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“The Law is a Terrifying Thing”: Anti-semitic Misuse of the Law in Arnold Wesker’s *Shylock*

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Controversy has marred the legacy of the London-born Jewish dramatist, Sir Arnold Wesker (1932–2016). Innumerable stories about difficulties between him and theatrical practitioners have circulated in print and verbally for decades.¹ Notably, in the first major essay collection to be published about his work for many years, 2020’s *Arnold Wesker: Fragments and Visions*, one whole essay is given the self-explanatory title, “‘Let Battle Commence!’: The Wesker Controversies.”² Theatre spats are one thing—experience with the courts is something else. Wesker was no stranger to the courts—both criminal and civil. In the earlier part of his career, when he was feted by the press for his genuine proletarian voice and for his seemingly leftist but nuanced humanitarian drama, Wesker was often involved in anti-authority protests. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, he was heavily involved in marches and civil disobedience campaigns against nuclear weapon research and production facilities at Aldermaston; indeed, he was a member of the anti-war ‘Group of 100’—a group led by Bertrand Russell. This led directly to Wesker’s imprisonment for a month in 1961, with some other Committee members, for refusing a court order to refrain from further protests and disruptions. Extraordinarily, Wesker and his cohorts had been summoned to court, without charge, under authority granted by the Justices of the Peace Act—an act brought into law under the kingship of Edward III in 1361.³

The specific details of why Wesker and others in the group were jailed are not specifically important here. What is important is that the experience gave Wesker

¹ For a guide to Wesker’s life and career, the moribund but still accessible official website, arnoldwesker.com, is a useful start. More rounded commentary on the life of Wesker can be found in past issues of all of the major British, American and Israeli broadsheet newspapers—all of which published (sometimes anonymous) obituaries in 2016. The *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* piece on Wesker, written by William Baker and published in 2020, is available only online (and behind a paywall) at oxforddnb.com. (Both websites accessed on August 2, 2023).

² Derbyshire (2020).

³ The 1361 statute is officially accounted for and transcribed at the National Archives/Legislation website: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/aep/Edw3/34/1> (accessed on August 2, 2023).

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a crucial insight into British criminal justice practices—as seen from an accused person’s point of view. In his rather long, rather detailed, scores-settling 1994 autobiography, *As Much as I Dare*, Wesker asserts that he is embarrassed by his imprisonment—not so much by the shame of criminality (after all, he was a prisoner of moral conscience) but because the brevity and relatively benign conditions (he was placed in an open prison—Drake Hall, Staffordshire) of his incarceration meant that his suffering was trivial compared to that of a Mandela or a Solzhenitsyn.⁴ Wesker’s first weekend in prison, though, was in Brixton Prison—there, he was shocked by the allegedly cynical, disrespectful and sarcastic behaviour of warders. One warder in particular, Wesker claims, mocked and humiliated the unworldly and vulnerable 89-year-old Russell: “I knew then there would be, in this lovely isle, [some who] would happily, unquestioningly, guard gas chambers.”⁵ It is a long way from HM Prison Brixton to Sachsenhausen—but when we get past the hyperbole there is a serious point to be made. Wesker had first-hand experience of being a prisoner under a regime that is necessarily based on dispassionate efficiency and on obeying legal strictures rather than on identifying and providing for the needs of any individual. Wesker’s allusion to Nazi genocide suggests that being Jewish made him feel more vulnerable in any blindly obedient, potentially hostile bureaucracy-dependent regime.

In the next decade, Wesker was involved in a more protracted legal battle: this was a civil case that Wesker took against the Royal Shakespeare Company. Again, it is not necessary to dwell on the specifics of who allegedly did what to who in the early 1970s. Basically, Wesker’s play, *The Journalists*, was commissioned for a 1972 RSC production. The RSC reneged on the deal. Why exactly the decision to ditch Wesker’s play was taken remains controversial: some actors have claimed that they simply thought that the play was not entertaining enough; Wesker and others have claimed that some actors thought that the play portrayed Conservative politicians in an inappropriately nuanced, positive light.⁶ The certain facts are that Wesker sued the RSC for breach of contract and, years later, he was awarded £4,000—a fraction of what he had wanted and a mere crumb of comfort given that after suing this popular, powerful, subsidised company, Wesker was held in perennial distrust by the major British companies in subsequent decades. Wesker’s bitterness is key here. In the 1994 autobiography, Wesker complains at length about many aspects of the RSC affair. The specifics of Wesker’s complaints about some named and some anonymous actors, producers and directors are inconsequential and will not be accounted for at length here. But the tone can be summarised by the quoting of this one comment about the then Artistic Director of the RSC, Trevor Nunn: “Trevor ‘Goliath’ Nunn beat Arnold ‘David’ Wesker and went on to become

⁴ Wesker (1994), p. 508.

⁵ Wesker, *As Much as I Dare*, p. 509.

⁶ For two (more balanced) descriptions of the affair, see the third edition of Hayman’s book (1979, p. 103) and Leeming (1983, pp. 100–107).

a millionaire while 'David' scratched around for pennies," Wesker asserts vituperatively.⁷ Note again that Wesker alludes, perhaps obliquely, to the Old Testament and the smallness of Jewish, David-like individuals and communities. Wesker won the case against the RSC but it was a hollow victory—the RSC was not seriously damaged by the case but Wesker was. Taken together, Wesker's 1960s imprisonment and his 1970s involvement with the elongated civil case gave him a double insight into how an individual feels when squashed by the machinery of complicated yet unyielding legal systems. Put simply, Wesker felt that he was a victim. That is the essence of this essay—when Wesker dramatises Shylock being crushed by an unthinking but ruthless legal system he is doing so with reference to jaundiced personal experience. The connection between Wesker's own legal travails and the destruction of Shylock at the end of Wesker's rewrite of *The Merchant of Venice* has not been made before. That connection is made in this essay. More crucially, it is argued that Arnold 'David' Wesker takes on William 'Goliath' Shakespeare and rewrites the story of Shylock not just to underscore the anti-Semitism of Renaissance Venice and western society as a whole but to reconstruct the tale as a serious courtroom play. In Shakespeare's play the legal problems of Shylock are a relatively minor subplot—in Wesker's play the court scenes define the play. Wesker's *Shylock* is a legal drama.

The Merchant of Venice is, obviously, now thought of in different ways than it may have been thought of in the 1590s—not just in terms of problematic content but in terms of genre. It may, in these post-Shoah times, trigger anxieties about anti-Semitism. It may also be thought of as a courtroom drama—a genre that did not exist in the narrow Tragedy-Comedy-History paradigm of early modern English theatre culture. Modern audiences regularly see plays that are set in and around courtrooms: a preliminary list of post-War courtroom plays might include Arthur Miller's allegorical witchcraft play, *The Crucible* (1953), Reginald Rose's 1955 theatrical adaptation of his own screenplay for the movie, *Twelve Angry Men*, Howard Brenton's dramatization of the 1649 trial of Charles I, *55 Days* (2012) and the 2018, Aaron-Sorkin-written stage adaptation of perhaps the most celebrated fictional court debate of all time, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It is no surprise that John Mortimer was commissioned to write the energetic if little remembered biographical drama series about the theatrical career of Shakespeare—1978's Lew-Grade produced *Will Shakespeare*.⁸ Mortimer understood the similarities of the court and the stage. He especially understood the transferable skills between legal professionals' capacities for courtroom persuasion and professional actors' abilities to manipulate audiences into feeling compassion and pathos. The connection between stage and court

⁷ Wesker, *As Much as I Dare*, p. 509. Note that Wesker repeatedly refers to the 1970s case at different stages in the autobiography—an autobiography that according to its title is supposed to deal only with events up to 1959. It is not difficult to conclude that Wesker was almost obsessed with the case and shoe-horned dyspeptic observations about it into the most inappropriate of places. See, for a start, pages, 239–40, 285, 288 and 330. He also provides a whole, uniformly angry and disconsolate essay on the affair, "The Strange case of the Actors' Revolt," in his 1985 collection of non-fiction prose, *Distinctions* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1985) pp. 56–68. The essay had originally appeared in *The Sunday Times* in 1981.

⁸ The series is available, at the time of writing, on DVD and—for now at least—freely on YouTube. See <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/tv/id/1140675/index.html>—accessed on August 3, 2023.

remains vital to this day. Dame Sue Carr, the first female Lord Chief Justice of England and Wales, had previously considered a career in acting: reputedly, her mother tore up her application for the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts.⁹ Thwarted as a professional actress, Dame Sue concentrated on legal study and acted and sang only with amateur companies; she still performs with the Bar Choral Society.¹⁰ Dame Sue's considerable gifts as a communicator on legal matters are directly related to her capacity for theatrical expression. In conjunction with this modern-day assumption that *The Merchant of Venice* is a courtroom drama because it seems to fit in with our notions about what is 'theatrical' about the play—the drama in court—we may think that the play is more about Shylock than it actually is. In other words, *The Merchant of Venice* is a deeply problematic play because latter-day sensitivities have made us see the trees but not the wood and consequently the play is difficult to study, to teach and to perform. Indeed, there is a school of thought, articulated often by distinguished theatrical practitioners, that says that the play should effectively be 'cancelled.'¹¹ I do not share this viewpoint at all. Some notorious productions, of course, have heightened the play's anti-Semitic aspects for both comic and gruesomely anti-Semitic effect—the most notorious of all is the 1943 Nazi-approved production in Vienna.¹² But, one hopes, such productions are exclusively historical, and Shakespeare's play will never be so misused and exploited again. *The Merchant of Venice* can, alternatively, be performed in a way that stresses the irrationality of the heightened anti-Semitic humiliation heaped upon Shylock. Sometimes, indeed, the ludicrousness of some of the play's more overtly ridiculous passages are exaggerated so that they contrast with the deeply serious courtroom demolition of Shylock. For example, in 2011 the RSC staged a production that constructed a very clear dichotomy between the play's romance plot and its grim court scenes.¹³ The romantic heroines of the play, Portia and Nerissa, were depicted as lively and amiable but flippant southern American reality TV stars. The Clown, Lancelot Gobbo, was played as an Elvis impersonator who lived his assumed Presley identity and articulated every line in a sung, baritone drawl. All of these (genuinely amusing) scenes were lit vividly, were afforded bright scenic design and were lavishly costumed with vivacious colours. Notably, there was little colour in the scenes involving Shylock—there, everything was sedate and downbeat. He was literally bound by rope during his court appearance and at one point he trembled and shook in a sort of wordless, elongated physical and mental breakdown. It was deadly serious, tragic drama—made all the more serious because it contrasted so diametrically with the production's colourful facetious scenes. This brings me to the most important point of this section: genre. *The Merchant of Venice* may seem to be a courtroom

⁹ Ames and Gibb (2023).

¹⁰ Siddique (2023). <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/jun/15/dame-sue-carr-appointed-first-female-lord-chief-justice-in-england-and-wales>. Accessed on August 4, 2023.

¹¹ See, for example, Stevenson's (2021). <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/juliet-stevensons-manifesto-to-keep-shakespeare-alive-lets-cancel-the-merchant-of-venice-lwt6gmr5t>. Accessed August 3, 2023.

¹² This notorious production is described in detail in a splendid essay by Bassey (2018).

¹³ For one of many online reviews of the production, see <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2011/may/20/merchant-of-venice-review-rsc>—accessed on August 3, 2023.

drama to us. And it might seem like a play that either *is* anti-Semitic or is *about* anti-Semitism. But in the 1590s it would have been seen as neither. Simply, in pure Renaissance theatrical terms *The Merchant of Venice* is a comedy. It is a play about the inevitably successful romance between Bassanio and Portia. It is a drama that celebrates heteronormative sexual union—it is, like every other Shakespeare sex comedy, a pagan-like celebration of love and fecundity. The plotting of Shylock and his comeuppance is a subplot. The courtroom scene appears in Act Four. Shylock is forgotten about during Act Five. He has been a nuisance that has been dealt with. Arnold Wesker's adaptation of the play, 1976's *Shylock*, is different not just in terms of Shylock's depiction but in terms of genre. Wesker turns the play into what is basically a tragedy. Shylock does not die so Wesker's play is not an Aristotelian tragedy in the true sense but he is broken in a way that inspires pathos rather than mockery and the society that breaks him—Christian Venice—is constructed with a jaundiced dramatic realism that in the words of Ronald Hayman "is intended to expose the Venetians as comparable to the Nazis."¹⁴ Crucially too, Wesker effectively strips *The Merchant of Venice* of its romance elements—the romance between Bassanio and Portia is present but it is both backgrounded and fundamentally joyless. Wesker's play ends with only a brief vignette after the courtroom scene—Shakespeare's Act Five becomes only a few bitterly ironic lines in Wesker's play. In other words, Wesker has not only turned when he thinks is Shakespeare's anti-Semitic play into a play that characterises Shylock as a totemic symbol of all Jewish suffering, but he has changed the genre too. *Shylock* is a courtroom drama—a courtroom drama written with subjective sympathy for the small man facing a courtroom that does the will of a hysterically anti-Jewish society.

Wesker's own relationship with *The Merchant of Venice* is a trifle more complicated than may be thought. He clearly believed that the less palatable part of Shakespeare's play was symptomatic of a two-millennium tradition of Christian hatred for Jews. He particularly loathed some modern productions of the play—productions that in his view offered only caricatured depictions of Shylock. A 1970 National Theatre production starring Laurence Olivier and directed by Jonathan Miller raised his ire particularly.¹⁵ Wesker had acted in a production of the play when he was a teenager—in the previously addressed autobiography, he recounts a number of amusing rehearsal incidents involving roller-skates and impossible-to-repeat somersaults.¹⁶ (Like many other dramatists of the 1950s—John Osborne and Harold Pinter are obvious examples—the young Wesker had anticipated a professional career in acting rather than in writing). So, Wesker never lost some sense that Shakespeare's play could be both enjoyable and valuable—indeed, always in awe of Shakespeare's power as a poet and as a playwright, he engaged with Shakespeare in many ways in his later career.¹⁷ So, Wesker does not hate Shakespeare

¹⁴ Hayman, p. 115.

¹⁵ Leeming, p. 124.

¹⁶ Wesker, *As Much as I Dare*, pp. 175 and 228.

¹⁷ For example, Wesker's 1987 play *Lady Othello* shows obvious engagement with Shakespeare; his 1997 play, *Break my Heart*, depicts a stressed woman who finds great comfort in Shakespeare's poetry; and he wrote shortened adaptations of *Henry V* and *Much Ado About Nothing* for the 2006 Shakespeare Schools Festival.

or his play—he hates just the anti-Semitic possibilities of it. As Wesker told a *New York Times* reporter in 1977: “I didn’t go into competition with the poet.”¹⁸ What Wesker does compete with, though, is the ownership of Shylock as a character. Wesker did not think that Shakespeare’s Shylock was a properly rendered Jew because Shakespeare’s Jew demands his pound of flesh—gleefully, arguably. For Wesker, a typical Jew would be relieved when the bond is declared illegal. He would be relieved that there will be no legally sanctioned violence done to Antonio. Wesker, then, rewrote the play to show Shylock not as a demonised other but as someone who eschews violence and is utterly bereft of what the 1600 title-page of the first edition of *The Merchant of Venice* describes with bias as “the extreame crueltie of *Shylocke* the Iewe.”¹⁹ Wesker’s Shylock is a humane individual. He is cultured, urbane, sensitive and devoid of vengeful tendencies. As Reade W. Dornan puts it succinctly and aptly, Wesker’s “Shylock is a man who represents the best impulses of Judaism ... [and] embraces life with all its responsibilities.”²⁰ In Shakespeare’s play, Shylock is presented as an almost solipsistic individual; in Wesker’s play he is a man organically connected into various aspects of Venetian society—not just Jewish or financial Venice. The remainder of this essay demonstrates the rounded depiction of Shylock in Wesker’s play. It is argued that this depiction of Shylock leads towards the courtroom scene where, in this play that dismisses the Shakespearean romance paradigm, the decent Jew is destroyed by a court that does the virulent anti-Semitic bidding of the society and the domineering Doge that it serves.

Shylock, a play about a legal problem, was, ironically contrived to rescue Wesker from the civil legal problem described above. In the 1970s Wesker’s career was in decline: his successful plays—*Chicken Soup with Barley*, *Roots*, *The Kitchen* etc.—had been written and produced before so-called Swinging London prevailed. Before 1963. None of his subsequent plays—*The Four Seasons*, *The Old Ones*, *The Wedding Feast*—had made any substantial impact. The RSC’s ultimate rejection of *The Journalists* was a major blow. The case against the RSC was ongoing as Wesker anticipated a success that would return him to popular and critical acclaim—a 1977 run of *Shylock* on Broadway. The play had been premiered in Sweden in 1976—but Broadway was the main goal. The high-profile screen and stage actor, Zero Mostel, was booked to star as Shylock. But Mostel died suddenly; the production degenerated into a sort of crisis, and, with previews eviscerated by critics, the run ended very quickly. It was a disaster for Wesker—ironically, Wesker’s prose account of the debacle, *The Birth of Shylock and The Death of Zero Mostel* (1997), is one of Wesker’s great contributions to theatre culture: it is by turns scabrous about actors, producers and directors (especially Wesker’s one-time mentor, John Dexter) and self-effacing about the bad luck that Wesker felt was following him everywhere.²¹ *Shylock* has made some long-term impact—partly because it is regarded as a very substantial rewrite of a Shakespearean text and, thus, is often studied by Shakespearean scholars in the massive field of Shakespearean Appropriation studies and partly

¹⁸ Weinraub (1977).

¹⁹ Shakespeare (1860).

²⁰ Dornan (1994, p. 105).

²¹ Wesker (1997).

because it has received minor stage revivals and a full-scale radio broadcast.²² The problematic production history is reflected in the play's complicated textual history. Even the title has proved to be a problem—initially the play was called *The Merchant*, and, indeed, is still referred to as such in some critical essays (and on the play's Wikipedia page).²³ Wesker was a restless reviser of plays—the *Shylock* edition that I will cite in the remainder of this essay is described as the “ninth version of the play.”²⁴ (Specific developments in the complicated textual history of the play are not crucial for the argument of this essay—I am using this version of the play simply because it is an easily accessible, readily available issue of the text that readers of this essay can consult without difficulty). So, *Shylock* has had a difficult, almost strangulated textual and theatrical history. But the play's narrative trajectory is, in contrast, really quite straightforward.

In essence, *Shylock* is *The Merchant of Venice* without the clowning and without the rosy romance elements. It is a serious play, depicting Shylock in a carefully presented Venice of 1563—Shakespeare's version of the tale is temporally unspecific. Wesker's Shylock is a thoughtful, generous man of patronage and care. Although invariably referred to only as “Shylock” in the text, he is further humanised in Wesker's list of characters with a full name: Shylock Kolner (p. 187). In Shakespeare's play, Shylock is dedicated only to trade but for Wesker's Shylock money lending is only a means to an end—as Shylock puts it himself, “Money lending was never a full-time occupation” for him or for any other Jew in the Venetian Ghetto (p.191). Shylock is constructed as a man who loves books, who loves study, who loves debate. Pointedly, the play opens with him cataloguing his vast collection of book and manuscripts. His joy in his collection is infectious: Wesker wants the actor playing Shylock to endear himself to the audience by underscoring his joy in the treasures through quite eccentric verbal flourishes: “Such treasures to show you, you'll be thrilled, thrrrrriled! You'll be—I can't wait ... just one more,” he enthuses (p. 189). He can hardly express himself in standard speech, so eager is he to signpost his passion for learned writing. Shylock is speaking to Antonio—but he is really speaking to the whole audience. The audience will be “thrrrrriled” by this infectious joy in the written word. When he speaks about his “most treasured manuscripts” he sounds more like another Shakespearean character, the unworldly, esoteric text-obsessed Prospero, than the money-obsessed Shylock (p. 190). Later in the play, Shylock delivers a verbal purple patch of celebration for two-thousand years of scholarly culture, praising scholars who produced “ancient manuscripts of Greece and Rome” and the authors and publishers of post-Gutenberg and post-Manutius printed books (pp. 228–29). This respect for manuscripts and printed books is contrasted with the Philistinism of Christian authorities who occasionally

²² For an example of an essay that contextualises Shylock within a culture of Shakespearean appropriation, see Malkin and Voights (2018), especially pp. 177–79. The radio broadcast of *Shylock* was on BBC Radio 3 on March 5, 2006. See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/dramaon3/pip/x8ixy/>—accessed on August 4, 2023.

²³ “*The Merchant*, play,” Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Merchant_\(play\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Merchant_(play))—accessed on August 6, 2023.

²⁴ Wesker (1990), p. 171. All further quotations from the play will be identified in the text in parenthesis.

destroy supposedly threatening works. So, Shylock refers to an (historical) incident in Rome on September 9, 1553, when many books were burnt (p. 190). Shylock wants to spread knowledge: he imagines books as repositories of an almost literally effervescent knowledge: from books, productive “Amazing! Knowledge” and insight will “Bubble, bubble, bubble, bubble, bubble, bubble, bubble, bubble...” (p. 229). Shylock does not just offer business to booksellers. He is a patron of a range of cultural and humanitarian activities: he gives work to an old portrait painter (pp. 218–21); he is heavily involved in the building of a synagogue (pp. 200–01); he helps a playwright assist Jewish evacuees fleeing persecution on the Iberian peninsula (p. 202); and he is even a sort of proto-feminist because as another character acknowledges, Shylock “wanted to prove that daughters could achieve the intellectual stature of sons” (p. 200). Note, too, that Shylock delivers his panegyrics about study to Antonio—a Christian. Antonio is not just a business acquaintance in this play—he is a close, even intimate friend. Shylock does not eschew Gentile company. And not every Christian in Venice is a bigot: though some egregiously are: Nerissa, a loyal female heroine’s assistant in Shakespeare’s play, in Wesker’s is basically an anti-Semite who despises non-Christian culture—“Why in God’s name did you want to learn Hebrew,” she unpleasantly asks Portia (p. 193); Bassanio expresses incredulity that Jews can talk about “Venice as though the city *cared* for their voice, existed for their *judgement* (Wesker’s italics, p. 214) and remarks, as if he is speaking for every Venetian Christian, that “The tolerance of Jews may be unpalatable to us” (p. 216); Lorenzo refers with evidence-dodging superciliousness to Shylock’s “sin: intellectual pride” (p. 215) and there being “no grace in the man” (p. 223); he refers caustically to “your tribe” (*ibid*) and contrasts the mentality of Jews with that of “civilised nations” (*ibid*); and, sounding like a 1970s bigot complaining about curry, asserts that “The Ghetto is notorious for its smells” (p. 224). Although it is set in what should be a remote, pre-Enlightenment past, Wesker’s depiction of such brazenly expressed, irrational anti-Semitism is unsparing and unsettling. The trouble is that these attitudes feed into the law of Venice. The very existence of an official Jewish Ghetto is a manifestation of a sectarian and racist state that encourages a potent segregationist tendency to proliferate and to self-perpetuate. Individual attitudes and state legislation go hand-in-hand in a vicious circle that will soon destroy the high-minded Shylock.

Shylock believes in good, honourable, respectable behaviour—beliefs that are dismissed by some of the city’s Christians who refuse to acknowledge any positive Jewish capacities for honour. A seemingly trivial argument with his daughter, Jessica, is telling. Portia suggests that lateness may be justified in certain situations but Shylock has a monomaniacal belief in punctuality as a courtesy: “An appointment is a bond. Between two people. They depend upon honouring it,” he insists (p. 221). The exchange bodies forth Shylock’s absolute belief in doing what one says and saying what one will do. It is an ironic counterpoint to the later court scene when Shylock himself is in peril because of a literal reading of a dangerous bond that he has made. But Shylock does not respect one sort of rule—the rule of Venetian law. He does not respect Venetian law because it is anti-Semitic and creates artificial barriers between humans. When Antonio admires the manuscripts and books, he does so illegally because he stays in the Ghetto for longer than he should according to

Venetian strictures. Antonio, even after it is made clear by the stage directions that he and Shylock "*have been drinking*," is cautious and loathe to test the law by lingering in the Ghetto (p. 195). But Shylock dismisses the law, saying that gatekeepers can be bribed to ignore such breaches (p. 197). This seems like uncharacteristic cynicism from Shylock—but this disdain for the letter and spirit of Venetian law is a constant. He respects everything and everybody except the law and its lawyers.

As in Shakespeare's play, Shylock agrees to lend 3,000 ducats to Antonio so that he can facilitate the swaggering Bassanio's charmless pursuit of Portia. In Shakespeare's play, Shylock delivers the loan with a grudging, menacing tone—he does it as a sort of demonstration of power, to show Christians how they need Jewish money even if they hate Jews. But Wesker's Shylock offers the loan with no begrudgery. He doesn't want any sort of contract: he says that Antonio's insistence on a bond is "nonsense" (p. 211). It is the cautious Antonio who insists on a bond—not because he wants to but because Venetian law says that "no dealings may be made with Jews unless covered with legal bond" (p. 211); he is adamant that "law in Venice is sacrosanct, dear Shylock" (p. 212). Shylock will, at Antonio's bidding, stipulate that Antonio must forfeit a pound of flesh if he fails to repay the debt. But it is contrived to be a joke—"A loving nonsense bond" that is contrived only for satiric humour (p. 213). It may be "loving" in spirit but the wording of the bond has ominous significance for possible violence. The trope of the juxtaposition of images of tenderness and brutality when referring to a dangerous threat perhaps recalls the "kiss" of "the loving swine"—the boar who gores the young hunter to death by "nuzzling in his flank" with a "sharp spear" in Shakespeare's narrative poem, *Venus and Adonis*.²⁵ Shylock's agrees to produce the bond only to "mock the law"—to mock an anti-Semitic culture that inspires laws that have made the bond necessary in the first place (*Shylock*, p. 213). For Shylock, the Christian law of Venice is an ass. It is an attitude that will cause tragic consequences for him.

Shylock's sister, Rivka (a sense-talking pragmatist who does not appear in Shakespeare's play—many Wesker plays have strong, hard-headed, no-nonsense female characters) sees the recklessness of the bond.²⁶ She acts as a sort of Chorus: perhaps ventriloquising the audience's anxieties about Shylock's jocund approach to Venetian law, she berates him for chaining "your friend's life to a mocking bird" (p. 238; the allusion to Harper Lee's 1960 novel is evident). As news arrives about Antonio's financial problems, Shylock begins to jabber about the law in a slightly unhinged way. He even anthropomorphises the law—he makes it sound like a sentient entity that "mocked at us" on purpose (*ibid*). He is complacent too. The now impoverished Antonio tells Shylock bluntly that "We've signed a foolish bond"—he says that exact phrase twice, stressing his worry (p. 240). Shylock is sure that "The bond will not be called upon" (*ibid*). He is wrong: Christians in Venice will take the bond seriously because it fits into their folk slanders and prejudices about Jews wanting to spill

²⁵ William (2002), p. 232.

²⁶ On how Wesker's apparent "preference for women over men is reflected in his work," see Fry (2020), especially p. 191.

Christian blood.²⁷ Lorenzo, bereft of any sympathy for Shylock, notes that Antonio has missed the deadline for paying Shylock and will suffer because “the Jew has turned mad” (p. 244). Jessica, although now estranged from her father, insists that the “bond had mockery not malice in it” (p. 245). Her calls for calm are ignored. Despite Shylock’s lack of interest in enforcing the terms of the bond, the case will go to court—and a high court overseen by a powerful ruler, the Doge of Venice. The court scene is the climax of the play—the longest scene in the play, it is also the second-last scene, followed only to a very brief final scene. In Shakespeare’s play, the courtroom scene is quite frivolous, in a way. After all, Shakespeare’s original audience would see a boy actor playing a woman (Portia) cross-dressing as a man. But in Wesker’s theatre there is no cross-dressing and no facetious burbling. Portia is a serious individual who has previously derided her father’s caskets conceit as “Those caskets. Those stupid caskets” (p. 193) and denounced the casual carelessness of “feeble ... Poor gimcrack men” (p. 233). The court scene in Wesker’s version of the story is serious, grim. There can be no fun as in Shakespeare’s cross-dressing, disguise-friendly never-never land of a fantastic Venice.

In Wesker’s more realistically configured Venice of 1563 there is a less centrally heroic role for the primary female character, Portia. Shylock’s mockery of the law bites him. It bites Antonio too. The Doge presides over the hearing at the court. Shylock and Antonio both feel honour-bound to see the case through in court: they are paired now through a sort of fatalistic nihilism: Antonio, knowing that the legal bond must be honoured, believes that he will die as the pound of flesh is extracted; Shylock thinks that he will be seen to be responsible for the death of a Christian. The Doge is initially prepared to release Antonio and Shylock from the bond but for reasons that are sincere but perhaps frustrating for a rationalist audience, neither is willing to release the bond. Their attitude is, seemingly, that a deal is a deal, that a bond is a bond. The difference between their principles and those of the Doge’s court is that their principles develop trust and personal relationships, even across religious barriers whereas legal dedication to the word of contracts fosters destructive violence when sods-law circumstances such as Antonio’s unexpected financial losses mean that bonds are impossible to honour. Decisions of the court are, of course, based on principles of integrity and fidelity to promise too—but they are decisions based on inhumane mechanisms that privilege the prejudices of the state and cause misery to the individual. As the Doge says: “The laws of Venice are very clear and precise ... and cannot be denied to foreigners” (p. 253). Shylock is “foreign” because of his Jewishness—so the Doge means that even a Jew like Shylock must get his pound of flesh because the law says that all such bonds must be honoured. Lorenzo appeals to the Doge to render the bond legally invalid because it represents malicious Jewish contrivance. He does so by demonising Shylock with familiar anti-Semitic tropes about the evils of the “principle of usury whose evil

²⁷ A later Wesker play, 1991’s *Blood Libel*, dramatises the persecution of Jews in medieval England, a persecution motivated by a propaganda-caused belief that Jews are energetic slaughterers of Christians and mockers of Christian worship. The trope of the Jew as fanatical murderer of Christians is central to the construction of the villainous Barabas in Christopher Marlowe’s early 1590s play, *The Jew of Malta*.

this bond so tragically exemplifies" (p. 254). Note that Lorenzo rather anthropomorphises what he calls the "principle of usury": he is personalising things by transmuting usury—turning it into a living thing, a monstrous familiar "whose" aim is to corrode the Christian society it parasitically feeds upon. Paradoxically, Lorenzo dares to humanise Shylock by rhetorically stressing, with a sort of metatheatricality, that "has not a Jew eyes" (p. 254). One assumes that every audience member will know that in Shakespeare's play it is Shylock who pleads for his humanity by saying that even Jews have eyes, hands, organs and dimensions. So, it is basically metatheatrical for Lorenzo to steal the words in this play—he uses the words ostensibly to humanise Shylock but effectively to demonise him. Shylock's response is, inevitably, enraged discomobulation as he responds to Lorenzo's insincere "apologies for my humanity" (p. 255). Portia is a hero in the sense that she does persuade the Doge that the bond is "impossible" because Shylock will not be able to extract the precise amount of flesh from Antonio's body (p. 256).²⁸ Lorenzo's anti-Semitic rhetoric causes Shylock to stiffen his resolve—to now wilfully, determinedly get his pound of flesh. It does not happen because, Portia intervenes not with, as in Shakespeare's play, dazzling wit in blank verse but with mundane prose predictions about how "torn flesh draws blood" (*ibid*). This is not a feisty Shakespearean heroine in man's apparel but a plain-speaking ordinary citizen who thwarts Shylock through calm logic that is agreeable to the presiding Doge—in Wesker's unromantic play there are no philosophical diversions from Portia about, for instance, what is or is not the quality of mercy. So, the bond is dismissed. Shylock shrugs his shoulders and announces that he will go back to his books. But the Doge intervenes and says that Shylock will have all of his books confiscated because "An old Venetian law condemns to death and confiscation of his goods the alien who plots against the life of a citizen of Venice" (p. 257). It is a startling and seemingly unnecessary intervention. Only the Doge seems to know about this "old law." It brings to mind the use of the 1361 law that enabled the bringing of Wesker to criminal court without charge back in 1961.

The Doge will not call for Shylock to be executed—but the Jew's books will all be confiscated. For Shylock that is a sort of death sentence. The court finishes business and Shylock is left dejected, broken—the stage directions dictate that the actor must portray Shylock as "*a bitter man*" (p. 259). Tragically, Shylock admits that he is now "so tired of men" (*ibid*). That is tragic because he has had a buoyantly philanthropic mindset—a mindset formed through engagement with the ingenuity of thinkers and writers as recorded by scribes and publishers for two-thousand years. For him, the contents of ancient and more recent books are signifiers of the efficacies of men. Without books he has no connection to the achievements of humanity.²⁹

²⁸ Robert Wilcher accounts for the significance of Portia's intervention here succinctly and insightfully: "After Lorenzo comes out with 'has not a Jew's eyes,' Portia stands up to say that the bond is impossible ... [it is] the moment that the entire play was written to validate." As Wilcher makes clear, this sets Shylock up to say "Thank God," because he doesn't need or want to cut off the pound of flesh. Wilcher (1991), p. 118.

²⁹ In a 1981 essay, Wesker reiterates the connection between the loss of Shylock's books and his total loss of humanitarian faith: "The state exacts its revenge. He [Shylock] must not merely lose his house goods but his beloved collection of books in which he has enthusiastically claimed resides the world's

He realises that he has no future left in Venice: he will go on a one-way journey to somewhere where he might belong—Jerusalem. For a 1970s audience, this is an obvious echo of the post-War, post-Shoah foundation of Israel. *Shylock* may well, then, be an ultimately Zionist play in that the reasons for Shylock's flight to sanctuary in the Middle East are laid bare. But the more striking impact of the play might be its bleak depiction of the capacity for laws, sometimes ancient laws, to be used and abused for seemingly partisan, sectarian, racist purposes.

Laws are not always good laws. For Wesker, there has always been a latent anti-Semitism even in democracies: what Fredrick Logevall identifies, in a different context, as “a casual anti-Semitism, marked by indifference and lack of imagination” that can co-exist with more virulent, more marked hatred of Jews—a mentality “attributing all evil to Jews and believing them genetically predisposed to being sinister and morally defective.”³⁰ But more vicious states can impose laws that will be proactively used to legally damage Jews. The Venice of 1563, in this play, is such a state. In Shakespeare's play, Shylock is humiliated and broken—but that is done with by the end of Act Four. Act Five is a long romance scene involving inevitable flirtatious playacting and eventual affective pair bonding between young Christian elites. But in Wesker's play the court scene is followed only by a brief scene when Lorenzo remembers, with a shudder, “that man's scowl” (Wesker, *Shylock*, p. 261). Shylock, for the Christians, is just a bogeyman, a bad memory—as Jews might have been for historical societies where Jews had been forcefully expelled—Edward I's England of the 1290s and Hitler's Germany of the early 1940s are obvious, sobering, actual examples. Arnold Wesker's Shylock could have got his way and got his pound of flesh. Or he could have been humoured and not exploited and crushed. But that does not happen. Shylock mocks Venetian laws and Venetian lawmakers with a joke bond and they clamp down on him with crushing, vindictive, dehumanising vehemence. The ‘Goliath’ Doge of Venice beats Shylock ‘David’ Kolner. There is no place for humour or sympathy for the small, “foreign” man in the law courts of Venice and there is no justice for Shylock: the Doge's court has served Christian, anti-Semitic Venice well. As Lorenzo asserts with jingoistic pride in the mechanisms of his state: “Fortunately the law is a terrifying thing, and the courts are an awesome place” (*ibid*). Shylock has been driven out of Venice by application of the law. Jews were driven out of Medieval England and Nazi Germany by belligerent aggressors citing not just informal populist slanders and pseudoscientific racist baloney but also formal proclamations, statutes, legislative decisions—laws. The law can indeed be a terrifying thing.

Footnote 29 (continued)

wisdom. He's a destroyed man.” “Why I fleshed out Shylock,” in Arnold Wesker, *Distinctions* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1985), p. 162.

³⁰ Logevall refers here to the anti-Semitic culture in elite parts of political society in the pre-War United States—a culture that he believes motivated, in part, isolationist tendencies, complacency about Hitler and even tacit support for German fascism in the early 1930s. His comments about casual anti-Semitism and its complementary coexistence with more overtly violent hatred of Jews could apply to some other contexts. Logevall (2020, p. 196).

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