Merchant of Venice-A Surprise

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"I have an idea Charlie. When we take the children to Crater Lake this Summer, why not stop in Ashland and take them to a play?" Tracy was the spouse in charge of planning family trips. I agreed. She made the arrangements. We had taken the children to Yellowstone and Glacier and to Arizona and the Grand Canyon, Brice and Zion, and to New York City and Washington, DC. Now we could see Crater Lake and take in a play on the way up. All in one trip.

She selected Richard III. Our children were 15, 12 and 9. I prepared by reading the play as well as a collection of essays on Richard, titled To Prove a Villain. The essays presented arguments, pro and con, whether Richard III was as villainous as Shakespeare portrayed. An alternate premise is that after his death Richard III, the last Plantagenet King, had been falsely implicated by followers of his usurper Henry VII, the first of the Tudor Kings, and his son Henry VIII. Shakespeare's Richard III adopts the Tudor party line.

Driving to Ashland, I briefed the children, the plot, the historical context, the villain or not debate, the arguments for and against. My teachers would have been proud. The children were silent. Two were in grammar school, not even close to graduating. One was a high school freshman. They were silent; there were no questions, no discussion, no follow-up. The play would be a challenge, at least that is what I thought. We found a motel on the outskirts of town; two floors of identical rooms; all opening onto an outside balcony or walkway; shaped in three sides of a box shaped U, an outdoor swimming pool within the U; everything facing the main street into town. As was our custom, paying three private schools on one salary, the five of us shared a single room. The children enjoyed the pool, along with others, cannon-balling, screaming Marco Polo.

That evening we saw Richard in the outdoor Elizabethan theatre. We enjoyed it, all five of us, even the children. For Tracy and me, it was the entire experience, a warm night, a well-presented play that we knew, in an authentic Elizabethan theatre setting, amidst a captive audience. I can not say what it was for the youngsters, maybe the theatre, the audience, actors playing roles, costumes, staging, multiple killings. Whatever it was, they told us they liked it. I doubt they had encountered the structure of Shakespeare's sentences, for sure the two younger ones. Flushed with the unexpected, we cancelled our reservations at Crater Lake, and stayed in Ashland for more plays hoping we could get tickets. In those days most of the plays were sold out. This meant getting in line early in the morning just to qualify for a priority number to buy whatever tickets were returned later in the day. Through this two-step process

we were able to buy tickets for more plays. Everything we saw we liked; and we repeated the trip North the following Summer, and the next and the next.

Ashland and its plays became part of our lives. Every Summer since, until this day, I have attended the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland. More than 40 years.The children accompanied us even into the years when they had better things to do than go somewhere with Mom and Dad. One of them has rejoined us, leaving her children with their father; and two of our grandchildren have joined us as well.

Until Ashland, I had little interest in theatre. In high school, while many of my classmates were staging the School's annual single performance of a Shakespeare play, I was playing whatever sport was then in season. As I ran, kicked, batted or dribbled, my friends were learning how to transform teenage boys into characters of a play on an outdoor stage.

Three plays at Ashland the next Summer, then five the following Summer, and finally eight plays annually. All this increased my interest; I was converted to theatre; some friends even thought me a guru; I was on my way to catching up with my wife, an English major in college and proud of it.

In its off-season Ashland's Oregon Shakespeare Festival sent actors to schools along the West Coast. Two of its actors visited my daughter Kate's high school in San Francisco. They performed mono graphs in street clothes with no props in front of a blank wall, it may have been a black board. As they got into their routine, I lost track of there being no costumes or props or makeup; the black board became a setting, I was brought into real plays, imagining characters in an imaginary Elsinore Castle and Arden Wood and Verona.

In 1991, Oregon Shakespeare Festival included Merchant of Venice in its full season repertoire. One part of Merchant, the Shylock part, is tough. The other parts are delightful. Overall, it is a finely constructed play, with well-developed characters. In fact, during its first four seasons, from 1935 to 1938, the Festival performed only two plays each Summer, Twelfth Night and Merchant of Venice. Angus Bowmer, the Founder of the Festival and its first Artistic Director, alternately played Shylock, the lender, and Antonio, the Merchant.

Merchant of Venice has three or four plots. One, the tough one, involves the interaction of Shylock and Antonio. The plot is this. Antonio's friend Bassanio needs 3000 ducats to pay off his debts, which will help win him the heart of the beauteous and wealthy Portia. Antonio would be willing to lend him this sum, but, at the moment, his own money resources are thin. He depends on his trading ventures, and at present, all six of his ships are at sea. Antonio is willing to guaranty another person's loan to Bassanio. Bassanio approaches Shylock for a loan telling him that his friend Antonio will be the guarantor. Shylock is pleasantly surprised at Antonio's prospective involvement. He hates Antonio, because, as he relates, Antonio has humiliated him, calling him a dog and even spitting on him. Antonio also has cut into Shylock's money lending business by making interest free loans to Shylock's borrower clientele. Shylock and Antonio discuss terms of the guaranty, and Antonio accedes to Shylock's request that the bond be a

pound of Antonio's flesh to be taken from whatever part of his body that Shylock desires. The prospect of a pound of flesh bond will be Shylock's opportunity for revenge.

When the loan comes due, neither Bassanio nor Antonio can pay it. Bassanio, as always, is broke. And, surprisingly, Antonio is in financial straits. All six of his ships have been lost at sea, leaving him without the resources that he expected to have to pay Bassanio's debt. Antonio's friends are willing to come to his rescue. Portia will provide the 3000 ducats or even double or triple that sum, so that Shylock can be paid in full. But, this is not what Shylock wants. Once there's been a default, Shylock refuses payment of anything except the subject matter of his bond. He insists on the collateral, the bond, the pound of flesh, and he wants it from Antonio's chest, near his heart. Of course, this will prove fatal.

Antonio tries to reason with Shylock, as do his friends, and even the Duke, the so-called Doge. Shylock will have none of it.

A Judge must confirm Shylock's entitlement to collect on his bond. This should be proforma, since, as we are told in the play, a creditor can pursue collection from the surety even when payment can be made on the underlying debt. This makes no sense today, but that is what we are told about the law in 16th Century Venice. The judge is not a real judge; it is Portia, the lady whom Bassanio has since married, in disguise. Judge Portia acknowledges that after default Venetian law permits a creditor to refuse payment of the debt and rely instead on the collateral. Nevertheless, Portia (the "trick judge") begs Shylock to show mercy, accept the money in payment, and abandon the collateral. Shylock refuses; he persists; he must have his pound of flesh collateral; he is set upon revenge. The "trick judge" attaches strings to her ruling, Shylock may pursue his collateral, but the extracted flesh must weigh exactly one pound, no more no less, and it must consist solely of flesh, no blood. If Shylock fails in either of these aspects, she rules, he will be executed for the murder of Antonio. She also rules that if Shylock decides not to pursue his pound of flesh bond, he still will be punished, in this case for pursuing his claim too far, in legal terms, a form of assault or attempted murder, and the penalty will be (1) the loss of his right to payment of the loan, and (2) forfeiture of his worldly wealth, one-half to the State and the other half to his daughter Jessica and her Christian husband Lorenzo, and (3) forced religious conversion from Judaism to Christianity. Antonio intercedes at this point. He asks that the State not confiscate all of Shylock's worldly wealth, but allow him to keep half, with other half being put in trust for Shylock's daughter Jessica and her new husband Lorenzo.

Shylock is unwilling to risk his life. He decides not to pursue the pound of flesh. He accepts the alternative "abandonment of murder" verdict, and its harsh penalties. He departs the stage, not to be seen, or even heard about, again. This is only Act IV. There is no sight or mention of him in all of Act V.

This is a tough story for Shylock. He is a Jew and Jews were persecuted in England and elsewhere for centuries. Inquisitors were forcing their conversion to Christianity. Shylock is a money lender who charges interest, which was legal in Venice, where the action was set, but

not in England where the play was written and performed. There is basis for his hatred. He has been shunned and humiliated by Antonio and his circle of friends. Aside from his hatred he happens to be an unpleasant person, in his dealings with just about everyone. His personal life is unsettled. We hear that his wife has recently died. His only child Jessica does not like him. She runs off to marry her boyfriend Lorenzo, a Gentile, and in leaving Shylock's house, she takes some of his money and jewelry. There are reasons for sympathizing with him and reasons for disliking him..

Nevertheless, in all the performances of Merchant that I had seen, I never liked him. He was unpleasant, and his unrelenting quest for vengeance amounting to murder made him a villain, at least in my opinion. The extent of the revenge he seeks, murder, is disproportionate to Antonio's conduct, his "crimes". I was relieved when a "trick" judge saved Antonio's life with fake laws.

Merchant played the entire 1991 season in the Bowmer Theater. Our show in August was a matinee.

I was surprised by the Shylock-Antonio plot in this performance, pleasantly so. The play seemed different. The Shylock-Antonio part of the story was not tough. My perceptions of the two characters switched. I had recalled Shylock as an unpleasant villain, despite the circumstances, and Antonio as an unfortunate victim, despite his treatment of Shylock in the past. In 1991 it was different. I was not bothered by Shylock. Somehow, he was not as unpleasant and villainous as I had remembered. I may also have disliked Antonio even more. Had my memory failed?

How had I missed this before? Was I now understanding this part of the play as it had been intended? Was I finally able to process every word of the spoken Shakespeare?

I thought about it. The story. Shylock's wife had just died. His daughter Jessica humiliated him. She ran off with a gentile. She robbed him of her mother's ring which she then sold so she could buy a monkey for her lover. Antonio and his friends continued to mock him; to mistreat him, personally and in his business. He was an outsider, not accepted, unloved. He spoke eloquently of his circumstances and inability to change them. Then, at the end, he was tricked into losing most everything. Powerful reasons for sympathy. Yet, despite everything, he always seemed a fiend. Why, this time, was he a more acceptable person, why did his drive for vengeance not seem excessive, as it had in prior productions? What had happened? Why now, and not before?

As time passed, I stopped thinking about the 1991 performance. Five or so years later, just by chance, it was brought back. Tracy and I had increased the amount of our annual giving to the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, enough to entitle us to attend an "actors' dinner". A hundred or so patrons, ten round tables, and a member of the acting company seated at each table. This particular year, I was seated next to the actor Richard Elmore. Richard had been part of the Company for many years and still is. He is a fine actor, and a nice and friendly person. We talked about his job as an actor and the Company. In passing, he mentioned that the Festival

had had to deal with a contentious situation five or so years previously. They had scheduled Merchant of Venice to be part of the program for the coming year.

Coincidentally, he said, there had been a contested election in the City of Ashland for the post of Rabbi at the local synagogue. The younger candidate, the ultimate winner, protested the Festival's decision to include Merchant of Venice in its program for the ensuing year. He said it never should be presented. It is antisemitic. There were meetings and negotiations between him and representatives of the Festival. They reached a compromise whereby the Festival could proceed with Merchant, but only if it was done in such a way as not to offend the Rabbi. I told Richard that we had seen that performance and had been surprised. It was not as we had remembered. I did not ask him how they had effected the transformation. I wish I had.

I shared the story with friends, the transformation of my perception of the characters and Richard Elmore's explanation. They agreed, it was a good story. None asked how it had been done; and, of course, I did not know. One friend suggested that I write it up.

Oregon Shakespeare presented Merchant once again after 1991, but the Shylock part was the same as all earlier versions, difficult for me, Shylock's unrelenting drive for a vengeance that did not fit the crime, overshadowing whatever sympathy he might have deserved. In the later production, Shylock was played by Anthony Heald, a fine actor and Jewish himself; he had asked for the role.

Off and on during the ensuing years I thought about the uniqueness of the 1991 production.

Finally, in 2018, while in Ashland, I decided it was time to try to resolve my question. The Festival must have changed the script. I asked someone in the administration office if I could obtain a copy of the 1991 script of the play. Two days later, they gave me one.

I read the 1991 script, comparing it as I did to my Penguin copy of the play. There were some redactions, not many, and nothing significant or pertinent. Few words had been changed, and none on point. So, transformation had not been made by the text. The changes to satisfy the new Rabbi had to have come from the direction, or the acting, or the staging or the delivery. I asked my daughter Kate, a theatre major at UCLA and longtime assistant at the San Francisco Opera, whether this is possible. Can actors really can change the characters. All she said was "Oh Dad, of course they can." I didn't ask her how, and she didn't tell me.

I decided to ask Richard Elmore, the actor who told me about the 1991 ruckus with the local rabbi. Here is what I wrote him.

"Dear Richard: I am writing an essay about the Merchant of Venice that OSF produced many years ago in response to negotiations with the then new Rabbi in Ashland. I saw the production and was confused as to why Antonio, the Merchant, was the heavy, and not Shylock. At an Actor Dinner five or so years later, we sat next to each other and you told me about the controversary, and I put two and two together.

“As years passed, I wondered how the play could have been so altered. I obtained a copy of the script this past Summer from OSF, checked it with my own paper back copy of the play, and found no meaningful changes in the script. The changes must have been accomplished by the actions of the actors or by the direction. **But how?**

“I am writing to you to find out whom you recommend I talk to (or exchange e-mails with) about what types of changes were made by the actors to turn the play on its head, so to speak. Maybe you yourself would be the person.”

Richard Elmore replied two days later. Here is his response:

“Well, as I remember there were two people vieing for the rabbiship in Ashland that year and it became quite heated and even got into the local newspapers. One of the rabbis believed that the play should NEVER be done…. As to the question of “who is the villain? Shylock or Antonio? Well when I played Shylock I certainly didn’t think of him as a villain with lines like “if you prick us do we not bleed?” Look at that speech, Charlie. One of the most emphatic speeches and characters ever written. In that production I believe that the Christians came off as villains as they danced off together at the end of the play having stripped Shylock of his faith. Libby Appel, the director of the play, and Jewish herself, and I spent many hours at the university defending the production. Jerry Turner, our brilliant Artistic Director, called the whole controversy “A tempest in a teapot.”… Two years later I played Antonio at the Milwaukee Rep in Wisconsin and the director definitely saw Antonio as the Villain….The play has always been controversial and Angus Bowmer played him here several times and at times as an almost comic villain sneering with fang like fingernails. I was proud of our production which we did over 120 times in the Bowmer in 1991. I think we approached the script honestly, had a brilliant dramaturg. I had an interesting thing happen to me one night after the performance. As I was going out to my car, I was aware of a high school student following me. As I reached my car she said with tears in her eyes “Thank you for that performance Mr. Elmore. That actually happened to my grandfather’ and she hugged me. Boy, was I moved. Such is the power of theatre. Anyway, it’s been years since I have thought of the play and I hope I have been of some help…”

There it was. Well, sort of. He did not share much of the specifics. Richard was saying that the actors produced the difference, but he did not tell me how. Intellectual property mysteries, like the tools of a magician. How could just acting, staging and/or directing create such a different feeling from other productions? I could not recall details of the 1991 performance. It had been 27 years since the magical transformation.

I re-read Merchant, carefully. Maybe there are clues in the text. Subconsciously, unwittingly, I focused on passages which maybe, if emphasized, shaped, and nuanced, could change an audience’s perception, at least somewhat. Here are a few.

In Act III, scene 1, Antonio’s friend Salerno tries to reason with Shylock. “What’s the good”, he asks, “of taking his flesh?” Shylock responds, on line 57: “It (the pound of flesh bond) will feed my revenge. He hath disgraced me, and hindered me half a million, laughed at my losses,

mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated my enemies and what's his reason."

I considered the last four words, "and what's his reason?" There is no justifiable reason, at least in Shylock's eyes. Persecution, that should not be justified; humiliation, that cannot be justified; shunning an outsider, that should not be justified; interference with his business, maybe only this can be justified. The overall absence of justification could tip the scales to Shylock and away from Antonio. I can understand his pain and his anger.

Shylock continues with his moving speech, the one that Richard Elmore cites as one of the most empathetic in Shakespeare plays. Asked "what's the good of taking his flesh", Shylock responds "To bait the fish withal. If it feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge. I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die, and if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction."

These are moving lines. How can one not be drawn to the speaker, except perhaps the last words, the vengeance part. I, who am not steeped in religion, question whether revenge is a Christian trait in the religious sense as Shylock claims. An eye for an eye. Didn't this go out with the New Testament? Putting aside what little religious knowledge I have, I still am willing to accept that he needs revenge. But it is the extent of the vengeance he selects, murder, that is bothersome. How can acting mollify this aspect?

In Act IV, scene I, on line 15, it is the Duke's turn to ask Shylock to show mercy, to give up his claim to the flesh. Shylock responds, on line 40, with irony. "You ask me why I rather choose to have a weight of carrion flesh than to receive 3000 ducats. I'll not answer that; but to say it is my humour; is it answered? What if my house be troubled with a rat, and I be pleased to give 10,000 ducats to have it banned? What are you answered yet? Some men there are love not a young pig; some, that are mad if they behold a cat; and others, when the bagpipe sings in the nose, cannot contain their urine; for affection masters our passion, sways it to the mood of what it likes, or loathes. Now, for your answer: as there is no firm reason to be rendered, why he cannot abide a gaping pig; why he, a harmless necessary cat; why he, a wooden bagpipe; but of force must yield to such inevitable shame as to offend, himself being offended, so can I give no reason, nor I will not, more than a lodged hate and a certain loathing I bear Antonio, that I follow thus a losing suit against him."

Shylock could be amazed. Perhaps, they won't change their ways; in short, maybe he feels that after all that they have done to him and all that he has tried to tell them, they still cannot get it,

then, sarcastically, tough, consider his hatred as unreasoned. OK. I understand. He has been driven past the limits of reason. If he can't help it, how can he be a villain?

On line 87, the Duke keeps trying. "How shalt thou hope for mercy, rendering none." After emphasizing "What judgment shall I dread, doing no wrong?", Shylock continues with "You have among you many a purchased slave, which like your asses and your dogs and mules, you use in abject and in slavish parts, because you bought them. Shall I say to you, let them be free, marry them to your heirs? Why sweat they under burdens? Let their beds be as soft as yours and let their palates be seasoned with such viands? You will answer: the slaves are ours; so do I answer you; the pound of flesh which I demand of him is dearly bought. Tis mine and I will have it. If you deny me, fie upon your law. There is no force in the decrees of Venice."

Why, Shylock, must be thinking, should it be he who seeks mercy when he is acting within the law? He then likens his plan to the practices of slavery and animal cruelty. All are legal, but questionably so. Is Shakespeare ahead of his time? Why should I like someone who will partake in such an odious, but legal, enterprise?

Before pronouncing the laws, real and fake, Portia, in disguise as the Judge, delivers her memorable lines, Act IV, scene I, line 184, "the quality of mercy is not strained, it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath; it is twice blessed; it blesseth him that gives and him that takes;…." and so on. To this Shylock says only "my deeds upon my head! I crave the law, the penalty and forfeit of my bond." How he is moved by Portia's words is in the actor's control.

I shifted my focus to lines of the Merchant, Antonio. Could there be any that make him deserving of death? Any that warrant his losing a pound of flesh in the area of his heart? We know what he has done to warrant Shylock's anger. But, there must be more to justify an excessive punishment. In Act III, scene iii, his friends suggest further discussion with Shylock. At line 19, Antonio responds "Let him (Shylock) alone. I'll follow him no more with bootless prayers. He seeks my life; his reason I well know. I oft delivered from his forfeitures many that have at times made moan to me; therefore he hates me."

Perhaps Antonio could be portrayed as shortsighted or hardened. He knows that he has angered Shylock, but he fails to understand, or will not admit, that it relates to anything but his business practices.

Consider also Antonio's response in Act III, scene iii, when Bassanio suggest that Antonio try to reason with Shylock. On line 70 Antonio replies, "I pray you, think you question with the Jew; you may as well go stand upon the beach and bid the main flood bate his usual height; you may as well use question with the wolf why he hath made the ewe bleat for the lamb; you may as well forbid the mountain pines to wag their high tips and to make no noise when they are fretted with gusts of heaven. You may as well do anything most hard, as to seek to soften, than which what's harder. His Jewish Heart."

In the face of losing his life, does Antonio seem unwilling to engage in further discussion which might result in changing his ways, or seeking forgiveness.

But then, hark back. Twice earlier, Antonio tried to reason with Shylock. “Hear me speak, good Shylock.” “I pray thee, hear me speak.” Shylock’s response “I’ll have my bond. I will not hear thee speak.” The text doesn’t say what Antonio wanted to say.

After trying to force the text to support the 1991 version, I decided to read the play one more time. Except for the humiliations Shylock relates early in the play, I find Antonio a likable person, supportive of, and well- liked by, his friends and the community. Also, unfortunately and much as I would have preferred not to do so, I still found too much of a fiend and villain in the Shylock character. Unfortunately, there’s not much to like about him. In short, after three readings, I was unable to see the play any differently than I had before 1991.

What was done differently in 1991 to make the Shylock story acceptable to the Rabbi? I wish I had known at the time I saw the play that something special was being done. The performance was seamless, and I cannot recall the details. I just assumed it to be an unaltered. Something I finally understood and could accept and liked. Obviously, it was the acting and the staging. The Shylock actor had to have been more nuanced toward reason in his delivery, less nuanced somehow in his drive for vengeance. Perhaps the actors playing Antonio and his friends shaped their characters more extremely as bullies, persecutors. Perhaps there were stage props and stage tricks, not reflected in the script. Recall Richard Elmore’s email. Antonio and his friends dancing off the stage in joy after Shylock’s final humiliation; and Angus Bowmer’s playing Antonio with fanglike nails. Whatever they did, they changed the play, which satisfied the Rabbi in Ashland, and the girl who sought out Richard after his performance in Milwaukee, and Richard himself, and me in 1991. I wish I knew how it was done.

In the one subsequent production, the Company did not use its 1991 methods to flip the Shylock part of the Merchant of Venice play as they had done in 1991. The result could not have satisfied the Rabbi. I felt as troubled as I had before 1991. Why wasn’t the 1991 format used in the subsequent production? Or in all in the previous performances. My conclusion: that is not the way the play was intended; that is not the way it is written.

Ashland has not played Merchant since then, and in the typical ordering of the plays, it should have.