



4-2020

Man-maid Merchant: Rebellion and Otherness in Shakespeare's Othello and Merchant of Venice

Taylor Flickinger

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Flickinger, Taylor (2020) "Man-maid Merchant: Rebellion and Otherness in Shakespeare's Othello and Merchant of Venice," *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion/vol13/iss1/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Man-maid Merchant

Rebellion and Otherness in Shakespeare's Othello and Merchant of Venice

Taylor Flickinger

Shakespeare wrote at a time of tacitly accepted hierarchy. Issues of gender, race, ethnicity, and religion were determined by the Crown, which claimed to be acting on God's own authority. Assumptions about the Other, then, were considered absolute, rather than social, truth: women were *objectively* inferior to men, while Jews were objectively evil. Yet, in *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*, Shakespeare complicates issues of Elizabethan Otherness, presenting it as an arbitrary social construct used mostly to secure the dominant culture's identity. However, he argues that totally ignoring social conventions is radically dangerous, primarily because it would be another form of social absolutism that Shakespeare finds so distasteful. He presents characters like Desdemona, Portia, and Nerissa as "blessed hermaphrodites," or characters who subvert social norms even while embracing them. Conversely, Shylock represents a total rejection of social norms, and his resulting ostracization contrasts him strongly with Othello, who is mostly accepted in his society because he accepts most of that society's customs. Shylock's ostracization, then, is both a result of his own stubbornness and the unrealistic expectations of the society that rejected him. Yet Shakespeare was aware that while Shylock and Portia were both oppressed, their "otherness" was essentially different. By comparing the ways Shakespeare treats gender and racial Otherness, we can better

understand the solution that he offers to modern xenophobia, a solution that is grounded in empathy, art, and experiences that radically decenter us from our imaginary universes.

Stephen Greenblatt, the editor for the *Norton Shakespeare*, emphasizes that Shakespeare's world was an absolutist one. Shakespeare was raised in a religiously dominated culture that emphasized, among other things, absolute divine freedom, unbound divine love, and faith alone. Moreover, these religious absolutes were intentionally conflated with political and social powers. "He heard," Greenblatt says, "in the social and political theories that mirrored religious concepts, comparably extravagant claims for the authority of kings over their subjects, fathers over wives and children, the old over the young, the gentle over the base-born" (*Shakespeare's Freedom* 3). The Elizabethans, then, functioned on a system of assumptions and absolutes. Yet Shakespeare's work is "allergic to the absolutist strain so prevalent in his world, from the metaphysical to the mundane" (*Shakespeare's Freedom* 3). His characters are unusually complex, and Shakespeare always complicates social assumptions even while admitting their validity. "Shakespeare understood his art to be dependent upon a social agreement, but he did not simply submit to the norms of his age. . . . He at once embraced those norms and subverted them, finding an unexpected, paradoxical beauty in the smudges, marks, stains, scars, and wrinkles that had figured only as sings of ugliness and difference" (*Shakespeare's Freedom* 15). Even though he was writing in a world of absolutes, Shakespeare paradoxically admits the validity of social customs while simultaneously subverting them.

Shakespeare, then, presents a breakthrough into rich individuality with his characters' achievements of "individuation through their distance from conventional expectations. They are memorable, distinctive, and alluring not despite but precisely because of their failure to conform to the code of ideal featurelessness to which Shakespeare and his contemporaries subscribed . . . indeed the forms of beauty in which Shakespeare seems most interested veer perilously close to what his culture characterized as ugliness" (*Shakespeare's Freedom* 4–5). This is especially true, Greenblatt argues, of Shakespeare's exploration of the Elizabethan concept of the Other, an Otherness that ostracized Shylock from his Christian peers and that set Iago on Othello. Both characters (and especially the women in both plays) present a kind of argument against cultural xenophobia—that fear of what I will argue is the Arbitrary Other—mostly through the playwright's presentation

of traditionally oppressed characters as strikingly and energetically human. Speaking of *Merchant*, Greenblatt points out that Shakespeare's treatment of Shylock proves that he "had no patience with walls, real or imaginary, and, even in a play consumed with religious and ethnic animosity, he tore them down" ("Shakespeare's Cure"). In other words, Shakespeare presents his audience with a cultural complication of the Other.

Stephen Orgel similarly examines the ways that Shakespeare simultaneously embraces and subverts the Other. However, while Greenblatt focuses his argument mostly on religious and cultural absolutism, examining the way characters like Shylock and Othello complicate Elizabethan social theory, Orgel focuses on the ways that women in Elizabethan theater were seen in English Renaissance plays "as 'them' rather than 'us,' as the Other" (12). More specifically, he examines Renaissance theatrical cross-dressing and what that reveals about Elizabethan gender roles. If "the interchangeability of the sexes is, on both the fictive and the material level, an assumption of this theatre . . . what then is the difference between the sexes?" (Orgel 18). More pointedly, Orgel asks, "What is our God-given essence, that it can be transformed by the clothes we wear?" (26) and thereby implies that gender is a necessarily social construct, one that the Early Moderns believed could literally change one's genitals (20–23).

Merchant of Venice and *Othello* interact with several different types of Otherness, and it is therefore necessary to differentiate between them. The obvious Other in both plays are those characters who are external to the dominant culture, namely Shylock and Othello. But Shakespeare's female characters—Portia, Nerissa, Desdemona, Jessica, etc.—are discriminated against even though they are an accepted part of their respective communities. Orgel and Greenblatt separately consider these issues of the Other: Orgel defines the Other as "as much foreign as female" (12) while Greenblatt focuses on the hatred of the ethnically or racially foreign. Neither, however, consider the implications of both forms of "Othering," of the ways that Shakespeare's characters impose limits on both the foreign and the female and how those limits are essentially different. Shakespeare presents his female characters as a kind of "familiar Other," or as a group that is discriminated against but still generally accepted in the community. Shylock and Othello (but especially Shylock) then become a kind of "other Other," a minority group that has no real accepted place in Shakespeare's social realms. Shakespeare explores

the different ways each kind of Other subverts and embraces their culturally assigned roles, a scrutiny he embodies in his social hermaphrodites.

Shakespeare presents Desdemona as *Othello's* blessed hermaphrodite: she subverts socially established gender roles (the familiar-Otherness) while still willingly submitting to the larger patriarchal society. In other words, she finds ways to rise *within* society without radically breaking gender norms. Shakespeare primarily shows this through her conversational cross-dressing: "That I love the Moor to live with him," she tells the assembled Duke and Senators at the beginning of the play, "My downright violence and storm of fortunes / May trumpet to the world . . . if I be left behind / A moth of peace, and he go to the war, / The rites for why I love him are bereft me" (1.3.245–54). Desdemona adopts the language of the men around her (her "natural superiors") in order to beg that she be allowed to go with Othello to war. She speaks of "violence and storm of fortunes," trumpets, and the rites of both love *and war*, assuming a language which was usually reserved for men. In this sense she appropriates the role of a man.

Significantly, though, Desdemona submits to the general patriarchy even while she's subverting it: she initially asks the duke to lend his "prosperous ear, / And let me find a charter in your voice / T'assist my simpleness" (1.3.242–44). "Simpleness" here means both a poor or lowly condition and an absence of pride, ostentation, or pretentiousness ("Simpleness"). Desdemona asks for help from the Duke, the male authority figure in the room, thereby simultaneously acknowledging her perceived inferiority and that she's going to attempt to overcome it. At the same time, she necessarily asserts that she is not upsetting the patriarchy. Desdemona masterfully maneuvers herself to a position where she can safely use the language and rhetoric of men while still conforming to the established gender roles.

Merchant, contrastingly, presents Shylock as a kind of counterpart to Desdemona's blessedness. Though he's male and rich (and class in Elizabethan society usually trumped all other issues, which is why Othello was so respected by his peers), he's still a radical social outcast, the other Other that is almost irreparably alienated. His values clash vehemently with the "Christian" values that the Venetian society values so, and he would have been considered an outcast from religiously homogenous England, which had banned Judaism entirely. It would be easy, then, for Shakespeare to write Shylock as a caricature, a simplistic and exaggerated antagonist who fills the role of the Jewish villain. Yet Shylock's character demonstrates a challenging

amount of depth. He cares deeply for his past wife, Leah, and is heartbroken when he learns that Jessica sold his ring for a monkey. "I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys" (3.1.101–2) he says, showing an emotional side that he usually hides from Antonio and the others. More importantly, he first offers Antonio friendship before suggesting the gruesome collateral of a pound of flesh: "I would be friends with you and have your love, / Forget the shames that you have stained me with, / Supply your present wants and take no doit / Of usance for moneys—and you'll not hear me" (1.3.131–33). Far from being needlessly cruel, Shylock initially offers friendship, an offer that goes rejected.

Shylock's rejected offer of friendship is the olive branch before the pound of flesh: it shows Shylock's desire to coexist, however warily, with his Christian neighbors. He's accused of actively seeking others' destruction: "It is the most impenetrable cur / That ever kept with men" (3.4.18–19), Solanio says of Shylock, refusing to even acknowledge him as a person, instead referring to Shylock as "it." Yet, despite all their mutual hatred (Shylock warns that he will bite when they kick at him), Shylock attempts to make amends with his Christian enemies. It's not quite an attempt at integration, per se: had he had his own way, Shylock would always have been a Jew. But his attempts at friendship demonstrate a vitally important desire to bury the proverbial hatchet somewhere other than in Antonio's back. It's only *after* his rejected offer of peaceful coexistence that Shylock becomes obsessed with Antonio's demise.

Moreover, Shylock's humanity is repeatedly denied, both by the Christian community and in the various versions of *Merchant*. The speech prefixes used for Shylock in the first quarto (Q1) vary; sometimes he is "Shylock," elsewhere he is merely referred to as "Jew." These are especially prevalent "at points in the play in which the action resonates with traditional anti-Semitic stereotypes" (Norton 279). Q2 changes many of these prefixes to "Shylock," while F follows Q1. The printing process was at best imperfect: printers made many errors and emendations to the text, either for readability or ease of printing. It is possible, then, that Q1's sometimes anti-Semitic speech prefixes were a result of the printer's own anti-Semitism, or else Shakespeare's desire to keep Shylock's Otherness immediately present. Either way, even in print Shylock is at times reduced to his nationality alone.

Yet Shylock fights against the Elizabethan's tendency to reduce him to a simplistic and nameless Other. "Hath not a Jew eyes?" he asks. "Hath not

a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affectations, passions... If you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh?" (3.1.49–54). But Shakespeare is doing more here than making his audience recognize Shylock's humanity—his lines echo a popular female advocate of conjugal mutuality, or the idea that men and women should be equal at least in marriage: "For women have soules as wel as men . . . what reason is it then, that they shall be bound, whom nature hath made free?" (McDonald 262). By quoting a feminist writer, Shakespeare blends both familiar and foreign concepts of the Other while intimately connecting Shylock with the Elizabethan hermaphrodite.

"Hermaphrodite" here means "a person or thing in which any two opposite attributes or qualities are combined" ("Hermaphrodite"). Shylock is *Merchant's* other Other: because he's a Jew and has traditionally Jewish values, he is universally ostracized, even by his own daughter (whereas the familiar Other were welcomed into society). Yet his offer of friendship to Antonio is as much conversational cross-dressing as Desdemona's supplication to the war generals: "I would . . . Forget the shames that you have stained me with / Supply your present wants and make no doit / Of usance for moneys," he says (1.3.131–33), essentially adopting Christian values to appeal to Shylock. Shylock, a man who values exactitude, vengeance, and the black-letter law, offers to exercise charity and forgiveness, two distinctly Christian traits (and, it should be noted, the two traits that the court *forces* Shylock to adopt after the trial). Shylock doesn't give up his Jewish identity—indeed, Shylock's many monologues and speeches constitute attempts to make himself "the complete, the quintessential Jew. We are in effect watching the fashioning of full ethnic or religious identification" (*Shakespeare's Freedom* 59). He nevertheless shows that he is at least initially willing to adopt foreign virtues to better conform to that society. After the rejection, and because of past grievances, Shylock mirrors much of the hatred directed at him: "the villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction" (3.1.59–60). Though he fights against systemized oppression and harmful "othering," opposing the society that has (grudgingly) accepted him for his wealth, Shylock doesn't fight for any kind of equality, much less submit to any kind of established authority. In fact, he openly admits that he hates Antonio, "for he is a Christian" (1.3.36). Whereas Desdemona sought to subvert the patriarchy while still submitting to it (thus making her a blessed hermaphrodite), Shylock actively seeks to bring ruin upon

the Christian society that has rejected him. In other words, Shylock rejects any externally imposed social limits, but, whereas Desdemona's break was calculated, Shylock's is radical. His total refusal to submit to established roles of subordination and his attempts to take revenge on his oppressors make him a cursed hermaphrodite—he dangerously rejects *all* social norms.

Yet *Merchant* also has instances of blessed hermaphrodites, too: Portia and Nerissa cross-dress as lawyers and end up single-handedly saving Antonio. Two women, who were generally considered naturally and intellectually inferior to men, manage to solve a problem that a group of men could not. None of the men present recognize Portia and Nerissa, and they therefore treat them with the respect and deference that they would give other men. Consequently, Portia and Nerissa are able to outperform their male counterparts. This raises an essential question about the “nature” of women—to re-quote Orgel, “What *is* our God-given essence, that it can be transformed by the clothes we wear?” (27). If Portia and Nerissa are treated as men, they perform *at least* as well as any other man would in that situation. If women were really *by nature* inferior to men, Portia and Nerissa should have failed regardless of what clothes they were wearing. Yet, given the opportunity, they more than raise to the occasion. Gender roles then become an arbitrary social construct, rather than a “natural” hierarchy of order.

Portia and Nerissa, *Merchant's* familiar Other, therefore suggest that any concept of Otherness is necessarily socially constructed, a realization they themselves have in the final moments of the play. “The crow doth sing as sweetly as the lark / When neither is attended,” Portia tells Nerissa after returning home. (5.1.102–3). The Elizabethan Other—at least, the familiar Other—breaks down in this moment. Shakespeare's characters, having experienced what it's like to be on the other side of the Other, realize in a moment of epiphany that their subjugation to men is essentially baseless. “Renaissance ideology had a vested interest in defining women in terms of men,” Orgel says; “the aim is thereby to establish the parameters of maleness, not of womanhood” (24). Shakespeare is therefore arguing that *any* concept of the Other, from Shylock's extreme Otherness to Desdemona's more familiar Otherness, is essentially a way for the dominant culture to assert their identity. All “objective” facts about both types of Other, from Renaissance fear of Jews as Christian killers to the belief that women are morally inferior, are simply untrue.

One must ask, then, why the Jew was so ostracized while these women and the Moor were so well respected by their respective communities. Significantly, Othello was a wealthy war general. Class trumped issues of race or ethnicity in Shakespeare's day, and while Othello had no name, he certainly had a big enough title for people to mostly ignore his skin color. Yet Othello's class was not enough to completely erase his racial differences. The Duke's phrase, "If virtue no delighted beauty lack, / Your son-in-law is far more fair than black" (1.3.186–87), suggests that people are choosing to look past Othello's Otherness, but "more fair than black" nevertheless proves that nobody in *Othello* is colorblind. More importantly, the Duke says it is the Moor's virtue that makes him more fair than black, intimating that Othello isn't ostracized because he plays by the rules. He willingly submits to the Duke's authority, is Christian, and doesn't try to upset the established order. Shylock does none of these things, insisting on either respectful coexistence or mutual, vitriolic hatred.

Perhaps the court's decision to force Shylock to convert was an attempt to force Shylock into Othello's role—the integrated outsider. But Shylock's resigned "I am content" (4.1.192) brings up an essential question about the Other that's immediately relevant in modern America: was his dream of peaceful coexistence even possible? Shylock tried so hard to befriend Antonio but was rejected and scorned many times before the play even begins. "Still have I borne it with a patient shrug," he tells Antonio, "for suff'rance is the badge of all our tribe" (1.3.103–4), but eventually it became too much. Shylock's hatred, then, is as much the Christians' fault as it is his own. Shakespeare blames both sides equally for their mutual hatred, a hatred uncommon in Shakespeare's comedies. The uncomfortably frank answer Shakespeare presents, then, is that sometimes there is just too much mutual hatred for either side to change. Both Shylock and Antonio believed that they were in the right, that they were somehow being robbed of justice, until Shylock lost to what basically amounted to a majority vote.

Shylock's fate is uncomfortably immediate to contemporary politics. It's common to think that we've progressed past so-called "archaic morality," that we are all of us champions of freedom and equality for all. We read of past racial and gender issues and believe that we have done away with the Other, both familiar and *Other*. But the increasing popularity, and in some cases resurgence, of social and political movements (such as *Black Lives Matter* and *All Lives Matter*, the neo-Nazi movement and the alt-right, and fourth-wave

feminism and LGBTQ+ rights) suggest that we have an uncomfortable habit of Othering not only “them,” but “us,” whoever “we” or “they” may be. Shylock may have been *Merchant’s* antagonist, but Shakespeare’s treatment of both the familiar Other and the other Other exposes our sometimes-extreme—and usually baseless—xenophobia.

The solution Shakespeare offers to this problem is not to start a revolution, but to seek out experiences that radically decenter us from our imaginary place in the universe. These essentially empathetic experiences give us glimpses of the Other’s experience, glimpses that made Portia and Nerissa realize that “The nightingale, if she should sing by day / When every goose is cackling, would be thought / No better a musician than the wren” (5.1.104–6). “Are such glimpses enough to do away with hatred of the other?” Greenblatt asks. “Not at all. But they begin an unsettling from within. Even now, more than four centuries later, the unsettling that the play provokes remains a beautiful and disturbing experience” (“Shakespeare’s Cure”). Part of the enduring power of Shakespeare’s works comes from their quintessentially human core that, by virtue of their empathy alone, speaks against the prejudices of his time and ours. Shakespeare, then, presents in *Othello* and *Merchant of Venice* an argument against absolutism. Shylock’s fate represents the dangers—and ultimate futility—of attempting to completely reject social norms. Shakespeare doesn’t totally embrace cultural norms, either; Portia and Nerissa encounter the boundaries of the walls that had been constructed for them and realize that their designation as the “familiar Other” was completely arbitrary. Yet Shakespeare does not suggest that we should totally dismiss social expectations or norms. Rather, his solution to forced, absolute social homogeneity is exposure to vitally important, humanizing moments, experienced primarily through art: “Music, hark! . . . Methinks it sounds much sweeter than by day” (*Merchant* 5.1.97–100). Reading authors like Shakespeare, then, becomes essential to increasing our humanity. In this, Shakespeare doesn’t try to break the chains of social oppression, but rather slowly loosens them.

Works Cited

Greenblatt, Stephen, et al., (editors). *The Norton Shakespeare*. 3rd ed, W. W. Norton Company, 2016.

---. "Shakespeare's Cure For Xenophobia." *The New Yorker*, 10 July 2017, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/07/10/shakespeares-cure-for-xenophobia. Accessed 16 December 2018.

---. *Shakespeare's Freedom*. University of Chicago Press, 2010.

"Hermaphrodite." *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2020. Web. Accessed 16 December 2018.

"Simpleness." *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2020. Web. Accessed 16 December 2018.

McDonald, Russ. *The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare*. Bedford / St. Martin's, 2001.