J. Kelly Nestruck reports, “[t]he Stratford Shakespeare Festival has declared a deficit of $ 2.6 million for its 2008 season – its first red ink in 15 years.”\(^5\) Despite having to suspend a few performances from the 2009 season, however, the company relies on its spectatorship and audaciously declares that “more than 600 [performances] in all [. . . ] will proceed as scheduled.”\(^6\) Apparently, despite the deficit, the nearly sexagenary producing company has braved the crisis because of its consolidated credentials.

Precisely because the Stratford Festival of Canada has consolidated credentials, it is reasonable to affirm that its patrons endorse its embodiment of cultural value, grounded on upper-class parameters as well as on its ersatz Englishness. Unsurprisingly,
particularities of style aside, the Stratford Festival’s embodiment of high cultural value parallels those of the Theatre for a New Audience and Shakespeare’s Globe. Messages such as the legend-line describing the picture of “Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II with Festival founder Tom Patterson and artistic director Richard Monette, [in] 1997” validate what Monette names “the mystique of Stratford.” In addition to bestowing aristocratism upon the producing company, the Queen also represents official approval of a cultural activity that, being good enough for royals, is marketed as a guarantee of high standards of production. This pervasive rhetoric denotes special concern with nameability. For example, in naming the preparatory program that provides the company with new performers “the Birmingham Conservatory for Classical Theatre Training,” besides honouring the English city that hosts The Birmingham Shakespeare Library, which has one of the world’s best collections by and about Shakespeare, the company implies that there is in fact a comprehensive educational process which legitimately enables actors to perform “classical theatre.” As far as acting skills are concerned, the staging of classics does have specifics: the disposition to tackle an old language (if the production is staged in the original vernacular) and historical fencing techniques (rarely seen onstage). Nonetheless, any skilled performers – as productions of Shakespearean plays by Peter Brook, Peter Stein, Gabriel Villela, and Tim Supple have radiantly demonstrated – can play roles in classical texts. For this reason, although the Stratford Festival of Canada cultivates the assumption that staging “classical theatre” requires a specific training, it is a myth. Because this myth conveniently dovetails with the horizon of expectations of a number of patrons who do regard Shakespearean acting as a specialization ranked above other types of acting, it strategically integrates the repertory company’s machinery.
Utopia is intrinsic to the identity of this industrial-scale company, whose main venue, the 1,826-seat Festival Theatre, where the 2007 Merchant was performed, never sells out. Apart from the fact that it is indeed difficult for theatrical events to fill in such a large venue, the Stratford Festival of Canada’s spectatorship is highly responsive to the aesthetic quality of the entertainment offered, particularly with respect to the execution of the designs of costumes and setting, and the charisma of the actors. Because theatrical events in Stratford imply a touristic experience, playgoers create a social network whose practices often include their informal reviews of the diverse productions. Thus, local word of mouth about the shows, often heard at public venues, such as restaurants, cafés, and inns, influences spectators’ decisions about which shows they will patronize. Hence, although the fetishization of the past is important in the fashioning of the company’s identity, it cannot draw playgoers to a theatre if a given staging fails to offer fine entertainment. Produced since the Stratford Festival of Canada’s second season, Merchant illustrates that “Shakespeare” onstage is heavily dependent on the artistic skills with which it is staged.

Still in the provisional tent, the company’s first Merchant was directed by Tyrone Guthrie in 1955. Designed by Tanya Moiseivitch, the lavish early modern décor and costumes significantly accounted for the production to be considered “the hit of the festival,” as Kemp Thompson attests. Nevertheless, the recent memory of the Holocaust soured the unbridled optimism. As a case in point, Stan Heuler reports that “[he] left the tent with the uneasy feeling of having been party to mockery.” The political quandary, however, did not prevent the production from being rewarded with a “[s]tanding [o]vation,” as Thompson summarizes the audience reception.
The next *Merchant* was only staged fifteen years later. The 1970 production was directed by Jean Gascon. DuBarry Campau argues that “there was an emptiness about the evening because the very essence of the plot had been diluted. If Shylock isn’t to be played as an evil man whose wickedness appalls the audience, there really isn’t much sense in playing him at all.” Similar accounts that the reception was unenthusiastic suggest that the patrons were not impressed by the production and its one-dimensional portrayal of Shylock as a victim.

Perhaps in attempting to correct the mistake of depicting Shylock as an inoffensive prey, the 1976 production in Victorian costumes, directed by Bill Glassco, was a disaster, partially due to the revival of Shylock as the *cliché* of a horrid character. Lawrence De Vine states that “Cronyn was left to play Shylock as a mean-spirited villain. [The production] cheated an audience of the treat of Hume Cronyn fully investigating a complex role of laughter and fear and tragedy that is fabulous in the best sense of the word.” Myron Galloway argued that “the best thing about the Stratford Festival *The Merchant of Venice*’s last night was Gil Wechesler’s lighting, and it had no unusual requirements to meet.” No wonder it took eight years for the company to make its next attempt of staging *Merchant*.

Directed by Mark Lamos, the 1984 *Merchant* was staged in eighteenth-century design. Henry Mietkiewicz notes that “[w]hen Shylock asks [. . .], ‘Hath not a Jew eyes?’, [John] Neville sp[oke] as a simple man struggling to keep his emotions in check while presenting his Christian tormentors with what seem[ed] a perfectly logical argument against religious prejudice.” Mietkiewicz’s remarks on Portia are no less enthusiastic: “Domini Blythe [wa]s entrancing as Portia. As feminist, she argue[d] on
Antonio’s behalf with unhurried precision and later took delicious pride in watching Bassanio squirm in explaining the loss of her cherished ring. As female, she was delightfully unashamed of her animal cravings." Apparently, this was a successful production, as Merchant was staged again only five years later.

With design inspired by the nineteenth-century, the 1989 Merchant was directed by Michael Langham. Christine Boyko states that “[e]very aspect of the production was brilliant. The staging was beautifully executed as well as designed.” After citing a number of individual performances and saying that they were “all flawless,” Boyko affirms that “Brian Bedford as Shylock was outstanding.” Arnold Ages states that “Bredford’s malevolent Shylock, Nicholas Pennell’s courtly Antonio, Geraint Wyn Davies’s suave Bassanio, Seana MacKenna’s lightheaded Portia were all memorable.” Ages’ review probably sold the production in a year in which “Murray Frum, the President of the Stratford Festival [ . . . ] publicly regretted the Festival’s choice of the play but refrained from supporting any censoring move.”

Back to the boards once more in 1996, Merchant was directed by Marti Maraden, who, according to John Coulboum, “by stripping the work of caricature and finding character instead, [ . . . ] shed new light into dark corners and found something that’s thrilling.” Set in Mussolini’s Italy, Maraden’s production was recurrently described as innovative, sensitive, and memorable.

Richard Monette’s 2001 staging in Renaissance costumes had warm responses. Richard Ouzounian states that “Monette has staged the play with great fluidity and you have to admire his ease and assurance with the Festival stage, but in the end, it was hard to pinpoint just what his interpretation was supposed to be.” Ouzounian’s comments
are particularly thought-provoking because, although what Dan McIntyre defines as “value-laden language”\textsuperscript{19} abounds in \textit{Merchant} and neatly determines the points of views of particular characters, it is virtually impossible to establish the authorial viewpoint, which is deferred to the reader or spectator. Thus, Monette’s “great fluidity” might have been a captivating proposition.

It seems that, in alternating triumph and failure as well as in accumulating complaints, the Stratford Festival of Canada is not willing to discard a playtext that ensures extraordinary media coverage in a country with a variety of representatives of the ethnicities depicted in it. One of these representatives, the Canadian Jewish Congress, claiming official representation of the whole Canadian Jewish community, published a document, available on the internet, entitled \textit{Finding the Right Stage for ‘Merchant of Venice.’ A compendium of information and education material on the presentation and teaching of ‘The Merchant of Venice’ in Canadian high schools}. This publication was elaborated to carry out guardianship of a specific reading in the curriculum of grades 9 and 10. Possibly traumatized by the scandalous issue of anti-Semitism wilfully promoted by Ernst Zundel and James Keegstra in 1985 in Canada, the compendium implicitly presupposes that the Canadian school system cannot deal with the controversial issues derived from \textit{Merchant} by relying on its own human resources. The Canadian Jewish Congress was present in one of the school previews of the Stratford Festival of Canada’s 2007 \textit{Merchant} in order to assess if the production stood up to the scrutiny of their high standards of what constitutes anti-Semitism. On that same afternoon, while the Venetians celebrated Shylock’s defeat, a male student probably motivated by his adolescent eagerness to show off – as opposed to an urge to broadcast entrenched prejudice against
Jews cried: “Bum him!” The incident aroused a localized burst of laughter among his peers, who also laughed and whistled at the display of affection between couples on stage. After all, it is in the nature of adolescents to experiment with their limits as participants in theatrical events, whose standard conventions of separateness of audience and stage seem to invite their transgressive behaviour.

In all probability, however, the Canadian Jewish Congress confirmed its suspicions that Merchant arouses anti-Semitic responses. Anna Morgan, the wife of the national president of the Canadian Jewish Congress, made use of her prominent platform in the press to make a point: “Did William Shakespeare intend The Merchant of Venice to be a racist play or an exposé of bigotry and anti-Semitism? Debate over this question has become so heated at times that some Shakespearean professors have removed the play from their repertoire.” Morgan’s unequivocal answer follows in a one-sentence paragraph: “But not the Stratford Festival,” suggesting that there “is, and always will be, the combined promise and danger of The Merchant of Venice.”

That the outburst was regrettable is indisputable. Nevertheless, the fundamental question to be posed is, how to draw the line between an educational system that must accentuate inclusion as a trait of fine character (particularly in one of only two countries in the world that promotes multiculturalism as a government policy) and freedom of expression, the cornerstone of a functioning democracy. Should a staging of Merchant comply with the regulatory gaze of a one-sided manual that intervenes in history’s display of its mistakes? Also speaking for a number of Jews, Israel Shahak affirms, “[t]he maxim that those who do not learn from history are condemned to repeat it applies to those Jews who refuse to come to terms with the Jewish past.”

Teaching a wise approach to human affairs necessarily hinges on the
comprehension that unquestioned univocacy produces authoritarian practices. In any event, the Stratford Festival of Canada’s performance history of *Merchant* suggests that the company, in an effort to make their ends meet, compromises with all the forces that exert influence on the configuration of the shows.

The 2007 *Merchant* was directed by Richard Rose, who selected the cast out of the company’s pool for that season. On the one hand, this limitation in the directorial choice of a staging’s most important element derives from the very nature of repertory companies, which need to distribute actors in order to meet logistic requirements. On the other hand, as Knowles observes, it “can create awkward situations in which directors work with actors they might not otherwise have cast, and actors find themselves stretched in uncomfortable and unhealthy ways.”22 Both directing and performing at the Stratford Festival of Canada can be particularly challenging activities. The actors who auditioned for roles in *Merchant* may be grouped in two categories, although, in a few cases, overlaps occurred. Most of the performers graduated from the Birmingham Conservatory for Classical Theatre Training, which runs a one-year program with stipend, after which graduates are entitled to a contract for the following season. The rest of the cast – including most of the major roles – was made up by Stratford veterans such as, Scott Wentworth (Antonio), a nominee of both a Laurence Oliver Awards and a Tony Awards; Severn Thompson (Portia), both a Shaw Festival veteran and a graduate of the company’s training program; and Sean Arbuckle (Bassanio), a graduate of the highly prestigious Julliard School in New York.

The only exception to the company’s casting procedure was Greene, who was not selected by the director either; he was personally invited for the role of Shylock by the
artistic director, the late Richard Monette, on account of being a member of Canada’s largest, most persecuted, and longest-suffering minority as well as for being an Oscar nominee and thereby occupying an exceptionally prestigious position on a popular scale of cultural values. As discussed in the case study of the Theater for a New Audience’s Merchant, whose Shylock was F. Murray Abraham, celebrity is significant because the perception of a renowned actor prompts involuntary reactions that may permeate the entire reception of a performance. Celebrity is the highest form of what Bourdieu calls “symbolic capital.” This special form of “symbolic capital” works as a magnet, a parameter whereby spectators make decisions regarding which productions in repertory they will patronize. In this light, Monette’s prerogative was consistent with the Stratford Festival of Canada’s policy of hosting stars in order to boost the season with additional attractions, which have included Alec Guinness and Maggie Smith. “Mr. Greene,” as the playbill reverentially states,

is best known for his Oscar-nominated performance as the sage Kicking Bird in Dances with Wolves (1990) and his starring roles in Die Hard 3, Thunderheart, Cooperstown, Into the West, Buffalo Dreams, Spirit Bear and Maverick. [ . . . ] Mr. Greene’s many awards have included a Grammy Award in 2000 for Listen to the Storyteller, a Best Actor Award at the Tokyo Film Festival for Skins, a First American in the Arts Award for The Green Mile and a Harvard Foundation Award.\(^\text{23}\)

As his biography illustrates, Greene’s indisputably massive “symbolic capital” justified his debut at the Stratford Festival of Canada despite his lack of specific training in “classical theatre.”
As for the audience-governed aspects of reception, Greene was also interesting for the role of Shylock because of his Aboriginal background. Greene, whose close-up illustrated Merchant’s poster, was a stimulating prospect: His countenance and his ancestry could endow Shylock with real alterity. Although this rationale had its own geographical and historical particularities, the “attempt to bring a realistic awareness of cultural difference to the portrayal of ‘the other’,” as James C. Bulman observes, was already present in Henry-Irving’s staging (in which Shylock emulated a Levantine Jew) because of the interest Victorians had in “peoples whom the English had subjugated to their imperial will and whom they now were refashioning in their own image.”

As for the Stratford Festival of Canada’s 2007 Merchant, although Jews have long been associated with money, Shylock would evoke the poor: the North American victims of the expansion of Western capitalism in all its stages. Shylock would be embodied by an actor whose presence brought to the spectatorship’s mind a people currently refashioning itself within an irreversible socio-cultural frame implemented by imposition. The realistic awareness of the Other perceived in the physiognomy of an Oneida descendant had the potential to invest Shylock with particular relevance. In a contemporary reconfiguration, the Jew was anticipated as the displaced Other: the early modern European Other in the Diaspora, struggling to transmit cultural identity to the following generations, enacted by the contemporary North American Other in dispossession, struggling to recover cultural identity from the previous generations. Nevertheless, the idea worked better on the poster than in its materialization on the stage.

Although the likeness of Shylock as a radically hybrid cultural product of European hegemony in the colonized world suggested double controversy for the
Stratford Festival of Canada’s 2007 season, this facet was not at an explored in the staging itself. In point of fact, Shylock was a virtually absent figure. For this reason, and given the prominence that the moneylender has had in post-Holocaust productions, it was not surprising that *Merchant* was only seen by 54,443 paying spectators. The contrast between the reasonably low number of viewers and both the long-running season and the theatre’s capacity suggests that the viewing community’s word of mouth did not favour Richard Rose’s production, which relied so heavily on a star that did not shine. Christopher Rawson writes that “[i]f you think ‘Merchant’ is a play about the quasi-tragic figure of Shylock, then this production directed by Richard Rose on the festival’s great thrust stage is a disappointment, because actor Graham Greene simply doesn’t have the vocal chops or emotional depth for the part.” In addition, fueling the “invented traditions” maintained by the Stratford Festival, a mediocre interpretation of Shylock by an actor who had never played “Shakespeare” did not do much for dispelling the myth that “classical theatre” requires specific training.

On the stage, initially dressed in the production’s most discreet suit, not yet bearing the visual markers of Jewishiness (*kippah* and prayer shawl) that would appear in subsequent scenes, Greene, albeit sincerely assertive, did not at all performed Shylock with a vigorous presence. Bearing a perfectly upright posture and constantly lifting his upper lip and the wing of his nose, Shylock snobbishly signaled that he harboured more repugnance for the Venetians than they did for him – in a production in which Solanio (Bruce Dow), Salarino (Jacob James), and Gratiano’s (Gareth Potter) performance of conspicuous harassment was on the verge of juvenile delinquency. Greene’s fixed
expression and line delivery suggested that the assimilated Jew, despite his wealth, was not in full command of the *noblesse oblige* required from moral superiority. Shylock came to the point of validating the dominant culture long before he needed to demand the letter of the law in court. After Antonio justified why he was resorting to a transaction that involved a collateral surety, Greene put his hands on his hips and mocked effeminacy as he replied: “Ay, ay, three thousand ducats” (1.3.57). Although homoerotic practices were frequently insinuated in the early modern period, overt depictions of same-sex relationships could not have been staged because sodomy constituted a crime. For this reason, Greene’s derision focused on contemporary issues and contained an oppressive ideology. Therefore, instead of subverting hegemonic forces, in attacking a transgressive behaviour, Shylock embodied “official seriousness.” Shylock’s provocation of Antonio as a homosexual was far from being a novelty in the performance history of *Merchant*. For example, Laurence Olivier added a similar invective to his Shylock in 1970 Jonathan Miller’s production when he “pronounc[ed] the middle syllables of ‘Base-aini-o’ in such a way as to make a plural anus of his host,” as Bulman notes. In 2007, however, this approach prompts the question *How many spectators sympathized with Shylock’s homophobic bias in a country where homosexual discrimination, besides being a crime, is increasingly discouraged by civil society?* In any event, Shylock’s homophobia was consistent with Greene’s reductive approach to the Jew as a particularly reactive victim. Shylock was inexplicably self-important and glacially bitter from his first appearance. Richard Ouzounian states that “Greene delivers the crucial outburst beginning ‘Hath not a Jew eyes?’ with less passion than his subsequent rant over the jewels his daughter has stolen from him.” “Shylock,” Tanya Gough affirms, “is understated, reserved, and
In addition to being incongruently aloof, from the director’s point of view, the politically challenging character also deserved to be vindicated by displaying agency at the end of the trial scene. Accordingly, before leaving the stage, Greene put on a sarcastic facial expression, which might be read as a sign that Shylock, despite officially acceding to convert to Christianity, would remain a Jew in his secretive practices, outwitting the Venetian law. Shylock’s proud exit as a Jew determined to defy the law derived from an engagement with the present. Jews, a meager fraction of an alien population that “roughly comprised four or five percent of London’s population in the late sixteenth century, somewhere between five and ten thousand individuals,” were already false conversos in their countries of origin, Portugal and Spain; in early modern England, none of them made a living as a moneylender, a profession that Christians, whether or not genuine, could not have. Shylock cannot be satisfied with the consolation prize that he has been awarded. The logic that underlies his conversion is that, although he would never be a Christian at heart, he would not dare defy the law because he would have no agency upon the fact that he would renounce the occupation that defined his identity. “England’s archives were well-kept,” Toby Lelyveld asserts, and “there is no record of any disaffection among these pseudo-Christians.” Thus, here is a case of unproductive engagement with the pull of the present.

Moreover, albeit contemporary, Richard Rose’s representational convention was not exactly a novelty in 2007. For example, John Barton’s 1979 production staged Shylock’s conclusive appearance in a similar way. Patrick Stewart, who had played the role in two productions before Barton’s, affirms that the Venetians:

[W]ant him to become a Christian and bequeath his estate to Lorenzo and
Jessica and he is content because he has saved something when moments before he had nothing. Now he must get away before they change their minds or think up further punishment. Illness is a good excuse and he leaves them with the assurance that the deed will be signed.\(^{32}\)

Whereas Barton’s directorial conception endowed Shylock with a sense of pragmatism, Richard Rose’s view aimed to intensify the character’s acumen and dignity in order that a social statement could be made: That Shylock, victimized without having any active participation in his disgrace, finally found a clever mode to attain agency. This rationale flattened the theatrical narrative, which lost leverage for arousing reflection about the social criticism dramatized in the playtext: If Shylock outsmarts the overarching power, neither does he lose anything of value nor do Venetian Christians offer any substantive threat.

The misconstruction of this particular staging convention derives from an alleged self-deconstructive approach to the playtext that sees Shylock’s situation as a Manichean one; that is, he is either victimized – the quintessence of a cliché – or heroified for overturning adversities and proudly conquering his own private “happy ending.” Such a view has been problematized even by its former adepts. As a case in point, Jonathan Miller, whose 1970 production became famous for having portrayed Shylock as a defenseless victim against a background of invulnerable scoundrels, completely reformulated his perspective in his 1980 film. Miller argued that “he now saw the play ‘as totally symmetrical in its prejudices,’ with Shylock as culpable as the Christians.”\(^{33}\)

Besides the unlikelihood that a production can render *Merchant* compelling by staging a well delineated dichotomy between the perpetrators of cruelty and their victim, in the
case of Greene’s monolithic characterization, this conclusion only denoted Shylock’s overestimated self-righteousness, which can hardly be viewed a sympathetic trait. Thus, neither did Greene portray Shylock as engagingly villainous nor did he persuasively embody the role’s tragic downfall. Consequently, at a moment in which the impact of “official seriousness” is magnified by the playtext, the director replaced it by (Shylock’s) laughter. In so doing, Richard Rose debilitated Merchant’s potent semiotics of rejection: The Christians, who, in the playtext, deploy religion as a justification to further their political agenda of social exclusion, were transformed into zealous militants. Consequently, in this production, the uncrowning of the official culture was overshadowed by Shylock’s supercilious self-crowning. The downside of this interpretation was that, with Shylock’s triumph in the trial scene, the playtext’s dramatization of dogmatism was not expressed. Merchant’s carnivalizing permutation of the religious and secular orders was not discernible; countered by Shylock’s deception, the staging of hypocritical spirituality at the service of worldly interests, instead of denouncing the social mechanisms that require a scapegoat, made the forceful conversion emerge as Shylock’s official integration into an alliance of hypocrites. While all major characters in Merchant are religious only nominally, in Richard Rose’s production, the devout Shylock acquired freedom by being spiritually corrupted by the pious Christians. For this reason, the Stratford Festival of Canada’s Shylock was far removed from the transhistorical dimension, and the engagement with the present evoked by the character was feeble. The lack of a strong characterization of Shylock considerably depleted this staging’s muscle power. Nevertheless, Greene could hardly be considered the scapegoat of this staging which abounded in “misconstrued” gestures; some of which did not cohere
within the production’s prevailing style.
A uniform stylistic inflection is paramount for reception because it works as the binding element of the theatrical experience. If multiplicity and open-endedness are formal properties of Shakespeare’s *Merchant*, it is because they are ordering principles of the cultural artifact. Ordering principles indicate coherence, probably the only unit that Shakespeare respected. Coherence is a transhistorical element for any staging of *Merchant*. This element may be deconstructed, but not destroyed without being detrimental to a production. In missing *Merchant’s* fundamental principle, Richard Rose’s *Merchant* remained a patchwork in which meanings could be lost at times. As a case in point, the very first scene was a choreographed piece by Mark Christmann. The choreography drew upon a twelfth-century carnivalesque macabre pageant celebrating a Venetian victory over Aquileia. All male actors, with the exception of Greene, were onstage; dressed in black and masked, they loosely reenacted an ancient Lenten rite during which twelve pigs and one bull were sacrificed. The enactment of the voracious appetite for flesh had a musical background: Michael Vieira’s composition fused elements as diverse as the constant heavy bass beat of disco, inserts of a classical soprano’s vocals and Gregorian chant with a husky masculine voice that sang a refrain informing the audience that it was party time: “Saturday, Saturday!” The style of the music captivationally amalgamated the present and the past. Despite the effectiveness of the music and the rhythmic impact of the choreography on summoning the audience to a desirable state of attention, the actors’ movement consisted of an indirect comment on the playtext that established misleading staging conventions for the production. Marie Comisso describes the opening scene as follows:
One side of the characters’ masks displayed a white mime face, which could have depicted Christian purity and innocence. The back side of the masks exhibited pig heads. Recalling early modern anti-Semitism, this dramatic scene could have also been a deliberate jeer toward Jews. The large, roasted pig placed in the center of a long table positioned behind the dancers as they encircled and pretended to slaughter Antonio, concealed by a large bull mask, heightened the play’s theme of sacrifice. The eclectic mix of Gregorian chant set to rock and roll music, to which the Christians performed their moves, reminded the audience that even in a more recent era, Jews were still persecuted.35

The reason why I mention Comisso’s reception is not to dispute her interpretation but by way of arguing that, if a dance routine inspired by the commemoration of a medieval burg’s hegemony may be read as the staging of Jewish persecution, then the scene was helpless; it did not give playgoers appropriate orientation about the production’s staging conventions. Accordingly, Michael Posner opines that “[t]he opening scene features a long table set for dinner, like the Last Supper, but with a fat roasted pig as its centrepiece. And the point is? Soon, a gang of men wearing pig masks emerges and beats a man that seems to be a Jew. A club for anti-Semites? Perhaps. But none of this congeals into a directorial vision.”36

In establishing the staging conventions of a Shakespearean production with an obscure reference, the director set an exegetical tone for Merchant. The audience was required to fill in the gaps of images that could have a vast number of associations. Although the historical event that originated this choreographic prelude was medieval,
the scene actually resulted in an exclusively contemporary style because of its abstractness. The practice of freedom from representational conventions tends not to fit into the tangibility of Shakespearean dramaturgy. Apparently, the more sophisticated the original lines or the directorial conception, the more a production requires staging conventions through which the plot can materialize. An excess burden of puzzling focus alienates most playgoers, who, unlike initiated specialists, may not appreciate activating their hermeneutic skills without immediate reward. Even less rewarding than the heavily exegetical tone, was the indoctrinatory tone. The binary suggested by Lent and Easter, temporal markers of suspension and observation of religious rules, was deployed as mere illustration of the primacy of Catholicism and did not offer any possibility for game. For example, background actions such as a procession of supporting actors reminded the audience that, in Venice, the identities of the Self and the Other were fashioned by the parameter of an official religion. In this way, timelessness was faintly framed. Thus, although the procession of believers evoked the transhistorical dimension, it did not add significance to the overall production except for the basic depiction of the play’s theme of institutional religiosity. It was not until 1.2 that a defined performative idiom, carrying the transhistorical dimension, grabbed the audience’s attention.

The transhistorical was daringly achieved in the enactment of Portia’s suitors representing politically incorrect national stereotypes. Stereotyping, a contentious issue, definitely prompted amusement whenever one of the suitors added a punchline to Portia’s critical remarks on him; each intervention was delivered in the respective foreign language: the Frenchman’s elegant chauvinism, portrayed by Bruce Dow smoking a cigar and making the most obvious declaration of love; the Palatine’s melancholic
contemplation with Roger Shank miming a frail butterfly; the Englishman’s confidence in
Paul Amos’ self-satisfaction; the Neapolitan’s exuberant virility with the crack of Brian
McKay’s riding crop; and finally the Scotsman’s frugality of Jacob James’ offering Portia
a bouquet of flowers taken from under his kilt brought the house down in an explosion of
laughter. Instead of dispelling the traditional stereotypes, the director took them to the last
consequences and staged comic caricatures out of the targeted cultures, still funny after
four centuries. This scene was indicative of the pervasiveness of cultural behaviours,
which Portia described with abrasive political incorrectness while Nerissa (Raquel Duffy)
balanced out the lady’s (dis)affection for them.

Political incorrectness was also the ordering principle of the scenes with Morocco
(Jamie Robinson) and Arragon (Tim MacDonald). This stylistic inflection added a certain
amount of consistency to the production. After landing in a helicopter (suggested by
sound effects), Morocco and his train of body guards exuded sensuality as they entered
Portia’s house, making the maids flush, whisper and melt at their passage. With a
markedly virile voice and a physicality that displayed a wild code of masculinity, the
exotic sheik defied any Western patterns of seductive behaviour. Conversely, Arragon
represented the quintessence of European refinement as viewed from camivalized lenses:
The dandyish prince and his train of matadors had a synchronized flamenco routine
(choreographed by Christmann), through which they would counterpoint the progression
of the caskets’ exegesis. Masculinity, codified as self-important to the point of being
affected, was ridiculed and, in accordance with the script, ended in emasculation, as the
princes left the stage morally castrated after conceding defeat in their endeavour of
expanding patriarchal power. However these scenes were staged in the sixteenth century,
the script’s rout of stereotypical masculinity encapsulates a comical inversion of the politics of gender: Portia’s father’s will turns out to be ambivalent in that, instead of imposing the official order, it ensures the maintenance of Portia’s unruliness at the price of masculine humiliation. Richard Rose’s Merchant effectively reenacted a carnivalesque mechanism that was eloquent to the original audiences and was still meaningful to viewers in 2007. In staging the taming of male lust and greed in the scenes with Portia’s suitors, this production was successful in giving substance to the transhistorical dimension because it aroused laughter, meant to purify seriousness. It should not be neglected, however, that Merchant also dramatizes seriousness that purifies laughter, the gratuitous laughter of contempt and spiritual defilement. This laughter is embodied by a few characters and arguably not meant to arouse comic relief – at least not in this day and age. This production, despite having failed in staging one of the play’s most important elements of seriousness that purifies laughter, that is, Shylock, managed to create a significant depiction of gravity out of an element (the presence of the three characters Solanio, Salarino, and Salerio as opposed to only two) that was probably never part of the playtext, except as an occasional printing mistake.

The transhistorical dimension was also attained in the gloomy characterization of Salerio, conceived by the director as a foil to the other friends of Antonio. The rationale behind the staging of Solanio, Salarino, and Salerio is rather pedantic because the three characters appear only in the 1619 quarto. Moreover, Solanio’s name is never used by any character. Hence, as a rule, most productions tend to choose two out of the three names for a pair of barely distinguishable characters that can even be amalgamated into one. Narrators and commentators of what is unseen, these highly prejudiced gossips poke
fun not only at Shylock, an ideological target, but also at Antonio, for no apparent reason except futility. Since dozens of patrons, unaware of editorial discrepancies, phone the Stratford Festival’s box office yearly in order to verify if Shakespeare’s scripts are being respected in their integrity, the company regularly stages Merchant’s three characters in accordance with the “invented tradition” of a printing mistake.\textsuperscript{37} The legendary guardians of Shakespearean textual purity function as unofficial regulators of the Stratford Festival’s production-governed aspects of reception. Unsurprisingly, as a result, this was the only production observed for this study that staged the three characters. Paul Amos’ characterization of a minor role was constructively manipulated in order that a neat perspective of the liability of Antonio’s friends in his affliction could be made visible. Amos’ distinguished presence contributed to the portrayal of a unique character with a discernible implication in the overall dramatic narrative. Salerio was an acute observer of the situation into which Antonio was dragged not only by his own actions but also by the actions of his friends: Lorenzo (Jean Michel Le Gal), Gratiano, Solanio, and Salarino. In observing Salerio’s trajectory, playgoers were induced to interconnect a number of perceptions with respect to Antonio’s ordeal: Lorenzo was instrumental in Shylock’s vendetta because, from the moneylender’s perspective, he was the pivot of a family disgrace; Solanio and Salarino were particularly accountable for distressing Shylock at a moment of fastidious grievance for him; and Gratiano was an accomplice of Jessica’s elopement. Salerio’s characterization was one of those infrequent cases in which a fixed expression is vital – an outcome that can only be obtained from a minor character. Accordingly, Salerio’s initial appearance was in the opening scene; without having lines, he made clear that he was an outsider, destined to depart from his fellows’ immoderation.
Towards the end of the second act, when Salarino and Solanio were kneeling down, holding Palm Sunday boughs at church and yet ridiculing Shylock’s reaction to Jessica’s elopement, Salerio circumspectly heard the mischievous account while Solanio and Salarino chuckled. Finally, he sternly intervened in the conversation that had just informed him of the latest events: “Let good Antonio look he keep his day, / Or he shall pay for this” (2.8.25-6). Salerio’s critical gaze of a hypocritical society magnified the audience’s perception of the other young Venetians and forestalled the consequences of their careless attitude in relation to Antonio. In act 3, Salerio arrived in Belmont with Antonio’s letter and, in contradistinction to Gratiano’s indulgence in vainglory, “We are the Jasons, we have won the fleece” (3.2.240), he guardedly replied, “I would you had won the fleece that he hath lost” (3.2.241). Spectators, in correlating these contrasting emotions with their remembrance of Salerio’s constancy in previous scenes, appreciated the collapse of the opposition between oppression and victimization often ascribed to Antonio and Shylock’s conflict. Although this perspective was inconsistent throughout the production, Salerio’s presence revealed that Antonio and Shylock got entangled in a tragic net interwoven by the fortuitous convergence not only of their own incompatible agendas, but also of the subversive behaviour of Antonio’s own friends.

Richard Rose, in staging a distinctive Salerio, stressed the theme of irony of fate, which overflows throughout Shakespeare’s body of work. For example, little does Antonio know when he declares that “My ventures are not in one bottom trusted, / Nor to one place; nor is my whole estate / Upon the fortune of this present year: / Therefore my merchandise makes me not sad.” (1.1.41-5). The subject matter of irony of fate is conspicuously transhistorical due to its abundant incidence in the foundational myths of
the Western civilization and in contemporary dramatic narratives. Arguably, this topic is constitutive of human existence itself, and thereby perfectly germane at the turn of the twenty-first century. In this light, when Salerio arrived with the letter from Antonio to Bassanio, he stood out with his gravity against the celebratory mood that followed Bassanio’s triumphant reading of his fortune. Nonetheless, even before Bassanio delivered the lines of the poignant message, all the other actors’ expressions shifted to gravity, matching Salerio’s invariable disposition. As a result, from the audience’s perspective, the banality of Antonio’s bravado of forfeiting his own body for a loan changed into the sublimity of his potential execution obliquely sanctioned by his own fellows. The prospect of an imminent death by mutilation was magnified by the playgoers’ recognition of the responsibility of Antonio’s companions in fuelling Shylock’s obsession. The audience’s identification of this intricate aspect of the plot coincided with the sudden remorse expressed by Solanio, Salarino, Gratiano, and Lorenzo. The spectatorship’s consciousness of this situation was gradually built up by Salerio’s presence – in contrast with Gratiano, Solanio and Salarino – since the first scene. Thus, a minor character made a major difference: The engagement with the past produced a reconfiguration of Merchant that illuminated the transhistorical. Salerio enabled the audience to have the perception that the Venetian and the Jew shared noteworthy resemblances beneath the surface of their antagonism. Accordingly, through Salerio, Richard Rose’s staging imparted that the emotional investments of the citizen and the alien were comparably penalized. Such a perspective disclosed a subversive correspondence between Antonio and Shylock to the extent that the Self and the Other were indeed subject to analogous anxieties regardless of their political statuses.
In observing a production that staged a character which, in all probability, never existed in the original practices, the transhistorical reveals itself as nothing but the expression of a pervading tone, which may take a myriad of formal properties. In the case of the Stratford Festival of Canada’s Antonio, this tone implied a tragic sense of solitude amidst a particularly dynamic commonwealth. Antonio was a puzzling character whose “love,” as Sean Lawrence phrases it, “appear[ed] mysterious even to himself.” The more Antonio played down the cause of his sadness, the more his response invited close scrutiny from Salarino and Solanio, who salaciously risked a resolution to the enigma: “Why then, you are in love” (1.1.46). Determinedly signaling his discomfort before insinuations to familiarities that he was not willing to share, Antonio temporarily lost his temper and raised his voice as though he uttered an invective: “Fie, fie!” (1.1.47). The motivation for highlighting the inscrutability of Antonio’s sorrow drew upon the Elizabethans because the original audiences, used to the traditional romance conventions in which their theatre was rooted, would neither expect nor see represented onstage the social code of same-sex interaction that our epoch has fashioned. In being enigmatic, the rapport between Antonio and Bassanio suited the horizon of expectations of the Stratford Festival of Canada’s potentially conservative playgoers, who desire to see “Shakespeare” without anachronisms. Simultaneously, however, Antonio’s characterization subtly reminded the audience that the taboo of homoerotic relationships is still in force despite the legal status of same-sex marriage in Canada. Thus Wentworth’s approach to Antonio also cast light on issues that are particularly relevant today.

On the other side of this enigmatic relationship, Bassanio, in persuading Antonio to finance a costly project through understated homosexual behaviour, evidently engaged
with the present. Antonio’s inscrutability notwithstanding, Bassanio subtly led the audience into expectations that the unfolding of the production would neither confirm nor deny. When the polished Bassanio explained to Antonio why he needed the loan, he had an intonation of joyful complicity, implying that his goal was to arrange a profitable marriage: “In Belmont is a lady richly left / And she is fair, and fairer than that word – / Of wondrous virtues” (1.1.160-2). Arbuckle underscored the line referring to Portia’s estate and continued referring to her physical and moral attributes as delightful bonuses of the negotiation. Thus, instead of foregrounding romantic love, already so ingrained in a “traditional” audience’s horizon of expectations, Bassanio made it clear that his take on romance was pragmatic; he wanted to venture on a financial transaction with sexual benefits. Moreover, in his inflection, the risk taken on his behalf by Antonio, instead of obviously separating him from his friend, would tie them forever with the bonds of creditor and debtor under no debt obligation except for everlasting trustworthiness. Hence, Bassanio’s emphasis on the business aspect of the enterprise did not at all make him an opportunist, unlike in 2004 Robert Anfoldi’s staging, in which “Bassanio was a Machiavellian vision of human nature, a man who mediated his wooing of Portia through disguise and pretense.”^39 Arbuckle renewed the character by flaunting crystallized expectations, either on the conservative or on the revisionist side of the Stratford Festival’s spectrum.

Bassanio’s characterization could also be viewed as a dialogue with the past in that it made a historically localized negotiation of marriage and dowry acquire the status of a self-conscious arrangement of pragmatic bearings. In minimizing Antonio’s risk and the distance that his eventual triumph would impose on their friendship, Bassanio
manipulated his discourse in order to benefit in detriment to his friend. In fact, Shakespeare’s Antonio and Bassanio’s language highlights that their friendship hinges on a joint venture phrased with eloquent propositions that cannot be fulfilled at times. For example, Antonio's first dialogue with Bassanio is characterized by a tendency to make promises he cannot keep. As Alan Stewart points out, Antonio’s “offer is rhetorical: Antonio’s purse is empty.” Undoubtedly, Antonio is willing to support Bassanio in his endeavour; he cannot, however, honour his word – at least not his literal word. Thus, the interaction between Antonio and Bassanio transcended a mere modernization for its own sake in that it foregrounded silences and fallacies that the playtext manifestly conveys. On the other hand, Antonio and Bassanio’s friendship also supported a theatrical narrative that accentuated Antonio as the epitome of an ideal Christian. This concept does not stem from the script’s historical context because a number of Elizabethan playgoers, particularly the literate, knew that religious precepts were consistently violated by Christians and Jews alike in *Merchant*. In staging Antonio as an exemplary Christian, Richard Rose explored the correlation of two overlapping phenomena: Jewish hatred, a popular form of antagonism between Christians and Jews, and anti-Semitism, a political strategy that extended Jewish hatred into “the final solution to the Jewish question.” Due to the continuities between both hostile practices directed against Jews, this overlap constitutes a problematic and yet sedimented perspective about the Holocaust and its relationship with *Merchant*. The horizon of expectations of contemporary viewers of *Merchant* is so deeply rooted in a present-day take on early modern English constructions of Jews that ethnic issues concerning a diversity of peoples dramatized in the play, such as Africans and even other Caucasians, tend to be eclipsed by anti-Semitism, which,
rigorously speaking, is a modern phenomenon. Thus, the dichotomist view that Shylock is Antonio’s defenseless victim is a present-day cliché, which Richard Rose replicated. This cliché derived from the dismissal of Shylock’s culturally onerous process of adjustment to a society that has distorted its foundational values; in order to fit into a society in which money is a value unto itself, Shylock departs from Judaism in the same way as the Venetians depart from Christianity.

Dehistoricizing Merchant, Richard Rose opted to go along with contemporary mainstream conceptions that stress anti-Semitism by portraying Antonio and his Venetian fellows as the official executioners of an individual with no alternatives. The trial scene was illustrative of this Manichaean view. After Shylock categorically declined any form of negotiation, Antonio decisively responded to Portia’s command, “You must prepare your bosom for his knife,” (4.1.241) by taking his shirt off and courageously preparing himself for the lethal incision. Lying stretched out on the floor, Wentworth’s unclothed upper body, with long ropes tied to his limbs, performed an emulation of Jesus’ crucifixion. This blatant imitatio crucis made Antonio’s friends resemble believers partaking of the sacrifice that would bring them to salvation. Against this background, Shylock, wearing a kippah and a prayer shawl at this point, inevitably emerged as a Christ killer. Before the spectacle offered by Christianity’s quintessential icon, regardless of the individual audience members’ religious persuasions, all other signs might as well have disappeared. The symbolic theme of crucifixion, imagined, depicted, sculpted, described, filmed, staged, and already practiced in a number of lands across the world, is so expressive across distinct cultures that fusing it with the theme of heart-stabbing, pervasive in the English romance tradition since Beowulf, becomes a lesser component of
the scene. For this reason, a series of equivocations blurred Richard Rose’s attempt to make the play sound as if it were about the moral superiority of Jewish tenets over Christian ones: Shylock’s knife was weakened as a prop before the magnitude of crucifixion; Antonio’s naked chest was easily readable as a representation of martyrdom, which absolved him from accountability in the conflict; and finally and most oddly, as an outraged representative of Christ killers, Shylock had a validation to kill a Christ-killer-myth perpetrator, a prerogative that, ironically, would turn him into a Christ-killer-myth perpetrator himself. In other words, the pro-Semitism implied in Richard Rose’s staging did not materialize. As Gough describes the effect, “strong Christian imagery dominated a production in which the Jewish characters literally had no place.”

Ultimately, Antonio’s depiction as an archetype of Christianity did not allow space for an important element to come into view: That which Derek Cohen calls, “the pornography of the scene,” as it presupposes “that the relationship of antipathy between the two men will find some kind of fulfilment in the physical closeness of a murderous embrace that the act of excision will demand.” Antonio and Shylock’s commonality was obliterated in this scene. The symbolism of the cross, instead of serving as an indictment of hypocritical Christian spirituality, eulogized Antonio – whose major mission had been Jewish persecution – as a sacrificial victim. As Erika Fisher-Lichte reminds us, “[t]he intentions of the mise en scene and the actual occurrences during a performance are frequently incongruent.” Thus, as was the case in the initial enactment of the choreographed slaughter, because the actual elements of the scene did not formally express the directorial conception, Wentworth’s performance became inappropriately mystical. After all, the trial scene illustrates a climactic fissure between the secular and
the sacred order to the point that the former constitutes a carnivalizing inversion of the latter. In the last scene, left alone on centre stage with Jessica (Sarah Topham) praying in Hebrew, Antonio exited after a last look at the new Christian converted by her own will. This scene, overloaded with contemporary resonances, echoed the 1970 National Theatre’s production directed by Miller, in which, Bulman tells us, “[a]s our focus narrows to Jessica alone, we hear an offstage voice plaintively intoning the Kaddish.”

The pairing of Antonio and Jessica reminded us, once more, of Merchant’s irony of fate.

In Richard Rose’s directorial conception, Jessica’s marriage, ironically, did not free her from patriarchal control; her submission to male authority was aggravated in that she exchanged an authoritarian father for a disciplinary husband with a tyrannical disposition. Cornered, she was doomed to live unhappily ever after. Disappointed with Christianity, she had reasons to feel sorry for Shylock’s forceful conversion, as it reminded her of the remorse for having deliberately converted herself. Thus, Jessica was an emblem of naiveté: a young woman objectified by the hegemonic forces that dismantled her family. As far as irony of fate is concerned, Jessica was arguably the most affected character in this Merchant. Incongruously however Jessica’s characterization completely ignored the past because Shakespeare’s Jessica’s agency distances her from representing the useful instrument of a chauvinistic social climber. Thus, the director molded Jessica to fit his agenda about current issues, rendering her functional in the representation of an unreliable Christian world.

Jessica and Lorenzo’s marriage illustrated a cultural shock in which the Other was doomed to be subdued by the Self. Because this one-sided directorial conception went radically against the playtext, it short-circuited the storytelling. In order to vilify Lorenzo,
for example, Richard Rose staged the playtext’s poet as an ill-tempered husband, who seemed to take sadistic pleasure in giving Jessica commands. In lieu of a playful dialogue about whether to have supper or to talk a little longer, Lorenzo arrogantly ordered: “No pray thee, let it serve for table talk; / Then howsome’er thou speak’st’mong other things / I shall digest it” (3.5.76-9). Willing to fit into the new cultural environment, the pitiable Jessica embarrassingly tried to do the sign of the cross to no avail. Hence, Lorenzo, standing behind her, took her arm and austerely manipulated it like a puppeteer. The vicious sexualization of a sacramental gesture, performed with intolerance by Lorenzo and passivity by Jessica, implied equivalence between religious conversion and sexual violation. This image was arguably readable as an indirect commentary on Shylock’s forceful conversion. With respect to Jessica’s characterization on its own however it was inadequate, as Shakespeare’s Jessica obviously does not convert to Christianity by force and does not regret her decision – at least not unambiguously. More importantly, if Lorenzo is an opportunist who marries exclusively for a dowry, which the couple spends recklessly on an extravagant honeymoon, the character lacks coherence. Therefore, despite the noteworthy presences of Le Gal and Topham, the enactment of Lorenzo and Jessica was not compelling, at least to playgoers familiar with the script. Moreover, the depiction of Lorenzo as the embodiment of oppression and of Jessica as the quintessence of willingness to victimization overwrites the license from seriousness that explicitly contextualizes the couple’s transgressive initiative under the protection of a pagan celebration. Furthermore, this depiction did not achieve the transhistorical in a production that often oscillated between exclusively emphasizing current topics and subserviently complying with a deadly “tradition.”
Also embodying a deadly “tradition,” Portia’s physical characterization was embarrassingly compliant with a conception that satisfied fetishistic criteria because Thompson, a dark-haired actress, wore a blond wig of human hair. The Stratford Festival of Canada’s system of production gave substance to the literalistic materialization of a character whose “sunny locks / Hang on her temples like a golden fleece” (1.1.168-9). This deployment of resources however accrued nothing to the staging except for the reproduction of an outdated common place of Merchant’s performance history. For example, in Bill Alexander’s 1987 production, as Deborah Findlay tells us, “all agreed that she should be blonde-haired. There are so many references to her golden locks and it seemed fitting that the centre of this light-filled, shimmering Belmont should herself be golden.”45 The question to be asked twenty years after Alexander’s production is In 2007, was hair colour really decisive in keeping the spectatorship attentively following the action onstage? Given that the Stratford Festival’s 2008 Juliet (Nikki M. James) was black, probably the new administration of the company thinks it was not. In the same way as no Desdemona ever dies for the audience to believe her death, Portia’s luminosity may be (more constructively) transacted by means of a quality of presence that renders her hair colour irrelevant and her actions bright.

Thompson emphasized Portia’s sobriety as vehemently as she expressed her discontent with the sexual politics to which she was bound by her father’s will. When Nerissa (Raquel Duffy) ironically defied her words, “They would be better if well followed” (1.2.10), Portia unpretentiously outsmarted Nerissa: “If to do were as easy as to know what were good to do...” (1.2.11). Thompson’s line delivery, in spite of communicating the pride of the all-mighty lady of her city-state, suggested that she did
not take advantage of the animosity to which class politics entitled her. Thus, in dispensing with the privilege of her social position, she established a tension between official culture and carnivalized counter-culture. As Jens Aage Doctor argues, “Shakespeare describes the courtly and political culture of the Renaissance as a society absorbing tendencies and possibilities that previously belong to carnival alone.”

Thompson drew upon tradition in that she embodied a mode of womanhood that, in the early modern period, was gradually remolding patterns of feminine identity while suggesting casslessness – or at least more fluidity in the performance of class distinction. In fact, the 2007 Merchant performance radicalized Renaissance’s camivalization at times. For instance, Richard Rose staged an idea dismissed by Ellen Terry in Henry Irving’s production that Portia chooses the song “Tell me where is fancy bred” (3.2.63) “deliberately to tip off Bassanio as to which casket contained her picture,” an option that “[Jonathan] Miller, however, found [ . . . ] irresistible” in the 1970 National Theatre’s production, according to Bulman. Thompson conducted a choir composed by almost all actors of the ensemble except for Wentworth and Greene. Singing an original composition by Vieira that evoked early modern music, the actors emphasized the words rhyming with “lead,” that is, “bred,” “head,” and the last syllable of “nourishèd” by employing more volume in their respective notes. A similar enactment was also created in the 1987 Royal Shakespeare Company’s staging when, as Findlay recalls, “Bill Alexander brought the whole cast on in disguise to sing the song as Portia’s household.”

The Stratford Festival of Canada’s audience responded with laughter to Portia’s subversion of her father’s will, understanding that her moral integrity was subordinated to nothing except love. Whether or not this scene was performed as an intentional revelation
in Shakespeare's time is irrelevant for the purposes of categorizing it as an instance of engagement with the past. This scene recreated tradition insofar as it suggested a theme that indeed exists in the plot and is particularly expressed through Portia’s enactment: inversion of social rules. Accordingly, this theme foreshadowed the climax of camivalization in the playtext: the trial scene. As Dr. Balthazar, Portia bore no masculine physicality. Once more, Portia’s physical characterization with a short-dark-haired wig and a moustache revealed the conservativeness with which the Stratford Festival of Canada’s system of production responded to the material requirements of the plot. Portia did not betray any discomfort regarding the disguise that allowed her such a decisive voice in the shaping of a male-dominated society. Nevertheless, when she perceived that Bassanio’s connection with Antonio was resolutely indicative of self sacrificing love, which downgraded the significance of his own nuptial bond, her expression converted to anguish, signaling that, like Jessica, she had also chosen the wrong husband.

Portia’s inflection was not at all playful when she protested with jurisprudential authority, “Your wife would give you little thanks for that / If she were by to hear you make the offer” (4.1.284-5). Propelled by the consciousness that the limits of her agency were then defined by the error of assisting Bassanio in winning her hand, she did not fear disputing the Duke’s proposition that half of Shylock’s wealth should be allocated to Antonio. In making eye contact with both Bassanio and the Duke, she stressed the negative phrase in her counterproposal: “Hay, for the state, not for Antonio” (4.1 .369). In this way, not only was she standing up for unhindered justice, but also, and primarily, exhibiting her jealousy, a feeling that would prompt her to probe Bassanio’s loyalty by persuading him to give away the ring to Balthazar. Thus, Thompson’s performance manifested a patent
concern with contemporaneity. This instance of engagement with present-day issues, besides defining Portia’s individual focus, also had repercussions on Antonio and Bassanio’s potential homosexual ties. This understated intimation informed the audience that the ubiquity of unfulfilment in *Merchant* magnified the contemporary taboo of same-sex desire. Despite the fact that the Stratford Festival of Canada’s image is notoriously conformist, the claim for equality of same-sex relationships is such a prominent theme in contemporary North America that sexual diversity could be insinuated in this production without disturbing the target audience. As far as Portia’s own focus is concerned, in embodying conflicting characteristics of a number of Shakespearean female leading roles, Thompson unmistakably evoked the past; invested with courage and integrity, her character composition exhibited broad strokes of a romantic heroine. As a case in point, after Bassanio won her hand in the casket contest, she kneeled down before him in order to declare her love. On the other hand, it was chiefly in masquerade that Portia displayed agency; noble ideals such as courage and ingenuity coexisted with the threat to social order in the form of trickery in the Elizabethan theatre. Consequently, in this light, Portia’s characterization drew upon the performance history of the play.

Somewhere between the amalgamation of the heroine and the trickster, however, Portia was also inspired by contemporary issues that did not merge into the transhistorical dimension because they sent confusing signs to the spectatorship, especially in the case of a target audience so used to linear parameters of performance narrative. In act 2, scene 1, for example, when Morocco (an Afro-Caucasian Canadian with blackface) and his train entered, Thompson shouted and covered her open mouth, marveling before her first view of a black man. Controversial as this physical attraction may sound, Shakespeare’s Portia
may share Desdemona’s inclinations towards the physical prowess of a black male; Portia herself states, “Yourself, renowned prince, then stood as fair / As any comer I have looked on yet I For my affection” (2.1.20-2). Hence, as far as the sexual objectification of an African male is concerned, Portia’s transitory infatuation could be considered with respect to the past as well as to the present without hindering the transhistorical dimension. In addition, the performance of a conspicuous erotic interest in one of the suitors constituted a comic inversion of gender roles, as Portia temporarily embodied the sexual incontinence of a particularly immodest codification of maleness.

The confusing signs emitted by Portia’s characterization in Morocco’s first scene regarded the constancy of Shakespearean heroines. As A. G. Harmon observes in relation to Portia, “[c]onstancy is a virtue she has in common with [. . . ] other heroines who play crucial roles in plot resolutions.”49 The identification of fissures in the conventions of a staging is not necessarily perceived as such by the audience. This fact does not preclude playgoers, however, from sensing incongruences that confound their intellectual and emotional construction of the theatrical event. In portraying Portia's emancipated libido, this production broke a noteworthy romance theme at the service of a peculiar conjunction of two opposing effects: the sheer amusement of the audience through a completely unanticipated characterization of Merchant’s heroine as voluble; and a highbrow commentary on significant paradigm shifts regarding gender roles and racial discrimination. However this enactment was received, from the perspective of the play text’s intrinsic logic, the (de)contextualization of this single scene based on contemporary issues momentarily entertained the audience at the cost of both the distorted perception of a character as well as of the overall view of the staging.
Likewise, Portia’s predominant circumspection after the trial scene indicated this production’s disconnection from the multidimensionality of the playtext, where the poignancy of the tragic intertwines with the lightness of the comic and the impartiality of romance. Once more, the staging conventions distanced the playtext from its inherent carnivalization in that Portia’s laughter was suppressed in favour of her “unofficial seriousness.” On the one hand, Portia’s angst reminded the audience of society’s corruptibility, magnified by her own fraudulent deception in the trial scene and by her incapacity to treat Shylock according to the standards that she had initially required from him. On the other hand, bound to a marital contract forged with her complicity, Portia’s overemphatic bleakness pointed towards an existential dead-end. The Stratford Festival’s characterization of Portia was opposed to the Globe’s in that both overemphasized different polarities – the tragic and the comic respectively – at the expense of their correlates. Whereas the Globe chose laughter that did not purify seriousness, the Stratford Festival chose seriousness that could not be purified by laughter.

Although skepticism is implied in Merchant, in disapprovingly portraying a society based on exclusion, which encompassed the exclusion generated by the competition between Portia and Antonio for Bassanio, Richard Rose deprived the audience’s awareness of the imbrications of a script that insistendy reminds us of its ludic and complex expressive properties in contradistinction to didacticism and onesidedness. Thus, the 2007 Merchant’s characterization of Portia, in overexpressing important elements of the playtext, annihilated other equally important elements and inflated the theatrical narrative with drama, making it too somber. Consistent with its inconsistencies however Richard Rose’s directorial conception did not resolve Portia’s trajectory, which
abruptly shifted to a “happy ending” without following the track of the character’s psychological and emotional patterns that it had so dearly established. Portia’s tormented gaze after discovering that she had made a mistake in choosing the lord of her domain was not consistent with the disclosure of the production. Thus, Portia’s characterization neither portrayed the *cliché* of a delightful young woman on her way towards maturity nor did it fully develop the trickster who cynically took her role to the last consequences. Towards the end of act 5, Portia smiled, inviting the audience to forget how dark the tragicomic theatrical narrative had developed until then – as though *Merchant* had an indisputable happy ending.

This production neglected *Merchant’s* ambiguity; it did not bring to relief the playtext’s carnivalizing potential for shocking the audience with the avail of a license to which the Elizabethan theatre was entitled precisely because of its unassuming poetics of ingenuousness, with its offensive potential. As Hazard Adams asserts, “[p]oetry’s offenses are challenges to a way of thought that too narrowly circumscribes experience.” Accordingly, *Merchant* arouses perplexities about social and intrapersonal issues as opposed to proposing solutions to them, let alone taking sides. Richard Rose enacted the script as if the politics of the quotidian dramatized in it could be easily broken down to its constitutive elements – as if the playtext were denunciatory of the excesses of power in contradistinction to exploratory of how identities are shaped *within* political structures rather than *by* them.

Shakespeare was too aware of the political circumstantialities that shaped the religion *en vogue* to manufacture apologies for any of them. If *Merchant* still has
something to speak to us, then it is a conduit, which, like the process of aging in human beings, makes it simultaneously different from and identical to itself across time. Transhistorical approaches to Merchant contemplate the script’s conception of the individual not as a social actor in conflict with an overarching structure exclusively defined by political forces. Merchant’s characters are entities tragically immersed within the world regardless of how the overarching power shapes their social practices. In other words, there are choices, but no redemption, except for Lorenzo’s speculative proposition of elevation in disembodiment and the ambivalent “happy ending.” This vertiginous underlying sense enables the script to remain open to the interventions of a variety of ordering principles, including those of the Stratford Festival of Canada because mainstream theatrical events per se should not preclude the possibility of simultaneously entertaining and promoting reflection. Compelling stagings of an old playtext are neither conditioned by marginal stagings that preach to the converted nor by mainstream spectacles for bored individuals with a surplus in their bank accounts. Compelling stagings of “Shakespeare” reveal something new about an old artifact, thereby drawing the audience to the theatrical event and sending them back home as if it were indeed vital to partake of that specific social practice out of a range of enriching life experiences. The Stratford Festival’s 2007 Merchant, in attempting to find the middle ground between tradition and innovation, in seeking a compromise between the target audience’s conservativeness and a provocative contextualization that would attract authentication from highbrow viewers, failed to generate either a popular or a sophisticated theatrical event - as the modest revenue of the production suggests. The unenthusiastic reception of Richard Rose's Merchant was not enhanced by the embarrassingly disappointing presence
of a distinguished peer of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, arguably the world's most prestigious manufacturer of talent validations. Moreover, Greene’s image’s evocation of the displaced Other did not nourish any forum for challenge vis-à-vis the critique of colonial disintegration of a culture that strives to come to terms with its identity. Nevertheless, the production provided the majestic oak board of the Festival Theatre with the spectacle of a large cast, original dance and music, a few exhilarating scenes, and a number of appealing individual performances. The last curtain call was given to Arbuckle and Thompson, whereas Wentworth and Greene were given the second last. To a number of patrons whose decision to watch this production was shaped by factors such as an Oscar nominee in the cast, the Stratford Festival of Canada’s 2007 Merchant possibly brought the acknowledgement that the mass media’s attribution of “symbolic capital” could constitute an insolvent letter of credit. It was a show without spark to be consumed that season, not to be remembered, like most shows produced by a theatrical practice on industrial scale, a feature that worked for the Tudor theatre, but proves not to be a transhistorical one.

Notes

6 Stratfordestival.ca, internet.
7 Stratford Shakespeare Festival Souvenir Playbill 2007.
8 Information provided by Ellen Charendoff, Co-ordinator of the SFC’s Archives.
vennero puniti con la distruzione dei loro castelli; il patriarca fu graziat, ma gli venne imposto di inviare ogni anno, nella ocorrere della vitoria, un toro e dodici maiali, rappresentanti se stesso ed i suoi fedeli canonic, che lo avevano difeso nell’assedio. A Venezia si pensò di ricordare quella vittoria per mezzo di una elaborata parodia: la riproduzione grottesca dell’avvenimento doveva divertire i cittadini e nel contempo affermare l’egemonia politica dei capi. Veniva inscenato un processo a carico degli animali nel luogo detinato al giudizio, in piazzeta S. Marco; seguivano la condanna e la decapitazione ad opera dei membri del patriziato, che si spartivano in seguito la carne.” Stefania Bertelli, Il Carnevale di Venezia nel Settecento (Roma: Jouvence Società Editoriale, 1992) 11-2.

35 Marie Comisso, “The Merchant of Venice and Othello (review),” Shakespeare Bulletin (Volume 26, Number 3, Fall 2008) 83.


37 According to Horace Howard Furness, “[a] trifling difficulty in nomenclature meets us on the threshold. Anthonio enters with two friends, whose names are so nearly the same that before fifty lines are passed the compositors have fallen into a confusion over them, from which they do not recover throughout the play. In the Folios and Quartos these names appear as Salaryno. Salerino, Slarino, Solarino, Salerio, Salanio, Salino, and Solanio with abbreviations at the beginning of the speeches correspondingly variable. Indeed so great does the puzzle become that [George] STEEVENS added ‘Salerio, a messenger from Venice; as a third character in the Dramatis Personae, and has been followed therein by many an editor, even down to the conservative Cambridge edition and to the Rolf.” Horace Howard Furness, A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare: The Merchant of Venice (1888), ed. Horace Howard Furness (New York: Dover Publications, 1964) 5.

38 Sean Lawrence, “‘To receive and to give’: Performing Exchanges in The Merchant of Venice,” Shakespeare and the Cultures of Performance, ed. Paul Yachnin and Patricia Badir (Aldershot, Hampshire and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008) 47.


42 Derek Cohen, Searching Shakespeare (Toronto and London: University of Toronto Press, 2008) 74-5.


Chapter Four

Destruction: the Pascal Theatre Company’s *The Merchant of Venice*

Those who think they stand outside institutions are sometimes those who interiorize its norms and programs in the most docile manner.¹

[I]t would be an equally essentialist and ahistorical gesture to attempt to resist the taming powers of Shakespeare with an opposing sense of the insistence upon the liberty and licence of performance.²

[T]he progressive potential of a sceptical postmodernism - which has the capacity to renew itself through a continuous and self-reflexive deconstruction is being jeopardised by a cynical postmodernism, which has discarded its sceptical imperative in order to uphold the totalitarian implications of the conclusions of relativism and pluralism from which there is no way forward.³

The misconstruction of a Shakespearean production involves the genuine search for the traces of the playtext. Thus, misconstruction implies Deconstruction and may achieve partially compelling results. Nevertheless, in attempting to make totalizing statements derived from the engagement with the present, misconstruction loses sight of the skeptical imperative, which stipulates open-endedness as a goal – a goal that holds particularly valid with respect to *Merchant*. The negligence of the play’s
multidimensionality may take more radical forms. Correspondingly, in this chapter, I analyze a special case study, the Pascal Theatre Company’s *Merchant*, an extremely iconoclastic adaptation that completely neglected the skeptical imperative and, in so doing, generated a cynical reading of the play. I deem it important to study this production for two reasons. On the one hand, it used “Shakespeare” to de-authorize “Shakespeare” and thereby represented one of the excesses of the postmodernist auto-referentiality; on the other hand, it noticeably authorized itself by means of the “symbolic capital” of both “Shakespeare” and *Merchant*, thereby overlapping mainstream theatre. Consistent with a cynical postmodernist appropriation, this staging explicitly used the original script for purposes radically different from those of the original practices. Hence, its transhistoricism was reduced to the inescapable fact that the source text, albeit undone, was paradoxically present as an indispensable element. As Linda Hutcheon argues, “[a]mong the unresolved contradictions of representation in postmodern fiction is that of the relation between the past and the present.” Because, while assaulting *Merchant*, this production suggested commonalities between the playtext and the Holocaust, it actually assumed a transhistorical proposition, even if a revisionist one. This parody’s contradictory relationship between the past and the present derived not only from the inevitable intertextuality it maintained with the source text that it resisted, but also from its political implications. As Hutcheon maintains, “parody is doubly coded in political terms: it both legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies.”

In reviewing this *Merchant* with a particular focus on its context, I suggest that it constituted a form of destruction, as opposed to a Deconstruction, in that it presupposed a claim to unequivocal domination of one mode of signifying over another. Moreover, in doing away with
carnivalization, an effective strategy to subvert the official culture, this theatrical event flagrantly embodied official culture’s seriousness instead. Furthermore, since the essential motivators standing behind this staging’s acts of appropriation were a heartfelt commitment to Jewishness and feminism, I probe how the company framed not only its semiotic representation but also its political representation.

The “radical version of *The Merchant of Venice* through the eyes of a Holocaust survivor, by William Shakespeare and Julia Pascal”\(^5\) was performed at the Studio of the Arcola Theatre, an Off West End venue operating in a building formerly used as a factory. The Arcola Theatre is located in Hackney, which, despite still having a significant population of a few thousand Jews, used to have even more when Harold Pinter, one of its most distinguished Jewish celebrities, was born, grew up, and played Romeo and Macbeth at school productions.\(^6\) Famous for its numerous artists, writers, actors, producers, and journalists, Hackney is now primarily known as London’s Turkish neighbourhood. For this reason, it has an ethnic atmosphere that matches the cosmopolitan appeal of fringe theatrical events. The Arcola Theatre, renowned for hosting productions “with a social, economical and political relevance, [ . . . ] won the Peter Brook Empty Space Award twice in a row and was given the Time Out Live Award twice for ‘Inventive Programming on a Shoestring’ in 2003 and ‘Favourite Fringe Venue’ in 2005. A large number of its productions have been selected as Time Out Critic’s Choice.”\(^7\) Hence, the Arcola Theatre, sponsored by the Arts Council and reputed for hosting works by prominent contemporary writers and directors, decisively upgraded the marketability of the Pascal Theatre Company’s *Merchant*. The tickets for the show cost £13 (£9 for students), being therefore affordable. The rectangular black-box auditorium,
with total capacity of 150 seats, foregrounded the scarcity of patrons. This Merchant's season had twenty nine performances and was seen by 1,609 spectators – including complimentary tickets. Hence the audience was composed by about fifty five members per performance, that is, roughly thirty seven percent of the auditorium's capacity, a low percentage in spite of the company’s persuasive promotion and publicity.

The Pascal Theatre Company’s promotional image of Merchant relied on the presence of two Jewish performers. One of them was Sarah Posner, a seventy-eight-year old Warsaw ghetto survivor, who naturally had more to offer than a professional background that included a role in the Royal Shakespeare Company’s Dybbuk. Invested with the experience of a Jew whose life had been under threat during the Holocaust, Posner could contribute authentic ethnographic materials, which added a potentially captivating layer to this production. The other was Paul Herzberg, who, out of the four stagings observed for this study, was the only Jew playing Shylock. With a considerable career span, Herzberg had already interpreted the role of Gratiano in a production for the Chichester Festival Theatre in which Alec Guinness was the moneylender. The presence of the fifty-six-year-old veteran added a particular quality to the production because of the audience’s predisposition for decoding an “authentic” Jew impersonating a Jewish character – particularly a character with such a variety of implications today. The appeal of what Susan Murray calls “double-coded performance of ethnicity” may be significant to Jewish viewers because their feelings and beliefs about the construction of their own social identities can be shared and promulgated. Although Jewishness was a veritable marker of the company, multiculturalism was no less noticeable.
Correspondingly, the cast also included visible minorities: for example, the African actors Olalekan Lawal Jr., who “graduated from Arts Educational,” and Tonderai Munyevu, described as having “studied at the National Youth Theatre and the London Centre for Theatre Studies.” Portia was played by Miranda Pleasance, who “trained at [the] Central School of Speech and Drama.” The playbill was vague about Pleasance’s and Munyevu’s trainings. Because the three theatre schools mentioned in the biographies of both performers run a variety of short-term programs, it is impossible to assume the extent of their trainings. In any event, the names of these institutions in the playbill demonstrated the company’s concern with “symbolic capital.” Correspondingly, both Roderick Smith, who played Antonio and Launcelot, and Jonathan Woolf, who played Bassanio, were credited as having worked for the Royal Shakespeare Company. Therefore, notwithstanding its subversive character, the Pascal Theatre Company did not dispense with prestigious references, even if they were unconventionally displayed. Moreover, in adhering to the “playbill biographies” genre, the company gave signs that the frame of Merchant’s theatrical experience betrayed normative standards. Thus, progressive values inevitably took a bow to the official culture, suggesting that the Pascal Theatre Company’s marketing strategies did not differ so much from those of the West End theatres despite the transgressive intent that awaited the spectators’ arrival at the auditorium.

As the patrons selected their seats, Lawal Jr. and Munyevu interacted individually with the audience, performing illegal street vendors. In blurring the limits between stage and audience, fiction and reality, this dramatization of poverty might have reminded patrons of the box office’s low revenue. Nevertheless, if the scene aimed to sensitize the
audience to the company’s probable hardship, it failed because patrons did not engage in the transaction. At the sound of a whistle, the poor salesmen gathered their merchandise and escaped. Because this scene did not provide the audience with orientation about its context within this adaptation of Merchant, spectators could have reflected on it fruitlessly through the entire show. Audiences are often exceptionally open to making sense of a show’s staging conventions at its beginnings. In this spirit, I also thought that the fear of confiscation might have alluded to an analogy between the social identities of Africans and Jews. The historical deprivation of Africans and their descendants, however, only marginally evokes that of Jews because the differences between the cultural histories of Jewish and African suffering are far more numerous than the similarities, to say the least. For this reason, the spectatorship was left with one single certainty: that Lawal Jr. and Munyevu had been typecast as “extra-communitarians,” as individuals who do not have a passport from a country of the EU may be labelled.

The audience apathetically observed the opening scene, which, in terms of this Merchant’s posture of critique, could be read as a striking contrast with the playtext’s background of opulence. Yet it was not possible to relate this scene to the fundamental question phrased by the production’s publicity materials: “Did The Merchant of Venice set the seeds of modern anti-Semitism?” Although the opening theatrical gesture evoked the vulnerable status of a large number of marginalized individuals in England, the main expressive elements of the scene were naïveté and blackness, which might have stimulated thoughts about the social exclusion of the performers themselves; nonetheless, to whoever had read the playbill, their “symbolic capital” inhibited these assumptions. However the audience perceived this scene, the fulcrum of the public’s indifference was
the absence of a specific codification. As it would become clearer during the show, nonetheless, the staging had the bold aim of destroying all stylistic conventions, including the convention that, whenever a theatrical experience establishes a clear-cut boundary between actors and spectators, the latter expect to see an ordering principle onstage; otherwise the theatrical event is simply chaos trying to justify itself through its alleged political action. Because the actors who performed vendors did not exhibit any technique that could stimulate the integration of the audience into a participatory mode of theatrical experience, neither was the conventional boundary between actors and spectators dissolved nor was their physiological behaviour perceived as a performative idiom. Consequently, the focus of this scene did not derive from a gradually established pact between the production and the audience (theatricality). In lieu of arousing insight into how compassion might be hindered by utilitarian automatism, the audience’s observation of living icons of poverty might have triggered actual fellow-feeling. The problem is that there is a vital difference between the representation of poverty and the bare exposition of icons of poverty.

The liminal staging conventions of the Pascal Theatre Company’s Merchant implied that meaning and its value did not inhere in the staging, but in the politics of culture per se. For this reason, from the company’s perspective, it was irrelevant whether or not Lawal Jr. and Munyevu either staged persuasion or effectively attempted to convince patrons to buy their commodities. Accordingly, the dramatization of clandestinity, instead of illuminating meaning, objectified the performers as pitiable presences, who could be taken away from the audience’s view at a whistle’s notice: a proposition that simulated the documentation of a feasible occurrence in the lack of a
commentary on it. In attempting to supplant canonical cultural authority, the director generated a staging convention that did not accomplish the purpose of providing orientation – or even intentional disorientation, had this been the case. The problem with this act of defiance of the essential rules of theatre is that the spectators’ minds work as decoders of codifications, particularly when a political commitment binds the performative idiom. As a case in point, referring to “[t]he dances alluding to the Carnival, which appear between some of the scenes of the dress rehearsal,” Rivka Jacobson notes that “female dancers in costumes of white brassieres and matching bottoms [. . .] prompt curiosity mingled with incomprehension. One can only guess what this is supposed to mean: could it be the sexual liberation of the female characters in the play?” Jacobson’s attempt to solve this enigma is plausible in relation to the horizon of expectations construed by a company that addresses feminist issues. Mentioning the same “interludes in which the youngest and best-looking members of the cast [. . .] stripped to sports bras and thermal long-johns,” Sarah Perry affirms that they “do nothing but heartily confuse the audience.” Nevertheless, disavowing Perry’s reception, it could be argued that, exactly in order to destabilize expectations regarding Shakespearean authority, this scene was added. After all, according to the ordering principles of a postmodernist parody, the staging conventions of this adaptation of Merchant should be somewhere between the borderline of the conspicuous assault of the status quo and the fragmentation of perception. Nonetheless, as an audience member who understood that this theatrical experience had the dual imperative of staging a protest against an alleged reactionary playtext and stimulating political action, I still needed to see more.
Immediately following the allegedly interactive scene with the vendors, Ruth Posner, dressed as a casual tourist, appeared. Playing the role of Sarah, a name that suggested an archetypical Jewish woman, Posner, as a Holocaust survivor playing a Holocaust survivor, had a clearly established goal: to add intensity and authenticity to the production’s implied investigation of the commonality between the persecution of European Jewry in countries occupied by Nazi Germany and Shakespeare’s representation of Jewishness. Nevertheless, as Perry observes, “[t]here followed an interlude so astonishingly crass I barely believed my ears!” Perry’s astonishment derived from the lack of a compelling mode of theatricality that could engage the audience. The matter-of-factness of the dialogue between Sarah and Valentina (a contemporary Italian tour guide played by Judith Quin) disallowed any emotional or intellectual response to Posner’s narrative of trauma. Conversely, the scene had a chatty tone that overshadowed Posner’s authentic experience as a Holocaust survivor. As Sarah approached Valentina in Italian, the latter proudly replied: “I’m a Ph.D. in Shakespeare! Why should I speak Italian?” Once more, a characterization hinged on an understated stereotyping – this time in defiance of “the idiot savant literary scholar,” who, as Robert Shaughnessy observes, “continues to appeal to many in the acting profession as an embodiment of pedantry and theatrical impracticality.” Nonetheless, the unnecessary attack on a national depicted as having a colonial complex aside, in staging a displaced scholar as a form of critique to authority, this production embodied authority. On the one hand, such gesture raised the question as to why the pedantic Shakespearean authority was not targeted by laughter, with its power of dissolving deformed embodiments of seriousness through the exposition of rigidity. On the other hand, in a scene where the
tour guide’s agenda was controlled by the tourist, whose interview naturally replaced a scheduled tour of the Venetian Jewish ghetto, the reason for the absence of laughter was self-evident: in addition to introducing the play-within-the-play device, Sarah and Valentina’s dialogue was concerned with teleology and closure, markers of an absolute control over the theatrical narrative. This control was manifest in an extraordinarily linear narrative.

Sarah and Valentina’s conversation concentrated on Posner’s youth: from the use of an Aryan passport in order to survive to the glorification of Americans as the exclusive agents of the liberation of Jews from Fascism, a historical event about which Valentina, joyful to the point of embodying American patriotism, remarked that “Americans freed them from the Duce!” The other Allies were omitted from Pascal’s allusion to the campaign in Italy because, in this anti-Shakespearean production, the British, under the flimsy ægis of Venetian alter-egos, would be stereotyped as bigots. Valentina’s brief reference to the historical episode did not derive from sheer ignorance or oblivion, but from deliberate manipulation of history. As Pascal states, “affirmative action is not a British way of life, it’s an American one. There is tremendous apathy and laissez-faire here. It’s very hard to get any sort of movement against the status quo. As a result the same white male middle-aged or young, middle-class hierarchy from Oxford and Cambridge continues.”

Pascal’s urge to explain reality from a tendentiously reductive viewpoint was reflected in her staging in that it visibly embodied a totalizing narrativity whereby history was presented as a set of continuous and unproblematically homogeneous networks of causality and analogy. The totalizing impulse of selecting and organizing historical events according to a specific finality, unless it is deployed
ironically in order to criticize what it mockingly embodies, goes against postmodernist propelling forces. The postmodernist project is shaped by the Foucauldian tenet, as Hutcheon summarizes it, of “not[ing] the dispersing interplay of different, heterogeneous discourses that acknowledge the undecidable in both the past and our knowledge of the past.”15 Valentina did not historicize the action of the American allies in the World War II upon the grounds of undecidability. On the contrary, a patent network of causality and analogy was established: Americans (alone) were the cause of Duce’s downfall and therefore they surfaced as the protagonists of the narrative of history, which was totalizing in a particular way, that is, by being reductive.

Correspondingly, Pascal’s additional scenes espoused a totalizing narrative in that they obstinately set about to fill in the gaps and unresolved absences of Shakespeare’s playtext. Whereas the original playtext is open-ended, Pascal’s adaptation drew upon disjunctive logic. Disjunctive logic – in contradistinction to addictive logic – assumes that texts have definitive meanings. Pascal’s adaptation was grounded on the deep-seated Western dualism (which Derrida was intent on deconstructing) whereby an interpretation is either right or wrong. For this reason, this staging did not exemplify a case of Deconstruction, but of destruction: it undid a self-deconstructive text and replaced it by a deluded construct. As a case in point, the original text from Morocco’s exegetic scene was entirely cut except for Portia’s line: “Let all of his complexion choose me so” (2.7.78-9), which, besides standing out as her only interaction with the Muslim Prince, was delivered with an extraordinarily disgusted tone. In addition, Portia threw the three caskets to the hands of each of the three suitors. Thus, in this production, there were no ambiguities or silences. Understandably, no compelling codification was performed
except for typecasting and stereotyping. A pact between the company’s framing of the theatrical event and the audience was betrayed by the staging itself. Although the staging purported to be postmodernist, it determinedly pointed towards closure: Portia was depicted as a tyrant; her wooers as brainless males; blacks as defenseless pariahs; Shakespearean scholars as infuriating shrews; and Posner’s surprisingly opaque performance of sincerity rendered her, as had previously happened to the African actors, a living puppet void of theatrical eloquence. Thus, constrained to fashion nothing but a plain account of trauma according to directorial decisions, Posner’s emotional investment, like every other aspect of this parody, was no more than an inert emblem of caricatural revisionism of early modern England. Except for Shylock, Merchant’s well-rounded characters, shaped by the totalizing impulse that this appropriation challenged, were depicted as stereotypes of the official culture.

Closure was so pervasive in this staging of Merchant that even Venice was caricatured. In Pascal’s adaptation, a flooding caused Sarah to be stranded in the historical city. For this reason, the tourist did not have any alternative but to observe a troupe’s rehearsal of Merchant. The totalizing justification for the dramaturgical device of the play-inside-the-play was actually an improbability, as a vaporetto (water bus) would transport Sarah out of the Venetian historical centre in any event. In addition, in Pascal’s totalizing Venice, a theatre troupe could afford to rehearse serenely, sheltered from the inundation, whereas the rest of the city would probably be either pumping water out of the buildings or making barricades. Hence, in adding allegedly logical justifications for the play-inside-the-play plot, Pascal amplified the totalizing impulse that she proposed to resist.
Similarly, when Sarah recognized that the theatrical practice she was observing was a dress rehearsal of *Merchant*, she deployed a dramatic tone for the first time since her appearance and uttered the sentence that would reverberate during the entire performance as a plea for banning Shakespeare’s play: “I wish it had never been written.” Sarah’s line was the epitome of the criterion on which the staging conventions were based. As Andrew Haydon asserts, “[Pascal’s] perverse contention is that, as a Jew, she finds the play deeply problematic, and in at least one of her articles she goes so far as to suggest that it shouldn’t be performed. As self-publicity goes, suggesting the play that you are putting on shouldn’t be put on is an unusual ruse. But, Pascal thinks she’s cracked it.” Despite the plea for deleting *Merchant* from the world’s cultural history, however, Sarah never expounded why Shakespeare “set the seeds of anti-Semitism.” This gap was the only one that the totalizing impulse of the staging never attempted to fill in. If the obsessive resistance to the past as a figure for the anxieties of the present is explainable, Sarah missed the chance to articulate it. In addition, in spite of professing her point of view about Shakespeare’s play, she watched the complete rehearsal. Sarah’s unreasonable determinedness reflected that, in Pascal’s *Merchant*, the gaze of the present conveniently forged the past.

The statement about *Merchant*’s inappropriateness due to its indisputable anti-Semitic stance was so unidimensionally illustrated by Pascal that neither did it deconstruct Shakespeare’s play nor did it add any contribution to the logical scope of the medium. Since a compelling staging of *Merchant* should purify the audience from the abuses of the past, an appropriation should magnify this purifying power, not pollute the audience even more. As Perry puts it, “[t]he Arcola’s new production of *The Merchant of*
Venice manages an astounding theatrical feat: to make the paying audience feel guilty that they stepped through the doors.”17 Falling into the trap of which it accused other ideologies, that is, the trap of the drive of imposing, Pascal’s production was the performance of a complaint. Nevertheless, it could be argued that kvetching (Yiddish for “complaining”), as a cultural expression of Jewishness, was expected in this Merchant because it implied an emphasis on the performance of trauma. If so, it raises the question: is there such a uniform positioning that may be said to represent a Jewish standpoint on Merchant?

In judging from the divergences among scholars and theatre practitioners of Jewish extraction, there is no unanimous perspective in relation to the alleged anti-Semitism of the play. For example, this study has drawn upon the perspectives of Janet Adelman, Jay L. Halio, Stephen Marx, and Martin D. Yaffe, who all see Merchant as a challenging proposition with respect to the “Jewish question” in early modern England. Similarly, the Theatre for a New Audience, based in New York under the artistic direction of its Jewish founder, Jeffrey Horowitz, did not stage a condemnation of Merchant. In assuming that kvetching is a consistent cultural aspect of the Jews, we exclude Jews of different origins, for whom Yiddish culture per se does not activate any affective memory. I am concerned with the fault-lines running between the Ashkenazim and the Others (Ethiopians, Egyptians, Indians, Magrebins, Turks, etc.) because they are markers of the heterogeneity of what the umbrella term “Jew” encompasses. The multifarious composition of Jewishness is indicative that the Pascal Theatre Company’s alleged performance of the social interests of Jews does not constitute a typical perception either of Jewishness or of the Jewish viewpoint of Merchant. Accordingly,
Pascal’s adaptation of *Merchant* could not be regarded as performance of political representation *vis-à-vis* the Jewish community. Considering, however, that the company’s proposition implied a discrete social mechanism for reinforcing a democratic ethos, I will examine the company’s semiotic representation of Jewishness.

The semiotic representation of Jewishness in Pascal’s *Merchant* had a significant advantage over the other characters: against a background of grotesque caricatures, Shylock stood out as the only humane major character in *Merchant*; his grief was externalized through a realistic impersonation. As a case in point, Herzberg’s delivery of the speech, “I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes?” (3.1.46-57) was an effective performance of “double-coded performance” because his intensity was unmasked. The deployment of realism and emotionality as a staging convention in this famous scene arguably exposed a contradiction in the underlying sense of the production: that at least one of Shylock’s original discourses actually exalts Jews. Nonetheless, considering that Pascal’s ordering principles were anti-conventional, even Shakespearean lines could be enacted in a conventional style as though it did not imply conformity to conventions. Herzberg’s realism was so reiterative of self-commiseration, however, that Shylock lost credibility and became another reductive expression: in this case of victimization. Jewish persecution, unavoidably enacted in the scene of confrontation of Salerio (Simeon Perlin) and Solanio (Marc Pickering), who insultingly spat on the floor before Shylock, was so constant and obvious that it deprived Herzberg of contradictions. Against a background of generalized aggression, Shylock did not have any alternative but to lament. Herzberg’s reduced gamut of emotions precluded the characterization of the moneylender as a believable human being. The trial scene, for example, hammered upon the inequitable
treatment of Shylock: Graziano (James Baldwin) unbuckled and pulled off his belt in order to intimidate the plaintiff; and even the Duke (Emily Sidonie), the script’s ultimate guarantor of a fair judgment, was contemptibly unsympathetic to the Jew. Thus, through the staging of injustice at the site of justice, Pascal de-authorized “Shakespeare.” Nevertheless, as stated before, Pascal’s staging conventions, in attempting to deconstruct the playtext’s polysemy, ended up undoing it. Pascal’s conception of the trial scene exemplified a case of unruliness of the performance in which the taming forces of the playtext could only be resisted at the price of essentialism and ahistoricism. In containing Merchant's indeterminacies, instead of uncovering something transgressive about the playtext, this staging put a new mask on an old face, inadvertently occluding the historical and euphorically celebrating the affirmation of a totalizing mode of signifying. Amidst this scenario of intolerance, only one line portrayed Shylock under different lenses. How did this breach of the totalizing impulse contribute to this parody?

Shylock's characterization was only destabilized by one line. In a scene in which he celebrated the family Shabbat, Jessica (Jodie Taibi), wanted to know why Leah had died. Without details, he intimated that his wife perished because “[s]he wanted to give [him] a son.” This line, inserted in a scene that aimed at deepening the personal ties between Shylock and Jessica, did not constitute a building block to the debate about Jewishness, which observes matrilineal transmission of kinship. The additional reference to Shylock’s past subtly condemned him for a topic that, so far, has been irrelevant to scholarly debate: his manliness. Shylock’s humanizing line was there because it met a fundamental criterion of the Pascal Theatre Company’s own agenda regardless of Jewishness: feminism. Hence, although it was essential for the director to place Shylock
on a pedestal above Christians, it was as important to demote his moral impeccability in order that the advocacy of women’s rights did not go unobserved.

Shylock’s line concerning the politics of gender sprang from the fact that, in a narrative in which Portia was doomed to be a racist villain and Jessica was stereotyped as the young Jewish woman who desperately wanted to be a model of white Englishness, there was no other character in Shakespeare’s play that could fulfil the requirements of the role of a feminist except for an absent one. In addition, all the other males were depicted as degenerated homosexuals and thereby they could not have absorbed flaws of male power. As a result, it was convenient to flag a shortcoming of Shylock’s maleness to remind the audience of the victimization of women. This device might have been fruitful in a different adaptation, but it was useless with respect to the overall subject matter of a production that concentrated on representations of anti-Semitism, which was amplified even more by Jessica’s internalized racism.

In making an effort to adjust to a racist society, Jessica was confrontational and determined to distance herself from Shylock, who, once more was victimized, this time in his own home. Hence, Jessica embodied the Christian society's assertion of dietary dominance in a peculiarly cankered mode, despising her family's religious and racial heritage. Accordingly, she scorned Shylock's faith with a rather meaningless and gross insult: “The Bible is full of shit!” Thus, Jessica was demonized for exercising her right to divorce herself from a religious belief system. Pascal’s mode of signifying a protest against anti-Semitism, neglected that, from a perspective sympathetic to women’s rights, Shakespeare’s Jessica legitimately acts like a number of her coreligionists, and does this under the social constraints of an early modern code of womanhood. From Pascal’s
perspective, Jessica’s exchange of a belief system inherited by birth for one to which she would adhere by free will was a misdeed. Pascal’s matriarchal perspective on feminine emancipation therefore foreclosed religious choice from an array of women’s prerogatives. Hence, the directorial conception, in order to emphasize the irrationality of Jessica’s proposition, staged her claim for assimilation by means of a tantrum: attempting to have her hair lightened with lemon juice, Jessica repeatedly urged at the top of her voice: “Blonder! Blonder!” Impervious to the words of wisdom from an authorized matriarch, she would not listen to Sarah, who meddled in Merchant’s rehearsal to persuade her not to escape with Lorenzo, justifying herself with the line: “I am your mother,” to which Jessica replied: “Leave me alone; you’re a witch.”

Pascal’s dialogue was intent on indoctrinating the audience in the values that condemned the psychological and moral degeneration of a Jew who submitted to the pressures of hegemonic forces. Thus this parody used Merchant as a springboard in order to negotiate its own meanings; and this is a standard procedure of postmodernism. However, Pascal’s mode of signifying raises the question about the adaptation: what is uncovered about the escalation of the antagonism against Jews that culminated with Nazism’s genocidal policy? In portraying Jessica’s urge to attenuate the terror of miscegenation that she represented, Pascal dramatized the thesis that Tudor society was anti-Semitic to the extent of producing cultural artifacts that contained anti-Semitic propaganda. It is vital to point out here that Pascal’s mode of historicizing went against the principles for which Derridean Deconstruction stand. In assaulting Merchant in this mode, Pascal reinforced the generally accepted construct that early modern ethnic intolerance is synonymous with anti-Semitism. As explained before, the use of concepts
such as “racism” and “anti-Semitism” in the early modern period is anachronistic:
Lorenzo and Jessica’s sexual union is not an outstanding deed – except for the fact that,
both in Renaissance London and Venice, Jews were in fact a minority by virtue of
preserving different cultural habits. Correspondingly, Salarino insults Shylock by stating
that “[t]here is more difference between thy flesh and hers than / between jet and ivory;
more between your bloods than there is between red wine and Rhenish” (3.1.31-3).
Salarino’s criterion of differentiation between father and daughter is grounded on
personal disposition. If the parameters for Jessica’s superiority were biological,
Salarino’s argument would be a logical fallacy.

The Pascal Theatre Company’s claim to historiographic metafiction of unearthing
a racialized past lacked the fluidity of a deconstructive perspective. Jessica was a traitor
in this production because the director discounted the fact that Shakespeare’s Jessica,
regardless of how wrong she may be in dishonouring her father, is a feminist character:
she yearns for vitality. She needs to free herself from the “taste of tediousness” (2.3.3) of
a hellish house whose conservative politics preclude her social integration, including her
communication with a servant: “I would not have my father / See me in talk with thee”
(2.3.8-9). Jessica’s discontent in relation to her rapport with Shylock stems from the fact
that; despite acknowledging that she is “a daughter to his blood,” she regrets that she is
“not to his manners” (2.3.18-9). Thus, what is at stake is not the construction of racial
identity, but the fact that this female character is endowed with adventurousness and a
defined sense of urgency. Shakespeare’s representation of Jessica points towards a
political agenda of resistance against patriarchal power.
In staging a neurotic Jessica with a modern syndrome of racial apery, Pascal dispensed with two arresting themes for a company that projects the image of being concerned with human rights: Jessica’s feminist response to patriarchal power and her discomfort in relation to class oppression. These two subject matters alone could nurture an entire new script focusing on Jessica from a feminist viewpoint. Instead, the director overwrote Merchant’s unstable construction of social identities in order to delve into the pseudo-archeological excavation for the seeds of anti-Semitism in “Shakespeare” – a procedure doomed to produce a totalizing mode of signification. The representational convention of stage Jews, such as Shylock, depicted as obsessive usurers and macabre mystics, like most romance themes, was half a millennium old when Shakespeare endowed the character with a multiplicity of dramatic possibilities that ensured the circumvention of a cliché. Anti-Semitism was not based on a folkloric view of Jews: it was cunningly constructed on the grounds of complex layers of modern historical mediation. These layers are perniciously overlooked if an excessively de-authorizing reading attempts to trace a simplistic retrojected linear history towards a period that had its own vanity. As Tresnjak’s Merchant made clear, exploring contemporary cultural values to shed a little light on the unattainable specificity of the past is a deconstructive reading. In contrast; Pascal's Merchant’s “investigation” of the commonality between early modern Jewish hatred and modern anti-Semitism established an unchallenging construct that did not provide audience members with either a reminder of respect for difference or a better understanding of the distant past and its connections with the present.
What is really at issue here is not whether the idea conveyed by Pascal’s totalizing narrative was flawed, but the oversimplification of history. After watching the performance, I partially agreed with Lyn Gardner that “Pascal frees one scapegoat only to snare another. She might have gotten away with it, if the play had been pin-sharp in the staging and acted with dash and conviction. Alas, there are only very dull boys and girls to be found here.”

The reason I agree only partially with Gardner is that Pascal’s Merchant’s aesthetics revealed interdependence with a rationale that can barely be considered beneficial to civil harmony. I mean that the aesthetic destruction was consistent with the company’s dualist politics of production, which lacks the affirmative values by which it should bound.

Pascal’s Merchant’s deficiency in affirmative principles was one of its main weaknesses. Although the theatrical event might have given a sense of belonging to a remarkably low number of insiders (e.g. the team’s family and friends), its unremitting hostility alienated outsiders (e.g. playgoers primarily interested in a worthy theatrical experience). Thus, contradicting the company’s image and framing of the theatrical experience, Pascal’s Merchant was precious and failed to bind groups together – a task for which the four-century-old playtext under attack in her staging has been deployed both deconstructively and successfully. Referring to a recent staging of Merchant in the Republic of Ireland, Lisa Fitzpatrick notes, “[a]lthough this production foregrounded the persecution of Shylock, it also offered an experience in which various races and nationalities gathered in the same space and engaged with a living performance as a unified community of spectators.”

Thus promoting social coherence through a staging of Merchant is not at all incompatible with the denunciation of narrow-mindedness.
Attempts to slot _Merchant_ into one-sided views, whatever they might be, are both aesthetically and politically impoverishing propositions; and so are any indoctrinatory liberties and licences in relation to the skepticism inherent in the Shakespearean script.

Unsurprisingly, in taking the liberties and licences to condemn the distant past for the atrocities of the mid-twentieth century, the Pascal Theatre Company’s _Merchant_ revealed itself as totalizing and falsely transhistorical as essentialist and ahistorical. As this proposition was meant to give a voice to Jews and expurgate them from a historical trauma, it is appropriate to formulate a few questions: _how could the reduction of Shylock to a fixed victimhood add to the cultural impact on the reflections about trauma sixty-two years after the defeat of the Nazi genocidal policy? Could a unilinear and distorted representation of victimhood arouse emotions that transformed trauma? To what extent could the contemporary Jewish viewing community recognize in Shylock a valuable interactive pattern of memory practices in 2007?_ It is a truism that the staging of trauma through the affirmation of life may be maudlinly commodified, as in the case of Roberto Begnini’s film _Life is Beautiful_ notwithstanding its Best Jewish Experience Award at the Jerusalem International Film Festival. Nonetheless, exceptional cases should not invalidate the fact that many Jews want to reconcile themselves with the last century’s catastrophe. A politics of reconciliation is important in order that the motto “Never again” may indeed resound as an appeal for surmounting the grief caused by massive destructiveness. Nevertheless, this adaptation was too intent on assaulting _per se_ in order to pay attention to its own promotion of disrespect for diversity. For example, the portrayal of Antonio and Bassanio was a particularly appalling case of disrespect for diversity.
Following the track of staging conventions established by the initial scenes; the very first contact between both characters informed the audience about the stereotypes with which they were associated: the attractive and young Bassanio kissed the old and unattractive Antonio on his lips and cleaned his own in sign of repudiation right afterwards. Perry does not exaggerate when she states that “it was baffling to see Antonio [ . . . ] kitted out like Quentin Crisp taking a morning stroll down Old Compton Street.”

The problem with transforming Antonio and Bassanio into “lovers” was not the homosexual relationship with its anachronistic hues. The staging of Antonio and Bassanio’s rapport consisted of such an unconscious discrimination that it could not be justified. The fact that Antonio, the affluent dandy, and Bassanio, his kept man, were racist attached a negative reputation to homosexuality insofar as it was inevitably associated with malevolence. To further complicate this state of affairs, after drinking to his marriage, Bassanio kissed Graziano, who in turn cleaned his lips in an act of abhorrence. To what end this maze of unrequited homosexual infatuation was interlaced with Merchant was never made clear by the direction or the additional script. In any event, sexuality and bigotry were uncompromisingly entangled in this production in which sexuality in a Christian milieu was staged as perversion.

Perverted sexual desire could emerge as harassment: for example, when Graziano, upon running into Jessica, spat on his hand, blew on her face, and gestured as if he were masturbating. The violence of this scene imparted gender power relations, which were magnified by male hegemony over a female who was doubly inferiorized on account of her racial status. This scene de-authorized “Shakespeare” in order to combine a feminist issue and racialization. Once more the narrative undid the plot because of the mode in
which the staging of Jewish women’s objectification was construed. The parodic abuse of Pascal’s representation of men depicted anti-Semites as sexually incontinent – a convention that aligned sexuality with a negative connotation. Moreover, contradictorily for a production conceived by a feminist director, female sexual liberation was identified with debauchery: alongside racism, it was a marker of Christian moral depravity. Portia was introduced lying beside an anonymous lover (Giovanni Bienne) on a bed sheet spread on the floor, her hand resting on her crotch and her unfulfilled facial expression simultaneously highlighting lust and frigidity. With an expression that lasted the entire performance, Pleasance delivered the line: “If I live to be as old as Sibylla, I will die as chaste as Diana unless I be obtained by the manner of my father’s will” (1.2.87-8). That Portia’s intonation did not express irony confirmed that text and action did not necessarily interconnect in this production. Portia’s depiction as sexually rapacious and morally degraded, like those of the other Christian characters, reinforced the prevailing staging convention of one-sided meaning: the stereotyping of self-aggrandizement through iniquitous exclusion of the Other. As a result, the contradiction of the obvious sense of an original line sounded external to the semiotic system established by the previous scenes. Contradictions such as this had the effect of disorder on the audience reception because an additional staging convention was incorporated. Portia’s incongruous line delivery appeared to be fashioned in accordance with only one objective: in order that the production could make a statement about its own fashionability. In conflating ethical deformation with sexual unruliness in Portia’s portrayal, this production implied a moralist politics of female libido possibly at the price of disaffecting a number of women concerned with normalizing feminine desire. In
contrast, Shakespeare’s Portia belongs to a gallery of female characters that clearly defy patriarchal values. For this reason, Portia’s characterization as a racist nymphomaniac is incomprehensible with respect to a company that allegedly uses the medium to redefine socio-cultural values.

Pascal’s *Merchant’s* failure in proposing new socio-cultural values also encompassed the representation of class struggle. Smith’s delivery of Lancelot’s monologue about the moral dilemma of leaving Shylock (2.2.1-26) was suggestive of the reason why the Pascal Theatre Company’s *Merchant* did not draw a significant number of playgoers to the Arcola Theatre. Lancelot’s cockney accent revealed another cliché – this time that of a stage type. Apart from enacting the predictable concept of a servant with a blue-collar worker, Smith’s basic speech delivery did not express any codification except for the accent and his fixed inflection addressing the audience. Thus, qualified as an individual with restrained purchasing power, despite his opinionated lines about Shylock, Lancelot was exempted from being staged as a racist, unlike the affluent Venetians and the fair lady of Belmont. Although the actors who watched the “rehearsal” laughed at him, cuing the audience to follow suit, the patrons were, once more, lethargic. The audience remained unresponsive to this scene because the production did not approach the staging of emotions that are fundamental for viewers to make sense of working-class consciousness, such as, in John Kirk’s phrasing, “deference and shame, dignity and respect, and how these sentiments are withheld from, or ascribed to, others in a culture and society shaped by class inequality and difference.”

Pascal’s *Merchant* “had an amateurish and occasionally slightly pantomime feel,” according to Sam Marlowe, who shrewdly concludes that “as it is, it falls squarely between two stools – it
is neither competent Shakespeare, nor effective critique.” Somewhere in this theatrical limbo, the ensemble closed the show singing as if they had just partaken in a celebratory ritual. Again, it was undecipherable why such a choleric production had a happy ending. After a brief round of discreet applause, it was perfectly possible to distinguish the cheerful patrons who had gone to the Arcola Theatre in order to greet their friends involved in the production from those who deeply wanted to recover from the unwholesome experience. Therefore, despite its humanitarian undertakings, the Pascal Theatre Company has a substantial inadequacy.

The Pascal Theatre Company’s major deficiency stems from its approach to artistic value itself, whereby the significance of a theatrical event derives from its commitment to the destruction of well-established social practices as opposed to a given production’s distinctive formal features. This dogmatic rationale stems from a crude interpretation of postmodernism by which, if reality is unrestrainedly relative, so is art. From this perspective, deprived of an ontological status, art is, consequently, indefinable and incapable of being assessed. Nevertheless, the fact that postmodernism has generated stagings reputed as influential because of the remarkable form with which they have created meanings demonstrates that theatrical events affiliated with the contemporary attitude may set out to transcend context-dependent guiding principles and affirm themselves as artistic achievements. Regardless of the intentions, contexts, or resources a company has available, stagings are appreciated if they successfully create meanings that other stagings have not created, that is, they only count as significant if they differ in specifiable respects from other stagings. In this light, remarkable stagings such as Darko Tresnjak’s Merchant, exemplify the fact that “deconstruction is invention or it is nothing
at all,” as Jacques Derrida rightly claims. Thus, our time has overstretched the tenet that reality is a social construct in order to accommodate less talented postmodern epigones, such as the Pascal Theatre Company, which does not create works that rise above the documentary function of its conditions of production; its “theatre” is used by instrumental reason as a means to an end, which takes the form of unsophisticated indoctrination, as is the manifest case of Merchant. Since the Pascal Theatre Company’s standards of creativity are dictated by political representation per se, particularly of women and Jews, it is necessary to ask how effective this representation was. Moreover, considering that the company chose to mount Merchant, it is also necessary to ask what the company’s horizon of expectations of Shakespeare’s work represented for a twenty-first-century society. The answers to these questions are intimately related to the topic of this dissertation, that is, how staging Merchant in the twenty-first century articulates the past in order to give life to the remainder of a dead theatrical culture.

As the Pascal Theatre Company’s Merchant made clear by means of its critical interpretation, the past was covered by a thick coat of revisionism. Thus the interplay between the cultural source of the script and the present that gives substance to it was nullified. In promoting a specific agenda, Pascal’s procedure echoed those of stagings of Merchant generated in accordance with the Nazi propaganda: while the Nazis cynically appropriated Merchant as a totalizing libel against Jews, Pascal cynically appropriated it as a totalizing denunciation of its alleged anti-Jewish propaganda. Therefore, what differentiates Pascal’s manipulation from those of anti-Semites is the interests they served. The Pascal Theatre Company’s overwhelming prevalence of representations founded by political practices justified the company’s Merchant. Thus, at this juncture,
my investigation unfolds into the following question: how does the producing company’s public image represent the minorities to whom it gives voice?

The Pascal Theatre Company, as its name makes clear, revolves around the aspirations of its artistic director Julia Pascal, who has also staged all its productions since its foundation in 1985. In manifestly investing itself with the public persona of a self-proclaimed “trouble-maker,” the company proudly identifies with matriarchal activism. As Michael Arditti reports in an article from The Guardian posted on the company’s website, “[s]he made trouble as an actress by demanding the chance to direct, until she became the first woman director at the National Theatre in 1978. She made trouble as a director by publishing an expose of the prospects of women directors in a newspaper, which prompted a threatening letter from Trevor Nunn.”

However transgressive, the Pasca1 Theatre Company is no less conformist, even if the latter aspect may go unnoticed. In reality, the transgressive-conformist paradigm is a debatable concept because “counter-hegemonic practices,” as Chantal Mouffe explains, “attempt to disarticulate the existing order so as to install another form of hegemony.” Mouffe’s reasoning implies a shift from one situation to the other. Nonetheless, at times, self-fashioning can synthesize both polarities. Dependent on state funding, the producing company also subscribes to the fixed meanings of the status quo. After all, it is in devising outreach activities meant to combat social injustice that it qualifies for public sponsorship. Therefore, the Pascal Theatre Company’s identity embodies a tension between two opposing forms of engagement with the body politic: a feisty pursuit of social recognition and a meek compliance with the regulations of social institutions.
Likewise, despite the mechanisms of promotion and publicity inspired by progressive values, the connection with the past is constitutive of another intrinsic ambiguity of the Pascal Theatre Company: its unruly facet shares a romance theme with the legendary outlaws of Sherwood Forest. The difference between Robin Hood’s and Pascal’s embodiment of class struggle for egalitarianism is that, in contemporary England, this enterprise is endorsed by the institutional partnership among the state, non-governmental funding bodies, and the arts sector. Moreover, not even the framework that enables the company’s existence escapes a correlation with tradition. As Kerry O’Halloran points out, “[m]any of the principles now governing charitable trusts have a history that can be traced to at least the sixteenth century.” Thus, the company’s legitimacy to conduct the government’s high-profile social policy is regulated by the current version of an ever-changing law whose rationale regarding the boundaries between public service and poverty mitigation has stirred debate since the early modern period. The certified philanthropy of the Pascal Theatre Company has been effective as a means to earn a specific form of “symbolic capital.” Hence, as a marketing strategy, charity is particularly effective in England, where there is a profusion of grants available for endeavours that uphold “the advancement of citizenship and community development.” The company’s official website provides the opportunity for interested viewers to recognize that the “Pascal Theatre Company has been sponsored by: London Borough of Camden, London Arts Board (Lottery), [t]he Arts Council (Lottery), London Borough Grants, Royal Victoria Hall Foundation, and [t]he Commission for Racial Equality.” In addition, it “has also been funded by: The Peabody Trust, The London European Social Fund / Global Grants Programme, Home Office Refugee Community
Development Fund, the Big Lottery Fund, John Lyon’s Charity, the Kessler Foundation, London Borough of Camden (Small Grants), Royal Victoria Hall Foundation, Awards for All, and BBC Children in Need.”

The use of the present perfect tense alongside the lengthy list of prominent sources of public endowment constitutes an incisive mode of capitalizing on institutions whose sponsorships have not been as pervasive as the linguistic device may suggest. For example, the Arts Council England (the major national development agency for the arts, an institution whose support translates into the highest form of prestige) financed the individual Julia Pascal only once, in 2006 with £5,000. In any event, the currency attained by rendering community service has accredited the producing company with no less than 16 sources of public endowment in its career. Therefore, the company goes on cropping the benefits of promoting an all-inclusive agenda.

Nonetheless, independently from the impact that the Pascal Theatre Company’s workshops might have on their target audiences, in assuming political positions in sync with a “progressive” agenda, the company inescapably degrades groups to whom reality is not merely a social construct. My aim in pointing out this contradiction is to demonstrate the impossibility of complete inclusiveness encapsulated in this line of thought. As a case in point, despite the fact that the Pascal Theatre Company has an extensive body of work that draws on Jewish identity, it does not pay worthy respect to a significant number of Jews: in adopting a feminist agenda, the company collides with the Orthodox, to whom, in accordance with the Sacred Scriptures, women do not hold the same status as men; moreover, in performing shows on Shabbats (Friday evenings) and at Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement), which fell on September 22, Saturday, in 2007, the
company is at odds with both the Orthodox and the Conservative, who are observant of important dates of the Jewish calendar. Furthermore, Pascal’s declarations regarding the company’s fruitless applications for funding “woman's theatre and Jewish-British theatre” from the Arts Council England in 2004 reveal how the company’s commitment with social unity may easily succumb to a patent sense of entitlement. In an interview with a feminist periodical, Pascal complains that:

> [t]here is even more talk about “diversity,” and more white middle-aged bureaucrats appointing people because they are black. It's ignorant and it's stupid. There is no long-term thinking on this issue. It’s just: “We are guilty, we are white, we had the Empire. We throw money at black companies. Please go away!” The problem is, getting state subsidised money for Jewish work is almost impossible. The subtext to this is the belief that Jews are rich, therefore they don't deserve state subsidy.³⁰

On the one hand, in taking a stand, Pascal does what an activist is expected to do, that is, to affirm one’s identity, which, by definition, can only be fashioned against a background of difference. On the other hand, even after one brackets off her opinion about government agents and the biased interpretation³¹ of the praxis of the Arts Council England, her discourse is laden with territorial rivalry and non-involvement with a ghettoized visible minority. The mode in which Pascal’s dissent is expressed implies that her philanthropic goals do not take account of cases in which the government faces obstacles to the expansion of its agenda of social inclusion. Hence, neither is the company engaged with unalloyed philanthropy nor does it set the ethical standards for the facilitation of social functioning. What should be a salutary expression of democratic
disputation reveals nonnegotiable (essentialist) values, which put into question the very parameters of the existing order. At the very least, the company’s difficulty coping with the prioritizations of England’s cultural policy suggests its deficiency in “social capital,” which, according to Robert Putnam, “refers to connections among individuals social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.” As Crowther argues:

hard relativism and the Institutional definitions of art entail various contradictions and unconsciously racist attitudes which radically problematize their theories. Both turn out to be surfaces of a narcissistic western globalism which colonizes the cultural world with its distorted consumerist mind-set (whilst imagining that it is doing something with the opposite significance). Thus, the Pascal Theatre Company’s infringement of the civic principles to which it should subscribe in order to assert its identity, in the same way as its tapping of a homogenized Jewish culture, is indicative of exclusivism. The contradiction with respect to a public image of cooperation and reliability could be disregarded if the company’s stagings were compelling. Nevertheless, the truth is that the company falls short of translating organization into creative work. Thus, it is precisely because the company’s theatrical events privilege non-exhibited contextual properties over aesthetic ones that the paradox of exclusion derived from the excessive concern with inclusion has particular relevance to the examination of the company’s political representation. After all, the Pascal Theatre Company’s political discourse is the sole criterion by which the company must justify itself. Nevertheless, as I have demonstrated and will further, the company’s
supposedly political representation of Jewishness was as unsuccessful as any other that
the company took upon itself, at least in mounting *Merchant*.

Pascal, like Jonathan Miller (1970), emphasized the sacred practices of Judaism in
*a Merchant* that linked Shakespeare’s script with the Holocaust. Netheless, as Charles
Selengut pointedly argues, “[a] Judaism based on memory either of the Holocaust or of
an imagined ethnic past does not have the religious potency to enchant and sacralize
Jewish life.” Hence, Pascal explored ineloquent semiotic and political systems in relation
to the question of what unifying element can lead the consciousness of the audience to
speculate about the Shakespearean representation of Jews and its implications on the
present. In not contributing a common interest with which the heterogeneous Jewish
viewing community could identify, the Pascal Theatre Company’s *Merchant*’s assumed
political representation collapsed. Paradoxical as it may sound, the identity construction
of Jewishness has never been so complex as it is today, when, as Selengut asserts, “anti-
Semitism is no longer perceived as a threat nor does it serve, in any significant way, to
keep people from leaving the Jewish community.”

Constituted by atheists, believers of
a variety of denominations, half descendants, converts, Zionists, anti-Zionists, rightists,
leftists, and a range of groups that include even Jews for Jesus, the so-called
contemporary Jewish community has been reconfiguring itself in a time of unparalleled
autonomy in self-fashioning, a sensible facet of postmodernity. Benedict Anderson’s
phrase “political imagined community” appears particularly appropriate to describe the
existing Jewish nation because its members “will never know most of their fellow-
members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of
their communion.” This “imagined community” is so multifarious that it is difficult for
its members to reach consensus even about a play written over three centuries before Nazism appropriated it as a functional icon.

The Pascal Theatre Company’s adaptation of *Merchant* failed in providing Jewish viewers of fringe theatre with a rewarding experience. Apart from its bitterness about “Shakespeare,” the show did not succeed in arousing reflection about the possibilities of repairing the distressing remembrance of recent past. On the contrary, it was the staging of a rhetorical question whose unreflected answer was taken for granted by the director. Both in preaching to the minuscule choir over the heads of the general audience and in neglecting the scope and value of the medium, Pascal’s *Merchant* also failed in communicating the performance of political representation. The production’s meanings were highly questionable. Apart from the matriarch Sarah, women were depicted as morally degenerated and racist; men were shown as stupid, opportunist, or anti-Semitic. The only exceptions were Shylock, for being a Jew, and Lancelot, despite his lines, for being a servant. In the specific case of Bassanio, the character encompassed all the negative aspects, with an emphasis on his sexual ambiguity, portrayed as negative. Sexual diversity and sexual emancipation were always related to moral corruption.

As far as the politics of culture is concerned, in staging a plea for banning *Merchant* as if it were grounded on the truth about the past, Pascal infringed a number of directives stipulated by the Arts Council England. Thus, “the advancement of the arts, culture, and heritage” was hindered by this show because it depreciated England’s national artistic and cultural heritage. This depreciation obscured the fact that Jews are but one category of alterity in *Merchant*, which does not represent aliens as biological specimens – in contrast to the yet unestablished “Caucasian race.” In *Merchant*, aliens are
also the Germans, the French, and the Scots; all of them are mocked as Portia’s wooers in a play that does not spare even the English from ridicule: Falconbridge’s behaviour is ironically described as an amalgamation of all aliens’ shortcomings. Therefore, in purposely misrepresenting a Tudor cultural artefact in such a twisted connection with Nazism, the Pascal Theatre Company potentially diseducated its viewers about their cultural heritage. Pascal’s suggestion that Catholicism should be blamed for the Holocaust was another biased falsification of history and indicated the company’s obstruction of “the advancement of religious equality and diversity.” In addition, “the advancement of conflict resolution, or reconciliation or the promotion of religious equality and diversity” was neglected by Pascal’s Merchant’s one-sided perspective of dissimilar conflicts involving religious backgrounds. Pascal equated three forms of social hostility that substantially differed from each other because: the medieval persecution of infidels did not focus exclusively on Jews; the early modern Christian intolerance was a mild form of provincial prejudice; and Nazism’s “final solution to the Jewish question” was a severe form of racial persecution, which by its very incongruous nature, targeted a group only nominally unified by a religion. Moreover, the superimposition of the belligerence set in motion by medieval Catholicism on Merchant obliterated the script’s visionary indictment of hypocritical spirituality – as if Shylock and the other characters were really observant of religious precepts. Furthermore, Pascal’s Merchant’s religious conflict was staged by means of the exploitation of Shylock’s victimhood as if the character did not have any agency in his own misfortune. Finally, “the advancement of human rights” was neglected because the company degraded homosexuals, bisexuals, and women by associating these groups with an intolerable political agenda. Therefore,
Pascal’s Merchant suggested that the company’s practices were not conducive to facilitating any kind of conflict resolution and reconciliation. Unlike scholars, the viewing community of fringe-Shakespeare theatre is not expected to scrutinize a company’s existence. Nonetheless, the Pascal Theatre Company’s failure to comply with the cultural agenda to which it should subscribe appears to have been perceived by Merchant’s viewers.

After the last post-intermission call of the only performance I could observe, four patrons remained at a table of the bar. Warned that the show was about to resume, they kindly replied that they preferred socializing in the foyer. The fact that these viewers gave up on seeing the second half of the show was magnified by the difference it made amidst such an undersized audience. Because both Shakespeare’s name and the play’s title were invariably associated with the staging, it is indisputable that the Pascal Theatre Company used “Shakespeare” as cultural capital. Granting that the playgoers who brought themselves to a venue with the Arcola Theatre’s profile did not at all expect a “traditional” production, the reason a number of patrons were frustrated in their horizon of expectations may lie in the extent to which “Shakespeare” was decentred in favour of “pretexts for cultural and ideological negotiations that are often more relevant to their immediate context than to Shakespeare’s plays themselves.” The phenomenon described by Pascale Aebischer and Nigel Wheale is symptomatic of the company’s complete dismissal of the play’s historical context. As argued in the preceding chapters, a staging that does not negotiate its meanings with the historical context of the script with which it engages is doomed to failure. This outcome is due to the production’s impossibility of bridging stylistic values of both the past and the present, and thereby of
expressing the transhistorical, or that which inexorably pervades in every successful production of the given script. Compelling adaptations that radically alter the horizon of expectations of a Shakespearean text do so by reconfiguring it. Reconfiguration implies a judicious concern with configuration. For example, as Jill L. Levenson tells us, Charles Marowitz recontextualized *Merchant* in order to create a new play that effectively vindicated Shylock:

Setting the dramatic narrative in Palestine during the British mandate, he identified Antonio with Ernest Bevin, foreign secretary at that time and the embodiment of Clement Attlee’s cruel immigration policies: restricted access to Jerusalem forced escaping Jews back to Europe and concentration camps. [ . . . ] He [Shylock] collaborates with his fellow Jews to repay the British colonialists in kind for their treachery. In the portions of the collage borrowed from Shakespeare, he acts the stereotyped Jew before the British to advance the deceit.  

Marowitz’s adaptation, in replacing Antonio and his friends by British officials in Palestine under British ruling, found a transhistorical equivalent of a fundamental premise of the script. The paradox of the Jewish question was thoughtfully illustrated in his production: Shylock was subjected by state policies that endowed him with agency but controlled it to the point of ultimately determining his entrapment. As Marowitz summarizes what seems to be vital for an adaptation of *Merchant* and of Shakespearean playtexts:

What we all most profoundly want from Shakespeare is not the routine repetition of his words and imagery, but the Shakespearean Experience,
and today, ironically, that can come only from dissolving the works into a new compound – that is, creating that sense of vicissitude, variety and intellectual vigor with which the author himself confronted the experience of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.  

Therefore, Marowitz could not have compellingly appropriated Shakespeare’s play if he had not conscientiously considered the kernels of a dramatic situation which he wanted to resist. Conversely, in neglecting Merchant’s potential subversion, the Pascal Theatre Company did not propose any interaction with the script but a prefabricated imposition on it. Nonetheless, it could be argued, the company stands up exactly for the rejection of canonic values of white male middle-class social constructs with oppressive meanings within it. In this case, we should ask how these constructs were effectively deconstructed and whether any minority was vindicated in this appropriation of Merchant. If we fairly exclude Pascal’s own social network, the answer is still unfavourable to the company.

Using grenades where a laser beam was wanted, the Pascal Theatre Company’s Merchant took aim at anti-Semitism but ended up fragging females, males, heterosexuals, homosexuals, bisexuals, the urban poor, immigrants, most gentiles, many Jews, Shakespearean scholars, and any possibility of a nuanced or insightful representation of early modern history. Thus, the Pascal Theatre Company failed in building elements of civil society as its adaptation constituted an indicator of exclusionism at numerous levels. Consequently, the social control nature of subsidized theatre was not sensibly exercised by the company, which also fell short of formulating a valid response to the trauma of Jewish persecution. In defending the right to be an alternative to the all-devouring mainstream theatre, the company overlapped its insensitivity; in affirming its identity as
Jewish theatre, it forgot that a considerable number of Jews, without wanting to
degenerate into a premature amnesia or euphoric utopianism, have proposed constructive
memory practices regarding the brutal past; in deconstructing Merchant under the
auspices of a state policy that calls for democratic values, it neglected that “democracy,”
as Derrida reminds us, “is rarely determined in the absence of confraternity or
brotherhood.”

Thus, the Pascal Theatre Company’s theatrical event did not constitute a
forum for change, unless change is understood as the establishment of a new form of
hegemony based on the destruction of humanity’s cultural heritage. Given that state-
subsidized theatre has been entitled to pulverize “Shakespeare” as a particularly
interesting target of iconoclasm as an end in itself, demonstrating, on the one hand, its
ability to capitalize on cultural capital, and its inability to speak with ghosts on the other
hand, it is suitable to question whether radical adaptations such as the Pascal Theatre
Company’s Merchant can have any impact on social cohesion. It is also opportune to ask
whether destructive appropriations of inheritance indeed redefine the position of
humanity regarding the theatrical process and really create new mental and cultural
spaces while laying the groundwork for a better society. Finally, it seems absolutely
necessary to ask ourselves whether epistemological claims to revise history are not in fact
generating what they should be deconstructing: more social constructs.

Notes

1 Jacques Derrida, “Once Again from the Top: Of the Right to Philosophy,” Points ...: Interviews, 1974-
2 Robert Shaughnessy, The Shakespeare Effect: A History of Twentieth-Century Performance (Houndmills
3 Lyz Tomlin, “Beyond Cynicism: Sceptical Imperative and (Future) Contemporary Performance,”


7 Hackneytheatrepartnership.co.uk, internet.

8 Information provided by Leyla Nazli, member of the administration staff of the Arcola Theatre.


10 Arcolatheatre.com, internet.


28 Pascal-theatre.com, internet.

29 Information provided by Lucy Horner, Assistant Officer, Governance Services, Arts Council England, National Office.

30 “I want to create a European-Jewish-British Theatre Where Women Have a New Role:’ An Interview with Julia Pascal,” [given to Tina Wald, University of Cologne] Anybody’s Concerns II, 7 2004, Genderforum.uni-koeln.de, internet.

31 In 2003 and 2004, the Arts Council England had 17 members, of which 2 were blacks, and 5 were women; a number of them were outstanding entrepreneurs; and a number of them were artists/intellectuals. They were: Sir Norman Adsetts, Tom Bloxham (MBE), Deborah Bull (CBE), Paul Collard, Deborah Grubb, Sue Woodford-Hollick, Prof. Alan Livingston, Joanna MacGregor, Brian McMaster (CBE), Elsie Owusu, Gerry Robinson, William Sieghart, Prof. Stuart Timperley, Dorothy Wilson, Stephen Lowe, Sir Christopher Frayling, and Diran Adebayo. Information provided by Lucy Homer, Assistant Officer, Governance Services, Arts Council England, National Office.
Conclusion

“Memory’s images, once they are fixed in words, are erased,” Polo said.

“Perhaps I am afraid of losing Venice all at once, if I speak of it: Or perhaps, speaking of other cities, I have already lost it, little by little.”

It seems fair that a narrative inquiry such as this recognize that its findings are inescapably incomplete and contentious. Like Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, the mind too is particularly multidimensional and alters itself in the course of observation and critique of stagings. At any rate, the appreciation of stagings is a theatrical experience, and experience is lost when we express it in words. Consequently, knowledge, a byproduct of experience, may be replaced by constructs, devised to advance specific agendas. Hence this dissertation’s conclusion could not help being self-deconstructive and examining, once more, whether the transhistorical can indeed be identified and located in contemporary productions of *Merchant*. A skeptical way to proceed is to decompose the process through which the present narrative was woven. In order to do so, as a scholar, I must ask myself as a participant of the theatrical events studied here how my critique differs from my reception. Thus, by way of conclusion, I will interweave my final comments with the question *How can the fault-lines between a pre-reflexive reception and a reflexive perception inform the investigation of the transhistorical dimension in these stagings?* In deconstructing my perspective, I will be able to probe whether the transhistorical dimension is indeed a parameter for compelling stagings of *Merchant.*
One of my immediate perplexities regarding the Theater for a New Audience’s 
*Merchant* in New York was how the specificities of this theatrical culture shaped Darko 
Tresnjak’s staging: the solid theatrical tradition that prompts a constant demand for 
innovation, the tremendous financial power that fosters the world’s second largest artistic 
market, and the high concentration of skilled workforce that defines standards of artistic 
consumption. Thus that this theatrical experience lived up to my expectations was not 
that unpredictable: The characterization of Shylock revealed nuances that surprisingly 
inhered in the script; the concreteness of the Venice of the near future (with its 
unmistakably contemporary signs of greed) effectively suited Shakespeare’s fabulous 
setting; Portia and Nerissa’s complicity boldly carnivalized conventionally accepted 
distinctions of class and gender; and Antonio’s desperation was stretched to the limit by a 
suggestive association with the performance of a public execution legally in force in the 
U.S.A. Ultimately, the script surfaced as an indicator that the early modern plot could 
poetically find an eloquent valance in a contemporary metropolis. The overall result was 
coherent, unsettling, pleasant, and thought-provoking.

Despite all these positive aspects of my reception, in March of 2007, I thought 
that Tresnjak’s consistent allusions to homoeroticism were simply a cosmopolitan fad. 
Even if my reception had been favourable, a set of formal properties of this staging 
prevented me from recognizing its achievement of the transhistorical dimension because 
my first impulse was to regard these evocations as gratuitously invasive. After examining 
how this topic was viewed in early modern England, however, I realized that a generally 
accepted idea had foreclosed my full appreciation of Tresnjak’s Deconstruction of 
*Merchant*. In shedding light on the theme of same-sex rapports, this staging put in relief a
subject matter that implicitly inheres in the traces of the text. In this way, the transhistorical was manifest not only in the staging of Merchant’s plotline but also in the materialization of silences and insinuations that can emerge more determinedly at a time when discrimination against sexual diversity is considered, in the West at least, a violation of human rights. My understanding that this production’s engagement with the present created meaning by turning the focus onto less manifest layers of the play was decisive to deducing that Merchant constituted a hermeneutic kaleidoscope. As a result, in retrospect, I could understand and appreciate Tresnjak’s transhistorical approach.

The transhistorical emerged in the Theater for a New Audience’s Merchant because its staging conventions derived from the engagement with the pull of the present were not innovations unto themselves but explorations of the conundrums of the past. Accordingly, this production did not set out to create a theatrical event in which the audience would learn what Shakespeare’s intentions were. On the contrary, Tresnjak staged the script’s impossibility of being pinned down. Moreover, although the framing of the theatrical experience was conservative, it subverted the audience’s crystallized expectations of the playtext by portraying a charmingly sensible Shylock – a characterization that crowned this Merchant, which could be described as a skeptically postmodern romantic tragicomedy.

Whereas the Theater for a New Audience’s Shylock was diplomatically argumentative, Shakespeare’s Globe’s was an inoffensive grump. My reception of this production’s vigorous performative idiom was positive. I agree with the reviewers who said it was an extraordinarily funny staging of Merchant. In critiquing this production nonetheless I had to bracket off my pleasurable reception of the show in order to make
sense of a staging whose star was Launcelot, a minor character often viewed as a challenge to comedians due to his notoriously unfunny lines. Here my puzzlement derived from the fact that, with the exception of a couple of Antonio’s scenes, this production mounted a comedy of manners. On the one hand, considering the company’s reputation for reconstituting the logic of the original practices, that this show was a “reconstruction” did not justify suppressing important tragic aspects of the playtext. As stated before, we have absolutely no information about how Merchant was staged between 1596 c. and 1605. Nonetheless, it is well known that Shakespearean dramaturgy conflates genres. On the other hand, the director Rebecca Gatward was clearly intent on mounting Merchant in accordance with a carnivallizing view of the world, and carnivalization has also been known to be consistent with Shakespearean dramaturgy. It was necessary to grapple with this difficulty by studying this production in the light of Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of carnival. This study has shown that Gatward’s “full comedy” was deficient in “seriousness,” a fundamental element: from a perspective on formal properties, “seriousness” amounts to dramatic tension, and from a perspective on both anthropological and political issues, it represents a part of society that must be purified.

Thus, Shakespeare’s Globe’s “reconstruction” of Merchant demonstrated an unbalance in the engagements with the pulls of the past and the present. Contrary to what might be expected, this production’s concern with pressing issues of the present outweighed the pull of the past. My critique of Gatward’s production maintains that Shylock was carefully downplayed by a Shakespearean veteran, suggesting that the director (or the company) decided to avoid eventual negative responses regarding the alleged perpetration of anti-Semitism. Hence, Shakespeare’s Globe, a company that has
definitely conquered space in the world’s largest artistic market, appeared to have made concessions to its theatrical culture, quintessentially mainstream. Playing for a target audience composed not only of locals but also of tourists, Shakespeare’s Globe chose to stage *Merchant* as an easily digestible “full comedy.” Viewed from this angle, it is possible to realize why the show was simultaneously so enjoyable and criticizable: Carnivalization, albeit unsettling, was explored within the strict limits of low-risk parameters. Outside these limits, license was revoked by a heavy-handed form of control, which left nothing to the purifying action of carnival.

Another production mounted by an ostensibly mainstream theatrical culture was directed by Richard Rose with the Stratford Festival of Canada. I classified this staging as a “misconstruction” because, in an attempt to deconstruct sedimented concepts about *Merchant*, it generated even more constructs. In addition, Shylock was as self-important as the Venetian bigots, who were outrageously racist. Thus while this production gestured towards deconstructing the generally accepted idea that *Merchant* takes an anti-Semitic stance, it was trapped in the attempt to engender an equally unproductive concept: that *Merchant* is pro-Semitic. Actually, from the perspective of one reviewer, it seemed that this show was anti-Semitic, and from my own standpoint, Shylock was arrogantly unsympathetic.

Because of the debate surrounding *Merchant’s* (or Shakespeare’s) anti-Semitism, my observation of the Stratford Festival’s production solicited the Deconstruction of this problematic aspect. Drawing upon Hannah Arendt, I have argued that the play portrays ethnic intolerance, or more specifically Jewish hatred, which despite its commonalities with anti-Semitism, does not have a transhistorical valence with its counterpart. In
locating the historical emergence of both phenomena, I have contended that this production’s manifest staging of a libel against anti-Semitism significantly impoverished *Merchant’s* open-endedness.

As far as *Merchant’s* uncertainties are concerned, it is appropriate to establish a comparison between the productions with the Stratford Festival and with the Theater for a New Audience. The former tried to make *Merchant* communicate indignation against anti-Semitism and did not succeed, to say the least. The latter staged the ambivalences of the playtext and aroused the audience’s compassion for Shylock. The fact that Tresnjak’s production mobilized the audience’s emotions and reflections with respect to social injustice suggests that the staging of multiplicity was both aesthetically and politically more productive than the staging of dualism. Richard Rose’s dualistic view of the play obscured the fact that, in *Merchant*, neither Christians nor Jews follow “the Golden Rule,” the fundamental code that ideally regulates the three Abrahamic religions represented in the play. In violating “the Golden Rule,” Shylock, like Antonio and his cohorts, breaches more than a religious precept, infringing the terms of “a nontheologic philosophy of living,” as Jeff Wattles defines it. This social pact is “shared by persons with differing but overlapping conceptions of morality.”^2

In staging hypocritical religiosity – a formal property generated by the engagement with the pull of the past – the Theater for a New Audience’s *Merchant* evoked a historical phenomenon that illuminated the present, or more precisely the historical event that informs contemporary reception of *Merchant*: modernity’s lack of common sense and the common reality it should hold together. Whether or not Shakespeare viewed, in his own time, the genesis of the dissolution of values and
alienation from the world that would culminate in the Holocaust is open to discussion. The relevant finding of this comparison between two very different productions is that the Theatre for New Audience’s *Merchant* potentially raised a question – whose answer I found in Arendt – whereas the Stratford Festival’s production gave a simplistic and unsatisfactory lecture about a complex matter.

The Stratford Festival’s “misconstruction” however also staged compelling scenes and gave relief to important aspects of the play. As a case in point, the escalation of Shylock’s hatred for Antonio was obliquely staged by the presence of Salerio, a character whose poignant sobriety contrasted with the bigoted loudness of Solanio and Salarino. In foregrounding how Antonio was indirectly entrapped by his own friends, this production partially attained the transhistorical dimension, demonstrating that “misconstruction” may occasionally produce interesting results when its earnest experimentation prevails over the attempt to deliver the final truth about the play.

In assessing the obstacles posed by a heterogeneous production such as the Stratford Festival’s *Merchant*, I became aware of the commonalities among Deconstruction, “reconstruction,” and “misconstruction:” These modes of approaching the relationship between the playtext and its staging spring from rigorous work – from the sincere project of grappling with the difficulties imposed by an exploration mediated by the chasm between our time and the script’s cultural source. The three modes of engagement with the play – whenever they were productive – generated scenes of emotional appeal, arousing sympathy for the several dramas represented. Invariably, these scenes were not designed to foreground a concept with socio-political implications, and yet these implications came across. Hence, the productive scenes and
characterizations of these three productions adhered to what I call the state of emergency of the play – which seems to have an ample spectrum as long as productions create representational conventions that meet the requirement of open-endedness. Merchant’s open-endedness necessarily includes the amalgamation of the genres and the emotional tracks of the characters implied in the traces of the text. Certainly, Merchant was instrumentalized in the Machiavellian process of anti-Semitic propaganda. In this case, the ordering principles of appropriation of the play were not inspired by the skeptical imperative of Deconstruction, but dictated by a cynical agenda of destruction, which, taking advantage of the play’s self-deconstructive features, disfigured it – in the same way as the Nazis disfigured themselves in their process of self-dehumanization. But cynical destructions of Merchant need not have an anti-Semitic agenda.

The Pascal Theatre Company staged a plea for the banishment of Merchant, deemed by the director to be an anti-Semitic piece. Because the formal properties of this staging were insufficient to qualify it as art, which requires a distinctive kind of aesthetic unity, my challenge regarding this fringe production was to critique its “radical adaptation” according to the postulates of postmodernism, that is to say, considering its contextual properties in contradistinction to formal ones. After all, upon observing the staging, it seemed to me that the transhistorical dimension was incompatible with the skeptical imperative of postmodernity. As a consequence, this production led me into Jacques Derrida’s Deconstruction, which revealed itself compatible with the transhistorical in that Deconstruction presupposes a transcendent (and yet dynamic) engagement with the traces of the text.
In scrutinizing the preconditions of production and the ordering principles of the Pascal Theatre Company’s appropriation of *Merchant*, I realized that they were at odds with the skeptical imperative of postmodernism, the constant questioning of assumptions that prevents monolithic stances from sedimenting. Thus rather than drawing on *Merchant*’s creative tensions, Julia Pascal staged a totalizing view of the play. In lieu of showing the script’s contradictions, she sought to prove its closure and staged a display of her dearly held assumptions – never submitted to skeptical questioning. In short, under the justification of being postmodernist, the company lost sight of the most basic tenet of postmodernism and excluded the play it aimed to resist through the theatrical medium.

If a totalitarian reality such as the one fictionalized in Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* ever materializes – as Nazism did – and books deemed inappropriate are burned, I would be willing “to be” *Merchant* and carry it in my memory banks, given this recent study. Deconstructing the transhistorical in stagings of *Merchant* has drawn my attention to the fact that the transcultural chasm between the past and the present is magnified by a construct: the present believes itself to be superior to the past. What if, for example, early moderns could express their views about present spectators and judge the allegedly sophisticated theatre etiquette that proscribes genuine responses to the theatrical events they patronize? Would they consider this prescribed behaviour a sad part for an individual to play? Unquestionably, they would have a view: thinking about the world in which we live – no matter what or how – is a transhistorical and universal action. The Deconstruction of the transhistorical in contemporary productions of *Merchant* makes us face up squarely to the fact that the most valuable aspect of the theatrical medium
regarding scripted stagings is presence – created by actors who perform the wonder of interacting with spectrums, which will have a future after we are historicized.

Notes

2 “Do to others as you wish to be done to yourself” (a version of the Torah’s “Don’t do to others what you do not want to be done to yourself,” penned by Rabi Hillel) is the Golden rule, which has circulated in cultures other than Judeo-Christian ones, such as in ancient China and Greece. Jeff Wattles, *The Golden Rule* (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1996) 48/188-9.
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