Censorship, Anti-Semitism, and *The Merchant of Venice*

Robert J. Wilson

Eight years ago surgery on my shoulder interrupted my teaching of *The Merchant of Venice* (*MV*) to sophomores at Suffern High School in the Ramapo Central School District, located in southeastern New York State. I had taught the play twice previously in conjunction with Elie Wiesel's *Night*. I made preparations for my substitute teacher to show the BBC 1981 version of *MV* during my surgery and recovery period.

The following week the substitute teacher wrote to my school district's superintendent concerning the use of the BBC film. He noted, I think quite correctly, that the film conveys the blatant anti-Semitism of the Elizabethan period. Shylock is portrayed as a stereotypical avaricious Jew, mugging for the camera by gesticulating and cringing in turn, underlining his rage and later obsequiousness with a Yiddish accent. In his letter, my substitute teacher noted that Italian Jews did not speak Yiddish and that the producers should have been aware of this historical error.

HISTORY VS. ART

Jonathan Miller, the executive producer of the film and a Jew, surely would have been aware of this historical inconsistency. However, Miller was dealing with art, not merely history. Historical truth is sometimes bent in service to the aesthetic truth of a work of art. The aesthetic truth of the work, however one might obtain that truth, is a measure of its effectiveness as art. For example, late sixteenth-century Italians could not ordinarily speak and pun in perfect Early Modern English, either. Hence, *MV* could not have been rendered as Shakespeare (and his quarto and First Folio printers and editors) intended it without some manipulation of the raw materials of history.

The egregious manipulation of the historical record concerning flesh and blood people and events in time and space is a much more understandable subject of protest. Oliver Stone's film *Nixon* and even Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* have been criticized for inaccuracies. Certainly what constitutes a superficial change vs. an egregious change in the historical record when one creates a work of art is certainly a thorny issue. I'm afraid that present and future audiences who see Bernard Rose's film *Immortal Beloved* will take home with them the highly improbable surmise that one can explain Beethoven's coddling of his nephew Karl with the dubious claim that Karl was actually Beethoven's bastard son.

However, Shylock is not a historical person. To be sure, he is represented as a figure rooted in a particular time and place, and these elements carry a certain historicity. Nevertheless, as a fictional (although perhaps euhemeristic?) character, he is subject to far more fluid representations. For example, I don't recall a single serious objection to black actors playing leading Shakespearean roles despite evidence for only two such players: Aaron in *Titus Andronicus* and, of course, Othello.

I wonder if my substitute teacher would have frowned upon an African American playing Shylock. Such casting would obviously play on the role of the Jew and American black as outsider, as Other, a theme often foregrounded in literary theory today. Similarly, Shylock's improbable Yiddish accent emphasizes his difference, his otherness in a Venetian society hostile to a culture charged with deicide and suspected of ritual murder. The pound of flesh demanded by Shylock echoes these libels, along with the blood and host libels. What better way to teach these (and the libel to come, of a Jewish shadow government as espoused in the Czarist *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*) than through Miller's insights into the play?

THE VILIFICATION OF SHYLOCK

My substitute teacher went on to write that non-Jewish students fail to be repelled by the vilification to which Shylock is subject. This is to similarly argue that my teach-

In a school district in New York, The Merchant of Venice *is removed from the curriculum for almost eight years.*

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ing of Elie Wiesel's *Night* to non-Jewish students would be inappropriate, because they again would fail to be repelled by the utter degradation suffered by Wiesel and his father at Auschwitz and Buchenwald. However, I didn't find this claim to be true at all in my experience in teaching the play and the autobiography, respectively. Indeed, the opposite occurred.

For example, near the end of Act IV Antonio requires Shylock to convert to Christianity. Numerous students (of presumably different religions—and no religion) had groaned aloud at this juncture when watching the film in my class. This reaction belies my substitute teacher's view that the BBC film and even the play itself as "harmful" (his word) to a high school audience. Shakespeare, in his typically ambiguous moral stance, portrays most of the Christians in a negative manner, too.

The substitute teacher sent his letter to three area rabbis in Rockland County. He also included a negative review of the BBC film from *The Jewish Standard* (1981, 26 June), and a copy of a 1979 reprinting of Morris U. Schappes' pamphlet *Shylock and Anti-Semitism,* which originally appeared in 1962.

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REMOVAL OF *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE*

After some consultation, the superintendent of the school district decided to remove the play from the English syllabus. Between 1988 and 1995 the teachers of Suffern High School were forbidden from teaching *MV* despite numerous verbal protests from the faculty of the English department.

The arrival of a new superintendent and some other changes encouraged me and others to petition the administration in late 1995 to reconsider the removal of *MV* from the syllabus. Some of the arguments above, along with a general discomfort with censorship, led the administration to reinstate *MV.*

CENSORSHIP AND ANTI-SEMITISM

Censorship is a loaded word. It suggests Stalin's stultifying socialist realism. It conjures up images of the dreary Index of Forbidden Books or the Hays Code (both of which were abolished in 1966). Yet I, like my substitute teacher, and most people, whether they realize it or not, believe in some restrictions, censorship, redaction—or whatever euphemism(s) one wishes to call it. I don't believe that every work in its fullness should be a candidate for inclusion in a high school syllabus. I question whether *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* or Veit Harlan's film *Jud Suss* or William Pierce's *The Turner Diaries* belong in a high school classroom of curious sophomores, or even Advanced Placement seniors. If, however, a student mentions them, I think it better for an informed teacher to contextualize them within the history of anti-Semitism than for the student to deal with these works in a historical vacuum.

This kind of virulent anti-Semitic propaganda will never be canonized, short of a takeover of the U.S. government by neo-Nazis, or in the case of the first two works, by the Nation of Islam. However, *MV* with its enticing moral complexities has been for centuries part of the critical canon: that is, those works which critics continue to chew and digest, in Francis Bacon's phrase.

Moreover, the play continues to be part of the dramatic canon, enacted most notably by Dustin Hoffman in a performance I saw a few years ago on Broadway in New York City. Hoffman played Shylock in the same way as a Shylock I saw in 1988 in London: a majestic, tragic figure, whose moral and intellectual superiority made the male Christians seem like vengeful babblers at times. Jonathan Miller's BBC production cut against the grain of Shylocks portrayed with the utmost dignity, and my substitute teacher found a different interpretation intolerable.

MV's firm hold on the critical and dramatic canon should make one pause before excluding it from the pedagogical canon: that is, those works taught at the high school and undergraduate level. The core of the critical canon in its glacial acquisition and unloading of works acts as a democracy of the dead, a recognition that past critics found those books culturally useful. Similarly *MV,* especially when coupled with a powerful autobiography such as *Night,* can enlighten young minds concerning the roots of Western anti-Semitism despite its sensitive subject matter. *MV* ought to remain in the pedagogical canon.

One problem with such a coupling is the overemphasis on victimization and death of the members of a particular ethnic group. Sandra Stotsky has written much about this

(1996, "Is the Holocaust the Chief Contribution of the Jewish People to World Civilization and History?: A Survey of Leading Literature Anthologies and Reading Instructional Textbooks," *English Journal* 85.2: 52–9), and perhaps a pairing of either *MV* or *Night* with a work that stresses a living, vibrant Jewish culture would make for a better teachable moment.

CONCLUSION

Despite the lifting of the ban on *MV* at Suffern High School, the English department is still saddled with a problem. After the play was reinstated, the department members realized that all copies of *MV* had disappeared from the book room. When were the books removed within the past seven years? No one seemed to notice. A tight school budget understandably precludes the purchase of new textbooks, and *Othello* now replaces *MV* as one of the Shakespearean offerings for sophomore year. Suppression whimpers even in its death.

Robert J. Wilson (wilsonb@suffernhs.1hric.org) teaches in the Ramapo Central School District in New York.