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# Profitable Reading or Literary Usury?

Interpretive Communities within and without  
*The Merchant of Venice*

*Abby Thatcher*

In *The First Folio of Shakespeare* (1623), John Heminges and Henry Condell address “the great Variety of Readers” in their editors’ preface and say, “From the most able, to him that can but spell: There you are number’d. We had rather you were weighd. Especially when the fate of all Bookes depends upon your capacities” (7). While Heminges and Condell were looking to woo undecided book buyers’ coin into their coffers, the larger truth of “all Bookes” stands: their fate does indeed depend upon the capacities of the “Reader.” “Fate” can be defined as both its historical longevity and as the enduring meanings and legacies of its text and characters, determined by the interpretive community of readers that encounters the work. Thus, over time the fate of Shylock, the Jew of Venice, as a character within and without *The Merchant of Venice* (1596) is dependent upon interpretive reading communities. As Stanley Fish’s coined interpretive communities operate by

the more traditional reading of written texts, rather than spectating, I use the more liberal sense of “read,” as the audience members viewing a performance are spectators expected to bring a certain literacy to the fore and must use similar practices to read the play on stage. “Reading” and “readers” are here largely synonymous with “spectating” and “spectators.”

But whether readers/spectators read Shylock as the vengeful angel of Jewish salvation, as by Hermann Sinsheimer, or as the hooked-nosed villain with rat-like insidiousness, such as in the “Third Reich” adaptations of Shakespeare’s work, Shylock’s cultural capital has changed in not only quantity, but *quality* over critical conversations since its first performance or its first printed appearance in the First Folio. This is rather axiomatic for reader response theory, as interpretive communities of readers shaped by, and in turn shaping, their cultural, social, political, and economic moment vary from one generation of readers to the next. What is curious is the cumulative effect of overlapping interpretive communities’ work on each successive reading of Shylock and the reading of other cultural “texts,” brought to bear upon the usurer’s proud figure and their unchecked, or unquestioned, latitude as they work with Shylock’s textual body. The effect of interpretive communities’ reading of Shylock’s Jewish form on the Jewish populations outside the text is especially disquieting and will be addressed herein. Through a close reading of Portia’s “close reading” of the judicial text and contract within Act IV, scene i of *The Merchant of Venice*, I will argue that communities of interpretation within the redlined ghetto of Shakespeare’s Venice demonstrate a need for governing practices or a code of justice for “readers” in (interpretive) power, the Christians. I will also argue towards the text’s lack of extant governing mechanisms to control interpretations that skew towards the oppressive and perverse in their effects. Moreover, my argument has much to do with questions for interpretive communities *without* the text, or external to the world of Shylock. I will present a case for the much needed work still to be done within reader response critical theory towards an ethical, generous, and ultimately just methodology of interpreting interpretive communities other than their own.

When Shylock is summoned to the Duke’s rooms for the deliberation of his contract with Antonio, the Duke pleads for Shylock to show forth “mercy and remorse” (4.1.19). Later, disguised Portia waxes poetic upon mercy, saying, “We do pray for mercy, / And that same prayer doth teach us all to render/ The deeds of mercy. I have spoken thus much/ To mitigate the

justice of thy plea" (4.1.195–198). Shylock's insistent "I'll have my bond" is his eventual undoing. He loses his property and is forced to become a Christian, made poor by the Christian's court's "justice" and Portia's close reading of his contract informed by her own interpretive community. Portia could not have interpreted the text of the contract however she chose in the Christian court, as a central premise of reader-response theory posits that "interpretive communities are delimited by the systems of intelligibility that inform it" (Fish 1908). As Portia belongs to and has been accepted by the interpretive community in power, and the Christian community has established practices, or ways, of reading their cultural and social texts, Portia reads within and for the benefit of the community.

However, although Portia's reading of the contract is delimited *within* her community, there are few external limitations at play upon the interpretive community and how they choose to construct meaning. For indeed, in the words of Stanley Fish, interpretation (including his provocative claims regarding the interpretation of the law) is not "the art of construing but the art of constructing" (Fish 1902). While the narrative of Christian dogma and the practice of oligarchical law would have Shylock and the doge convinced that reading a contract in favor of the Christian right is right (as the court of Venice is filled with more rhetoric from the pulpit than the magistrate's bench), Shylock from the beginning operates from an interpretive deficit, as he seeks to *decode* the contract, while Portia the Christian lawyer seeks to *make* the law. In addition, elements of the interpretive community itself—its power, its size, and its socioeconomic and political *largesse*—make its reading more potent, its constructed claims more "valid" and therefore heighten the sociopolitical impotency of the minority community, the Jewish people of Venice. Therefore, Portia's reading of the text prevails and enables a practice of the law that leaves Shylock stripped of dignity and faith. Further, there seems to be little care given to the *effect* of such a close reading upon Shylock at the end of the play. The Christian interpretive community acts more as a fraternity or brotherhood than an objective and merely differing ideological group. Thus, it seems that communities of interpretation within the play lack an effective structure that mediates competing readings of texts and demonstrates how structures of oppression can be leveraged within large, *majority* interpretive communities upon *minority* interpretive communities with devastating effect.

Christians within the world of *The Merchant of Venice* had been taught to “read” a Jew as hostile, evil, opportunistic, and cunning and to read his being outside of the Jewish ghetto as transgressive; Shylock becomes many Shylocks in one to a given Christian, as they unfairly bring to bear external contexts or “texts” when they encounter the actual character in the Venetian marketplace. Thus, Shylock’s turn as the villain within the play is aided by characters’ readings of him in their interactions: called “the Jew” more times than “Shylock,” the fictional Venetians’ reading leaves the merchant socially poor. To read Shylock in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a reader may turn to the trauma and tragedy of the Shoah, anti-Semitic attacks and slurs in use during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the current state of economic and political conflict between Israel and Palestine, and each successive iteration of Shylock on stage (Bassi; Oz). Interpretive communities, reading by overlaying the accumulation of the past on the present text, bring new “museums” of Shylocks to bear as they construct the Shylock of their moment (Kennedy, 196). As in Jay L. Halio’s article on Shylock’s multiplicity of characters, within one figure being a “singing [of] chords” rather than one-dimensional monophonic lines, the reader writes and hears chords of their own making as they engage the play each successive time (Halio). These chords are built from cultural texts that postdate Shylock’s original production but still manage to shape his “birth” to new viewers in each (re)production. These cultural texts act as corrective blueprints to the community’s response. Any additional text drawn upon in the reading of the first shifts the reader’s perception of it. For example, using the cultural text of the Shoah to reread Shylock as a fully fleshed and fully persecuted victim is to “correct” and reconstruct readings of the past that would place Shylock fully as a villain.

These blueprints to correct Shylock’s meaning within and without the play are increasingly problematic the further given interpretive communities stray from the original text, leaving minority communities more vulnerable to hostile interpretive communities’ unjust readings and actions. For example, in Nazi Germany, *Reichskulturkammer* censorship imposed limitations upon both the text itself and, as a result, readers’ interactions and reactions to Shylock’s world. In 1942, lines that sought to humanize Jews such as the performance of “Hath not a Jew eyes?” (3.1.49) “fell to the Reich Dramaturg’s blue pencil” and were cut from Heinrich Schlosser’s production of *The Merchant of Venice* in Erfurt (Bonnell 147). This “sanitized version” became standard throughout much of the rest of Germany during the war; it seems

“a Jew could not be allowed to lay claim to humanity in Germany” (Bonnell 147). Similarly, in Hermann Kroepelin’s *Merchant* during the same period in Berlin, Jessica was rewritten as Shylock’s “adopted” daughter who was stolen away from her Christian parents at birth and has been longing to return to her rightful place among the “Aryan” elite (Bonnell 144–45). Thus, the *majority* interpretive community manipulates through “corrective” cultural texts the body of text, and consequently, the body of Shylock. Further, such an interpretation acted as oppressive propaganda for the *minority* communities of the “Third Reich,” including the Jews of Berlin, Warsaw, and Munich. When Shylock is persecuted as a result of his interpretation of the law, and Portia and the Christian’s majority interpretation of the law is allowed to run rampant upon his body and faith, such effects seem distanced and, well, *fictional*. A fictional court lacking mechanisms of checked power upon interpretive communities coming against others is impotent upon the page; a real court lacking mechanisms of checked power upon interpretive communities resulted in dreadful theory used to construct and validate inhumane practice.

Curiously, for a text that seems to yield immense harvests for the virulent anti-Semitism of Nazi Germany, *The Merchant of Venice* did not lay claim to many audiences during the “Third Reich” period. Although it was the third most frequently performed Shakespeare play from September 1929 to January 1933, by August 1944 when theatres shut down, *The Merchant* had slipped to ninth-most performed play, with a total of thirty-three performances from February 1933 to August 1944 (Bonnell, 143–44). Critic Andrew Bonnell attributes such a drastic decline in popularity to Shakespeare’s “endow[ing] his Shylock with an ineradicable kernel of humanity . . . The play ultimately proved harder for the propagandists of genocidal anti-Jewish ideology to instrumentalize than . . . might be assumed” (174). As the stereotype is but the accumulation of shared interpretive community memory synthesized into recurring and homogenized figuration, the successful playing of Shylock as a negative stereotype depends upon the buy-in of interpretive communities to the shared memory.

Dennis Kennedy’s “memory machine” of theatre is useful here, as he argues that theatre acts as a machine that constructs, deconstructs, and then constructs again memories for its audience members (Kennedy). But rather than providing the “memory machine” of Nazi Germany’s *Merchant* with easily stereotypable fodder, Shakespeare’s original Shylock upon the page

resists and subverts the machine and its interpretive communities. Shylock resignified as a cold-hearted villain both on and off the stage is countered by Shylock's resistance to the interpretive community's transactive reading. The text remains firm that a Jew "hath eyes . . . [and] hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions" (3.1.49–51).

The resilience of Shylock's character suggests that the author is not dead as the reader-response critical community necessitates she be, or that, at the very least, the text as blueprint resists additional "texts" as correctives. Thus, in transactional reader response, not all "texts" are equally valuable, or more correctly, not all additional interpretive texts yield as great a return upon interpretive community investment as others. While the text that Shakespeare originally penned represents an investment with infinite returns, the interpretive community stretches thin the line between profitable reading and literary usury when they engage in the practice of making unjust critical close readings—if unjust is using "texts" that manipulate Shylock grotesquely beyond his original textual bearing—that unfairly enrich the interpretive community in power while leaving the original text, character, and representative minority interpretive community poor. Ultimately, at the end of centuries of reading and rereading coupled with the accumulated, overlaid memories of all "texts" deemed relevant internally by interpretive communities in power, Shylock the character is left much as he is within the play: poor, manipulated beyond his own form and expressed desires, puppeted to say words he does not wish, without mercy from those who have benefitted from his continual literary fall, and (sometimes) baptized into movements to which he has no loyalty.

What to do, then, for regulating or governing external mechanisms for interpretive communities? Wolfgang Iser asked of Fish's work on interpretive communities, "If there is no subjectivist element in reading, how on earth does Professor Fish account for different interpretations of one and the same text?" (Fish 1898). While critics continue to grapple with Iser's question, and warrantably so, I ask a further question of reader-response interpretive communities and varying interpretations: accounting for different interpretations of one and the same text as a given reality, how does one mediate the resultant practices from varying and conflicting interpretations, especially as they negatively affect minority communities? Regardless of reading regulations *within* an interpretive community, is there such a thing as a "just" reading *without* and *among* varying interpretive communities?

Perhaps the question should be framed more pointedly: how do interpretive communities read justly? Mercifully? As Portia says, perhaps it is “mercy [that should] season justice” (4.1.192), in our reading of Shylock, and in our interactions with differing interpretive communities. Whichever “quality” we land upon in constructing the meaning of “just” or “merciful,” reader-response criticism requires further discussion and careful thinking, for much is at stake. We must also “consider this:/ That in the course of justice none of us/ Should see salvation” (4.1.193–95). Hath not a reader-response critic eyes? Perhaps the time has come to direct them towards the structural inequalities extant among interpretive communities, to break down the systems of oppression and damning interpretations that so harmed Shylock and may, if we are not just *and* merciful, harm us.

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