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The Merchant of Venice at UMASS: An Exploration in Collaboration and Representation

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The Merchant of Venice at UMASS:
An Exploration in Collaboration and Representation

A Thesis Presented

By

ELIZABETH PANGBURN

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

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Department of Theater

The Merchant of Venice at UMASS:
An Exploration in Collaboration and Representation

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ABSTRACT

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE AT UMASS

:
AN EXPLORATION IN COLLABORATION AND REPRESENTATION

MAY 2015

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Through an analysis of the details of *The Merchant of Venice*, I will show that a costume design which only satisfies the basic role of articulating the relationships, status, time and place, etc of the play but has no point of view regarding that text's inherent assumptions will always support, rather than subvert, any problematic issues present therein. Secondly, I will show that without tandem movement from the creative team, no rehabilitation or subversion is possible.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	iii
LIST OF IMAGES.....	v
CHAPTER	
I. THE MERCHANT OF VENICE AT UMASS.....	1
II. TRANSLATION: THE BACKWARD GLANCE OF SEMIOTICS.....	6
III. ELIZABETHAN VS PERIOD.....	14
IV. ELIZABETHAN CLOTHING FOR MEN AND WOMEN: 1570-1605.....	20
V. MODERN STYLING: 2007-20142.....	22
VI. <i>MERCHANT OF VENICE</i> : A PROBLEMATIC SCRIPT.....	28
Ethnicity and The Other.....	32
Religious Bigotry: Christian Anti-Semitism.....	33
Homosexuality and Heteronormativity.....	34
VII. MERCHANT DESIGN: OVERVIEW.....	38
APPENDIX: IMAGES.....	49

LIST OF IMAGES

Image	Page
1. Michael Hayden and Kevin Kline in Henry IV	49
2. Richard Easton in Henry IV	50
3. Robert Dudley, 1st Earl of Leicester.....	50
4. Still from the Movie “Much Ado About Nothing”	51
5. Ethan Hawke in Henry IV.....	51
6. The Ditchley Portrait; Queen Elizabeth.....	52
7. Queen Mary at Coronation.....	52
8. Twelfth Night. Kings Players	53
9. The Peacham Drawing	53
10. Prince of Morocco in <i>The Merchant of Venice</i>	54
11. The Portrait of Abd el-Ouahed ben Messaoud ben Mohammed Anoun, Moorish Ambassador to Queen Elizabeth I.....	54

CHAPTER I

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE AT UMASS

In the late spring of 2014 I was a graduate student in costume design at UMASS Amherst, and had just begun research and meetings for my thesis show, *The Merchant of Venice*. This was an exciting project. I was eager to engage with the text and the challenge of staging the anti-Semitism and bigotry of this particular play felt timely and relevant to global and local events.

There are only a handful of Shakespeare's plays I haven't designed. In my early career, I worked at a Shakespeare theater, designing for both the summer season and the Education Department. This theater was my training ground. It was where I cut my teeth as a professional, and first understood the power of Shakespeare's multi-faceted language. It was here I first experienced the political liveliness of Shakespeare's history and texts. In a brilliant stroke of serendipity, my thesis, *The Merchant of Venice*, was to be performed at UMASS but directed by the now artistic director of that very theater where I grew up as an artist. I remembered this man from our mutual time there; he was then a fight choreographer, and I liked him personally and respected him professionally.

As we began design meetings at UMASS for *The Merchant of Venice*, our director told us he didn't "know" the play with the same intimacy as he knew the Bard's other work. He said he wanted to "do the play;" he wanted to figure it out on the bodies of our actors. He said he did not want to superimpose a political viewpoint on the script,

or apply some elaborate concept. The creative team agreed that “doing the show” “period” or “Elizabethan” would be the best way to achieve this directive.

Because I grew up in his theater, I think I understood that to “just do the play” means a production that rejects high concept, and rather celebrates the humanity and truth of Shakespeare's characters' experience. I think I understood that to “figure it out on the bodies of the actors” means that many production choices will be actor driven, and arrived at in rehearsal. It means that the actor's experience of the text will be privileged, and that the process will be a collaborative, meandering one. This type of process was a joy to participate in when I worked at his theater, and I was excited to engage with *The Merchant of Venice* in this way.

As I researched and sketched I began to construct a visual system that I hoped would circumvent or subvert the problematic attitudes in the script. I was conscious of how my costume choices would affect the audience's perception of each character

especially those that are treated poorly within the script. However, during the process there emerged a substantial problem. The creative team failed to adequately address the inherent bigotry in the script. Perhaps because the creative team agreed to work in an open-ended and fluid way, we never fully engaged collectively with the text.

In hindsight, we approached *The Merchant of Venice* as we might the familiar *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, trusting our instincts and expecting that the play could be “just done” as written. We did not seek to answer the many questions the script asks of modern practitioners or audiences, not the least of which questions our relationship to Shylock, or to the Prince of Morocco, in a post-Holocaust racially divided United States. We never answered the question, “Why this play now?”.

This lack of clarity was a problem because later in the process, we, as a team, had no foundation to return to when conflicting perspectives on the script complicated production. For example, about a week before tech, after all research, renderings and costume choices had been approved, I received two requests which revealed significant differences between my and the director's expectations for our production. The first request came through an actor: I was asked to provide a yarmulke for Shylock. The second came through the rehearsal report: I was asked to "darken a few shades" the Prince of Morocco's skin with makeup. These unexpected and ethically troubling requests forced me to confront whether or not my work, and its rejection of the problematic issues found within the script, was an adequate contribution to the war against bigotry. I questioned whether my work could be adequate without the help of the rest of the creative team. This experience has spurred my inquiry into how our design and production process affects the theatrical experience of problematic scripts, and specifically here, the issues inherent to *The Merchant of Venice*.

Theater's ability to either reinforce or recoup subversive behavior onstage is a hotly debated aspect of the medium's political power. Writers, practitioners, directors and theorists of various persuasions and disciplines have all questioned that potential ability. *The Roaring Girl*, a play of particular interest in my research due to the successful female to male cross-dressing¹ of its main character, Moll Firth, and the surrounding criticism, is a great example of the difficulty of gaining consensus regarding this issue.² Similarly, we may question our ability as practitioners to reinforce or subvert problematic attitudes

¹ Moll and Portia's both successfully dress as men as a means to an end

² See Bailey, Orgel and Howard and others for a more in depth look at how the performance of cross dressing within a script which reestablishes order may or may not recoup that subversive behavior.

present within a script. This is the heart of my inquiry, and the main question raised by the lack of consensus within the creative team of *The Merchant of Venice*.

To answer these questions I began to conceive of the costume design for a period play as a kind of translation. The first issue of translation I dealt with in *The Merchant of Venice* was the challenge of doing the play “Elizabethan.” While Elizabethan is typically understood as a historically accurate representation of clothing and props from the late 16th century, I instead was more interested in recreating an Elizabethan sensibility. Using the work of Stephen Orgel, I posit that the Lord Chamberlain’s Men’s historical vagueness, as manifest in the period’s costume protocol, was more a window to their modern sensibility than a comment on their understanding of the past. From this vantage, I rejected historicity, and allowed our production the flexibility to adopt anachronistic elements. I created an understanding of “Elizabethan” as one of historical playfulness, combining the silhouette of the late 16th century with contemporary textures, fabrics, accessories and styling. By translating the period through a modern lens, I hoped the relationships and hierarchies within the play would be more clearly defined for our modern audience.

The second issue of translation was found in the challenge of representing the minority groups in *The Merchant of Venice*. While, arguably, Shakespeare highlights the hypocrisy of the Christians through the clowning and degradation of the minority groups, the script contains negative stereotypes which remain problematic to a modern audience. A translation of the attitudes within the script for a modern audience can ask a for a presentation that does not blindly perpetrate the original stereotypes, but rather, at the very least, reveals to the modern viewer the inherent bigotry of the script, and at most,

uses them to comment on the history of Western oppression. While this is primarily achieved through directorial choices, the story told by the costume design can either support or hinder this endeavor. My choice to prioritize the ethical concerns of creating an “other” on stage for comic relief by creating costumes that were neither ethnically nor period specific is under scrutiny in this paper. I had hoped that by translating certain aspects of the script through the lens of fantasy, I would avoid perpetrating negative stereotypes of actual peoples or cultures.

Whether or not it is possible to rehabilitate a stereotype, or subvert a problematic attitude within a script through costume can only be answered through an analysis of the constellation of choices made in each show. Through an analysis of the details of this particular production, *The Merchant of Venice*, I will show that a costume design which only satisfies the basic role of articulating the relationships, status, time and place, etc of the play but has no point of view regarding that text’s inherent assumptions will always support, rather than subvert, any problematic issues present therein. Secondly, I will show that without tandem movement from the creative team, no rehabilitation or subversion is possible. These conclusions began forming during the production process of *The Merchant of Venice* and crystalized as I returned to the project both in conversation and as I made edits to my renderings in preparation for my portfolio presentation. While this inquiry may seem rudimentary, as most practitioners know how important collaboration is to create a cohesive production of any show, I believe that by examining a particular failure of collaboration we can achieve a greater understanding of how the production process affects the theatrical experience.

CHAPTER II

TRANSLATION: THE BACKWARD GLANCE OF SEMIOTICS

Designing a period show for a modern audience has its challenges. The successful costume design must, on some level, articulate the answer to the question “Why this play now?” A costume design that answers this question locates the meaning and significance of the production for the audience. In order to accomplish this, the costume designer achieves two types of translation in the design. The first is translating the original or period hierarchies and relationships into a series of visual connections decodable by the modern eye. The second type of translation happens when the cultural attitudes of the past are clarified or commented on through the design choices. Both modes of translation create an additional layer of meaning in support of the purpose of the production, and provides answers to the original question of “why this play?”

In modern productions of Shakespeare, effective translation is often achieved through use of contrasting elements to differentiate or to make connections between groups. One example of this type of translation is found in the costume design of Jess Goldstein for the 2004 Lincoln Center Production of *Henry IV*, directed by Jack O’Brien. [Table 1]

In order to distinguish the historic class divides of Elizabethan England, Goldstien employs rough and nubby textures for the tavern scenes, creating a ragged homespun aesthetic for the lower class. In contrast, he dresses the nobility in reflective, and to our modern eye, expensive surfaces of gold and velvet. [Table 2]

Period portraiture confirms the fashion for elaborate and sumptuous clothing among the upper classes, as in the representations of Sir Robert Dudley, a favorite of

Queen Elizabeth. The 1574 painting by an unknown Dutch artist is housed at the Royal Portrait Gallery in London, and is generally accepted as having been painted from life. In quarter pose, Dudley wears a red doublet of slashed and dagged velvet and leather, trimmed in gold. [Table 3]

In Queen Elizabeth's Wardrobe Unlock'd, Janet Arnold writes that the Queen's subjects of noble birth could easily spend a third of their average annual income on preparing for an audience. Dudley was well known for being very well dressed. As the favorite of the Queen, and therefore often in her presence, Dudley would have spent dearly on elaborate costume. Both he, and the Queen, loved their sartorial expression of wealth and power.³

Research from the period does show lower classes wearing coarser fabrics, and velvets were in style for the nobility in the mid 16th century.⁴ From this superficial research, a designer might consider this divide an authentic period representation, for certainly common sense dictates that nobility wore expensive clothing and the poor wore homespun.

However, one document we use to ascertain the styles of the nobility during the 17th century also illustrates the permeable line between the dress of the middle class and nobility at the time. The Sumptuary Laws of Greenwich, 15 June 1574, 16 dictated by Queen Elizabeth, state:

Velvet in gowns, coats, or other uttermost garments; fur of leopards; embroidery with any silk: except men of the degrees above mentioned, barons' sons, knights and gentlemen in ordinary office attendant upon her majesty's person, and such as

³ Arnold 103.

⁴ Boucher 455.

have been employed in embassages to foreign princes...⁵

This document, in regulating the visual markers of class, implies the power of an ascending middle class with social aspirations. London's merchant class was growing and many among its ranks had begun to copy or even surpass the nobility's fashion excess. While some were the wives of merchants, who with their money and life of relative leisure, had time to visit the theater fully dressed, most were men.

Amanda Bailey, in *Monstrous Manner*, argues that the clothes "made the man" – that is, if a man could afford to dress appropriately for a certain status, he would gain access to that class stratum. The sumptuary laws then, often unenforceable by most accounts,⁶ attempted to claim the nobility's innate right to the refined and expensive wardrobe in the face of declining political and financial power. An ascending middle class and a declining nobility imply a kind of permeability between the classes, marked by the ability of middle class men and women to dress themselves as "their betters." When this ability is considered in conjunction with an awareness of the individuality each person brings to the creation of their wardrobe, it is likely class and status in Elizabethan England were not always clearly defined through fabric choice. It is more likely that class and status in Elizabethan England, as they are now, were read as a constellation of markers that included fabric, cut, decoration, bearing and speech.

Therefore the ease with which we distinguish between classes on our modern stages, such as in Goldstien's *Henry V*, through fabric texture is a simplification. It is a theatrical conceit designed to simplify and clarify a social structure unfamiliar to a modern audience, and one designed to facilitate storytelling. The visual markers costume

⁵ Acts of the Privy Council 1

⁶ Baily 270

designers often use to designate class, such as fabric texture or gilt decoration, certainly have their origins in history, but are more accurately understood as a translation of that history for the modern audience.

Another example of this type of translation is found in the use of 19th century uniforms in Kenneth Branagh's film *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993). By employing the commonly identifiable modern military aesthetic, costume designer Phyllis Dalton established the military character of the world of the play and the male relationships.

[Table IV]

In Elizabethan England, military uniforms were issued for ranks fighting abroad,⁷ but not for those fighting at home. England did not have a standing army, so the uniform must have been an unusual sight and carried a kind of worldly sophistication, as well as the visceral proof of the Queen's, and England's, power. As John M. Adrian argues, military pageantry was used in Bristol and London for both entertainment and to underscore the legitimacy of the new corporate government.⁸ The uniform has always carried the power of its regent into the community.

On the modern stage, uniforms can indicate camaraderie between men, a war-like or violent culture or a well-organized and corporate society. The quality of the garments in the context of the script determines how the uniforms are read. In this example, the costume design combined with the bucolic location creates a genteel and distanced understanding of the military. Dalton makes the uniforms using a simple shaped garment, in light colors and natural fibers. This human version of the military uniform tells more about the relationships between the men, by using the simple device of repetition of a

⁷ Goodman 1.

⁸ Adrian 82.

militaristic yet accessible garment, than it does a dangerous or violent world. This uniform is a visual path by which the modern audience can navigate the social structures of the past. Certainly, this translation is appropriate for *Much Ado About Nothing*, a play that relies on the humor and attitudes of the military man, but not on the culture or actuality of war.

The second type of translation costume designers achieve is found in representing attitudes, ideas or culture in a way that creates meaning for the modern audience. This is a kind of double vision: a simultaneous vantage on the past and the present. Once considered the realm of the dramaturgical, costume design has the power to make textual and contextual connections viscerally present for the audience. A good example of this is the 2004 Lincoln Center production of *Henry IV*. As Hal ascends the throne he is wrapped in a long, pale golden cloak. By donning the cloak, Hal obliterates from view the leather and canvas of his youthful carousing warrior self, and replaces both his youth and its clothing with the gold mantle of leadership. [Table 4]

The history of coronation robes is well-documented in portraiture and in text. Queen Elizabeth was one of the few English monarchs to wear gold; her male predecessors either wore white or dark hues. Queen Mary I, the only other woman to be recently crowned monarch also wore a white and gold gown. Mary and Elizabeth both wore fashionably cut gowns to their coronations. Henry VIII and the previous male monarchs also wore fashionable silhouettes. Both the crowned Kings and Queens wore an ermine cloak and the crown jewel. So, historically, the royal accessories, rather than garment or color, tended to be the defining factor in the appropriate coronation apparel. However, the image of Queen Elizabeth's coronation and the many subsequent portraits

in which she wears white and gold are firmly entrenched in the Western visual cannon. It is this image that has influenced centuries of semiotic understanding of royal leadership and wealth, and I suspect, the costume design of *Henry IV*. [Table VI] [Table VII]

A visual analysis rooted in semiotics of the Prince Hal image wrapped in gold connects his leadership to other righteous leaders in the western cannon. From the mosaics of Hagia Sophia which represent political leaders chosen by God, recognizable by their golden halos and backing to Queen Elizabeth herself, in her white and gold coronation garb. In using one simple garment, Goldstein combines the use and history of Hal's coronation robe, a historically accurate garment well known for its coronation role, with the color and luster of Queen Elizabeth's power portraits. In doing so, he links Henry visually to a web of legitimate Christian leaders, which in turn supports Hal's elevation from bar brawler to king. This brief analysis reveals our modern semiotic understanding of clothing, which is a deceptively simple synthesis of factual and accurate information gathered by costume and art history scholars and individual experience. This type of synthesis is the foundation of any visual translation that results in meaning by combining historical context and a modern understanding of aesthetic considerations.

Each of these examples are from productions that created "period looks", but did not attempt historicity, similar to my approach to *Merchant of Venice*. However, the same principles of translation apply to productions that are more accurately rooted in the clothing and practice of Shakespeare's time. The Old Globe 2002 production of *Twelfth Night* with Mark Rylance as Olivia is a beautiful example of what Rylance calls "original practice"⁹. Costume Designer Jenny Tiramani is well known for "a unique body of work

⁹ Rawson

in which the development of theatre costume is founded on historical research into the material culture of clothing”.¹⁰ The costumes used in *Twelfth Night* are part of this body of work, and represent a wealth of accurate Tudor tradition in both aesthetic and construction. Tiramani used historically accurate fabrics and construction techniques. She also used cork and other historically accurate materials in the makeup design. Together with an all male cast, the costume and makeup design produce a theatrical aesthetic that is very similar to what Shakespeare’s audiences may have witnessed.

[Table VIII]

While this attempt to recreate the clothing of the Elizabethans provides particular window into the physicality of Shakespeare’s actors, and the experience of his audience, a purely aesthetic look at the costume design of *Twelfth Night* shows a fairly compact monochromatic palette- white to grey to black with few splashes of color. We know that the Elizabethans were fond of color, and rich, sumptuous, colorful clothing was popular. Despite the research available on color, Tiramani chose a very limited palette. In addition to the limited palette, Tiramani also created a period makeup look for the women (very pale skin, slightly rosy cheeks) but again deviates from the research by including dark eyebrows and dark lips. I suggest this deviation from history within a design dedicated to historical accuracy as a type of translation- an adaption of the period look for modern audiences. It is possible that the makeup, in combination with any of the other unfamiliar Elizabethan tropes, such as cross-dressing or men in hose, could look clownish to the modern eye. However, in Tiramani’s limited palette our modern eye reads an elegance and rich simplicity, allowing the period clothes to support, and not impede,

¹⁰ University of the Arts London

Rylance's interpretation of *Twelfth Night*. It would be easy for the nuance of this complicated script to be lost in a garish costume design, which would reduce the humanity and pathos of this comedy to farce. Tiramani's design accommodates and molds the modern audience's experience without losing the heart, and the historical connection, of her design.

In these limited case studies, in which I was not a part of the production process, I can only extrapolate meaning from the apparent design choices, I have no authenticated insight into why certain choices were made. I do, however, have access to the imagery, and from this exterior position I can connect the design choices to Shakespeare's text, and from there make an assessment about the intersection of design and text. When considered in this superficial way, the types of translation I've described can only reveal the inherent attitudes within the play. For example, Henry's golden cloak as he ascends the throne is not the only link of his leadership to a history of righteous leaders, that righteousness is present within the text. From the moment Prince Henry declares he will soon leave his wild ways and be worthy of the crown, his ascent is sure. In this example, the visual code of the costume design and the text work together. When the costume design is intentionally rejecting the text, or is not in alignment with the director's or actor's choices, the act of translation- that is the design choice- cannot alone mitigate that disconnect. Had Ethan Hawke played Hal as a malcontent, as opposed to the passionate and youthful performance he gave, the power of his coronation robe as a marker of his coming of age and the righteousness of his ascent would be diminished. Similarly, Tiramani's design for *Twelfth Night* works in tandem with the rich and nuanced performances given by Rylance and his troupe.

CHAPTER III

ELIZABETHAN VS PERIOD

My research into the clothing of the Elizabethan era led me to Steven Orgel's writings. In *Spectacular Performances* Stephen Orgel implies a difference between "period" and "Elizabethan". He writes about the 1966 Zeffirelli movie *Romeo and Juliet*.

Zeffirelli's décor really does work beautifully; but as a version of Shakespeare there is nothing authentic about it: Romeo and Juliet wore the same clothing their audiences wore, their tragedy did not take place in the distant past...¹¹

Orgel simultaneously rejects a period accurate production design as accurately Shakespearian, and recalls the costume practices of the late 16th and early 17th centuries. Orgel goes on to remind us, "The actors and the characters were fictions, but the costumes were the real thing".¹²

Further research into the costuming practices of the Elizabethan Era clarifies Orgel's intriguing statement, and reveals a fascinating dynamic between clothing and audience. Most sumptuous garments used on stage were purchased second-hand from the patron ranks of aristocracy. Others were gifts given by the aristocracy to their subordinates, who then sold the garments to the theater. Jean MacIntyre suggests in *Costumes and Scripts in the Elizabethan Theatres* that these garments were sold because the recipient could not legally wear the gift, as they were too sumptuous for their rank. Other costumes appear to have been unclaimed pawns or received en masse from other, earlier theatrical events

¹¹ Orgel

¹² Orgel 55-58

such as *The Revels*.¹³ Unlike our modern Broadway stage, where often even contemporary clothing is often built to withstand the rigors of a multi-performance week, the principal Elizabethan actors wore real clothing, and possibly clothing that recognizably belonged to a known individual in the audience. Compounding the familiarity of the principal actors clothing, was the generally adopted policy of apprentice actors wearing their own personal clothing in smaller roles.¹⁴

In a world where the clothes make the man,¹⁵ and personal and political identity is articulated through the donning of specific garments, clothing from the community worn on stage as costume could have carried a very potent power. Not only would the contemporary garments used as costumes serve as visual markers clarifying relationships on the Elizabethan stage, just as costumes function today, but they may have also superimposed another story, the one of their previous owner, on to the world of the play. While this is juicy conjecture, it formed my interest in combining period and modern elements in the costume design for *The Merchant of Venice*.

Orgel connects the use of contemporary clothing as costume in Shakespeare's time, a choice indifferent to the year the play was set, to the potential danger of his politically charged plays. He writes, "In its own time Elizabethan theater was always relevant to current issues, ...and the costumes themselves on Shakespeare's stage had a kind of authority that was not without its element of danger."¹⁶ Orgel again refers to the practice of using contemporary clothing on stage. In this passage, Elizabethan clothing's political potency as a marker of status and identity is referenced. The clothing of the

¹³ MacIntyre 79-80

¹⁴ Ibid. 74

¹⁵ Bailey 270

¹⁶ Orgel 60

aristocracy would naturally carry connotations of leadership and authority. However, I suggest the clothing would carry another message, one of political agency. It is possible that the clothing on stage, which likely looked similar to the clothing in the audience, created a mirror effect and allowed the audience to see themselves easily in the action on stage. In one anecdote from 1601, *Richard II* was remounted¹⁷ by private donation at the Globe to support an attempted uprising by Essex. In that production, in which the patrons intended to make a direct connection between Queen Elizabeth and the dethroned Richard II, the then contemporary clothing on stage would have created visual synergy between the audience and the actors as they successfully overthrew the reigning theatrical monarch.

Clearly, Shakespeare's costumes reflected his present age, much more than any sense of history. *Richard II*, first titled a "historie" in the First Folio, was set in 1398-1400, the years of Richard's reign, a setting incongruous with the incongruous with accepted costume practice at the time. In fact, historicity was fully rejected, or perhaps not possible in an age where art was private and literacy rates were low. The Peacham drawing (1614) attributed to Henry Peacham and cited as the only surviving visual representation of Elizabethan costumes, illustrates *Titus Andronicus*. From left to right, the illustration shows two guards, in contemporary dress, Titus, in approximated Roman costume, Tamora, in a generalized medieval gown, and on the right, her two sons and Aaron the Moor, each in approximated Roman costume. The three time periods referenced in this rendering speak to the placement of the characters within the world of the play, rather than creating an accurate or objective sense of history. This drawing

¹⁷ Bate 256-286

represents the relationships between people, between the characters on stage and with the audience. The use of recognizable modern military costume pieces could generate contemporary connections regarding power and force for the Elizabethan audience.

[Table IX]

Another important element of Elizabethan costume practice relevant to my assessment of what “Elizabethan” might mean for a modern practitioner is the lack of a stage designer. Until Inigo Jones and Ben Johnson collaborated in 1605, most successful actors owned and managed a collection of costumes, from which they would clothe themselves and at times, their apprentices¹⁸. Looking back at the seemingly disjointed Peacham drawing, the privilege of character over a cohesive stage design is clear. Certainly, this is the product of a theatrical production system with no institutionalized artistic roles such as a modern theatrical designer or director.

This rejection of historicity, the privileging of character over aesthetic unity and the additional layer of meaning invoked by the contemporary garments created a theatrical costume practice quite different from what modern practitioners might construct as “period”. “Period” as discussed often implies a window to the aesthetic, if not the construction practice, of a particular year or era. As Shakespeare’s work was not produced with that visual unity while he lived, a modern practitioner’s impulse do to a Shakespearian play “period” would not access the original flavor or look of the original performances. I extrapolate that “period” would also not access the meaning and context of the script either. Not only would the aesthetic be without 16th century precedent, but the immediacy of human connection implied in Shakespearian costuming practice would

¹⁸ MacIntyre 50.

be lost.

To a modern audience, period clothing creates distance between the action of the play and the audience, not intimacy. Shakespeare's actors included the audience, who were full and active participants in the performance. The transfer of clothing is one marker of the permeability of what we now call the fourth wall, as were seating practices that allowed certain classes high visibility by sitting on stage. Primarily however, the play was meant to be heard; the language drove the performance. Not only does this contextualize the use of non-conforming or non-organized visuals, as "watching" was secondary to "hearing" but it restates the relationship between the audience and the actor, who would hear and respond to one another. The clothing was simply an extension of that connection between actor and audience.

It was with this in mind that I created an initial understanding of "Elizabethan" as one of historical playfulness, combining the silhouette of the late 16th century with contemporary textures, fabrics, accessories and styling. In using the period silhouette I found the historical context for the play. I was interested in the period silhouette as the connection to the time the play was written and used it to bridge the gap between the language and our modern sensibility. I chose 1570-1605 as the range in which the silhouettes could be pulled from. In using modern elements, I intended to create intimacy, or at least familiarity, between our characters and modern actors. The most assertive modern elements I used were contemporary fabrics, such as synthetic leather or ombre jacquards, and contemporary accessories, such as shoes and jewelry. By translating the period through a modern lens, I hoped that the relationships and hierarchies within the play would be clearly and accessibly defined for a modern

audience.

My understanding of how to do a play “Elizabethan” is ultimately not synonymous with “period” and relies on the ability of the audience to see itself reflected from the stage. It is not, as Mark Rylance has done beautifully, an attempt at recreating the “original practice” of the era, nor is it the full translation to modern dress, such as the successful movie *Romeo+Juliet* starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Claire Danes from 1996. While both are fascinating to watch, and the chosen aesthetics are excellent storytelling devices, I chose a combination of anachronism and period authenticity as the foundation for my costume design for *Merchant*.

The use of anachronism gives a historical play a kind of double vision. First, it provides a vantage on the past and its attitudes. Period clothing can create a bridge between our modern ear and archaic language, ancient setting or other non-familiar theatrical element. It also reminds us that the attitudes expressed within a period script are from another time. Simultaneously, it creates shorthand for the modern audience through the use of easily recognizable semiotics, a connecting device for our modern perspective and an obtuse play.

The use of modern elements on stage when juxtaposed with period elements has another function as well. It allows the audience to see themselves repositioned in history; it reminds us that there are many linking similarities across the years, that humanity remains somewhat the same whether the era is 1600 or 2000. This, to my mind, is the closest a costume design in a proscenium house can get to the intimacy of the original Elizabethan relationship between character/actor and audience.

CHAPTER IV

ELIZABETHAN CLOTHING FOR MEN AND WOMEN: 1570-1605

The male silhouette of the 35 year period I chose for *Merchant* relies on a v- shaped torso, full hips, achieved through full short breeches or hose, and revealed shapely legs. The length of the hose depends on the year, and the status of the wearer. In the mid 16th Century, shorter fuller hose was popular, but by the end of the century, only middle class students were still wearing the short pumpkin hose. Men of status by the end of the century had adopted a longer style leg, closely fitted and ending at the knee, called cannons. These were topped with a version of the short hose, resulting in a new fashion called hose and cannons. The shape of the lower leg was still visible, clad in the equivalent of modern tights. Accessories varied geographically and by status, but all men wore hats, the shape of which changed frequently with the fashion. Shoes also varied greatly by region. English men tended to wear short boots, with a soft or hard sole. Doublets, the standard male garment for most of the 15th and 16th century, were fitted through the torso to the waist, with an attached peplum called tabs extending from the waist to the high hip. Doublets, and their more casual sleeveless twin, the jerkin, were often padded according to prevailing fashion. The peascod belly, of the 1570s, is a well-known example of this trend. Sleeves appeared as one with the doublet, but were often separate and therefore interchangeable with many garments. Sleeves were tied on to the armcyce of the doublet. This generalized male attire became the template for the Venetian Christians in *Merchant*.¹⁹

Women of status in the same time frame in London also strove for a conical torso,

¹⁹ Payne Arnold Boucher

typically through the use of a laced “pair of bodies” or a boned and laced two-part bodice. While not yet a corset in the modern sense, women’s garb was still structured and fitted through the torso. Like men’s, women’s sleeves were separate and tied or sewn on during the dressing process. By the end of the century a large hip was fashionable, and the inverted cone of the torso ended in a large barrel or table shaped skirt. The skirt shape was supported by both a bum roll and rigid farthingale, a lightweight cage-like structure supported at the waist. Women also wore hats, or headpieces, depending on their status and activity. Shoes were soft slippers for indoors, and boots for traveling.²⁰

In a nod to Rylance and the Globe’s “original practice,” I also chose to base my design on English costume tradition, not Venetian. While some of the research I did into the fashions of coastal Italy did eventually make it into the design, I focused instead on what Shakespeare and his audience would have been familiar with. The most significant examples of this process are the rejection of large-belly lacy gowns and chopins, wooden platform shoes popular in 16th and 17th c Venice, in favor of the more severe, masculine women’s attire of England. My original design for Portia did include blond hair, which was very popular in Venice during the era. However, the final stage picture did not include a blond Portia, as our actress looked far better with her natural mahogany hair.

²⁰ Payne Arnold Boucher

CHAPTER V

MODERN STYLING: 2007-2014

Just as the Elizabethan silhouette defined the historical context of *Merchant*, modern fabrics and modern styling defined the psychological and emotional world of the play. During the past 50 years in high fashion, leather has had varying degrees of popularity as daywear. Leather as daywear has now become the standard look of the college age student, available in all major retailers in the form of teeshirts, shorts and mini-dresses. Despite its current ubiquity as appropriate middle-class fashion, leather has not fully lost its popular historical associations with the punk, the biker, the baddass, or the worker. Rather, I would argue, leather as daywear recoups that history on the backs of white upper middle class youth, providing them with an outlet for their post-adolescent self-exploration. As used in *Merchant*, leather or vinyl as daywear suggests a modern flirtation with danger, rebellion and youth culture, while still indicating a rich and elegant middle class. I believe I achieve this by first divorcing the leather from any utility, as it does not create armor or any protective element in the clothing., and secondly pairing it with rich fabrics.

In a significant shift from the period silhouette, men wore modern chelsea boots, an ankle boot with a semi-round toe, and a fairly substantial sole. In contrast, the period look is a soft ankle boot, with a minimal sole and a low pointy profile. With its larger profile, the chelsea boot grounds the male silhouette on stage by adding visual weight to the lower half of the body. This reads as a strong, modern look.

I also painted the chelsea boots with a variety of gold accents. Bassanio, Antonio and their entourages wore black boots with gold caps and heels, a gold ombre treatment

most saturated at the toe, or with a painted gold spat. These motifs recall the recent shoes of Marc Jacobs, an upscale but accessible designer, who made similar shoes using actual metal and leather. Not only does the modern shoe ground the actors on stage, but it also connects the period shapes to recognizable modern cues, such as fashion and brand, which indicate status and wealth. Status and wealth were two aspects of the Christian Venetians that the production team intended to highlight as we fashioned a consumer youth culture in the *Venice of Merchant*.

These two decisions, to restrict the period aspect of the design to Shakespearian England, and to include modern elements, are the pillars of this construction of “Elizabethan”, and constitute the framework within which I attempted to address the problematic aspects of the play. By placing my design in England, not Venice, I acknowledged the lack of veracity in Shakespeare’s text. *Merchant* is not a story about a real Jewish man and his daughter in 16th century Venice. The characters and their location are a fantasy, a conjecture based not on factual evidence of Jewish culture but rather on speculative reporting and fiction. Therefore, any indication of historical, religious or ethnic accuracy in the design applies a false truth to the play, supporting the spurious claims against Judaism.²¹ I chose to avoid authenticity in all areas, excepting the period silhouette, to avoid any link with a group other than the Elizabethans.

The lack of reliable primary sources from the era concerned with the dress and habits of the very small Jewish community in England also influenced this decision, as this gap creates a challenge for any designer attempting to make Shylock authentically Jewish in the late 16th century. Even the Jewish Clothing Museum begins their

²¹ Erdman 20

collection in the early 11th century, but skips entirely over the Renaissance, resuming the documentation of authentic garb and practice in the 18th century,²²

I hoped to avoid mocking actual cultures or people by refusing any visual connection to authentic minority groups . I also consciously attempted to avoid making any stereotypical costuming choices. I approached Shylock, Jessica and Tubal slightly differently than I did Portia’s suitors.. My intent was to create images that were in such contrast to the common visual stereotypes of Shylock, Jessica and Tubal that the problematic ideology regarding these minority groups would be undermined by the lack of its accompanying visual. For example, the stereotypical and excessive consumption associated with the Jewish character, often cited as greed or lechery, was not represented in the costumes through use of jewels and opulent fabric. Similarly, by not locating the Jewish characters visually as Jewish, through the use of any modern signifier such as the requested yarmulke, I avoided connecting them with actual Jewish heritage. I created them as simply “other”: an unspecified and undeserving oppressed group. By this approach, I attempted to more strongly connect the characters with the parts of the script with reveal their pathos and humanity, while downplaying any visible “reason” for their oppression.

The obviously broad and laughable characters of Prince of Morocco and Aragon do not have the depth of character or breadth of role as do the Jewish characters. Keeping this in mind, I did not locate the Prince suitors as specifically Spanish or Moroccan, and did not attempt to reinforce their humanity through my costume design. I saw them as caricatures, and costumed them broadly.

²² Juhasz 10

In post-show conversations with faculty, my costume design's intentional lack of authenticity and specificity did bring up the specter of Orientalism. Edward Said, in his seminal text, *Orientalism*, writes:

Orientalism was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, West, "us") and the strange (the Orient, the East, "them").²³

In the visual arts, and this can include theater design, Orientalism as a structure of thought which is found in representations of non-westerners, depicted by westerners. The defining attributes of Orientalism in art are evidence of character stereotyping (sexually available Arab women, fierce and irrational Arab men) but also a lack of ethnographic or cultural specificity. The problem with Orientalism is that it lumps non-western peoples into one exotic "other", equally diminished, and equally inferior, to the Western construction of self.

Despite my clearly stated intentions otherwise, I heard from faculty audience members that the suitors' costumes, and their lack of connection to an authentic and recognizable culture, still read as problematic. It is possible that the text, and the inherent ethnographic specificity of the character names and origins, superseded the visual code I constructed. That is, the text created stereotypes that resonated at a more accessible frequency than the mitigating costume choices. As most practitioners know, and as I explore in this paper, the costume design requires parallel movement from the rest of the creative team to be read successfully. It is also possible that to the untrained eye, what was a rejection of authenticity for me read as a generalized, and therefore Orientalist,

²³ Said 200

view of the “other” in *The Merchant of Venice*.

This leads me to believe that while the design choices I made may have been more successful in a more cohesive project, it is possible in this production of *Merchant* that any apparent evidence of Orientalism in the costume design is a failure not because the suitors were offensively stereotyped through their clothing but because the Elizabethan aesthetic as used on the Venetian Christians was not strong enough. Certainly, the offending ideology is part of the Elizabethan era, and the costume design does fully reveal this. The best solution within the constellation of our UMASS production may have been to color the Christian Venetians with more sordidness- as a reflection of their problematic attitudes towards “others”. *Merchant* is a very accurate representation of the attitudes concerns and interests of Elizabethan culture. I therefore remain convinced it can be accurately clothed in the English tradition without fear of mistranslation.

My rejection of authenticity was not my first or only approach to the problems in the script. I initially suggested we heighten the sense of stereotype through exaggerated familiar stereotypical costume. I alternatively suggested we pierce the fourth wall with a costume design that called even greater attention to the stereotypes in the play; Shylock could wear modern clothes and a placard reading: stereotype or Shylock. I felt the juxtaposition of the real man playing the false Jewish character would connect the modern audience to the history of problematic representation, and create some of the immediacy the Elizabethans enjoyed. However, this production of *The Merchant of Venice* never intended to use the stage as a soapbox; from the beginning our team was making a play that dealt with the characters from a humanist and personal perspective. IN fact, our director was very clear that he did not want to make any “political statement”

with the play. In this context, the team agreed any approach to the costumes which called attention to the historical context of Shylock as a caricature, was inappropriate.

CHAPTER VI

MERCHANT OF VENICE: A PROBLEMATIC SCRIPT

Western theater practitioners and audiences have been grappling with *The Merchant of Venice* for hundreds of years. Perhaps some of its staying power lies in how we historically have opportunistically treated Shakespeare as a vehicle for our own contemporary issues. *Macbeth* has been used a vehicle to comment on domestic violence, just as *Julius Cesear* has been used to comment on current political systems. Orgel's assertion that Shakespeare was once assumed to be political and timely supports the 20th century trend to recast the bard's plays in our own image.²⁴ But, as *The Merchant of Venice* itself is possibly one of the most commonly produced Shakespeare plays of the last two hundred years, there must be more to the script's popularity than its inclusion in the canon of popular theatrical literature.

Perhaps the plays popularity is connected to those very modes of representation that form the problematic issues plaguing the modern practitioner. Each era has its own issues of "us and them" to grapple with. Art is where Western thinking often grapples with big questions, and a production of *Merchant* offers ample opportunity to examine the eternally relevant question of identity and self in the face of oppression and mistreatment. This play, by modern standards, has the potential to raise questions about ethnic bigotry, seen in the suitors scenes; privileged heteronormativity, seen in the final wedding scene; homophobia, in the treatment of Antonio and Bassiano's marriage to Portia; religious bigotry, seen in the Venetians attitudes towards Judaism; and most certainly anti-Semitism, the attitude which motivates the entire Antonio and Shylock subplot.

²⁴ Orgel 80

From a design standpoint, this play is, at its core, about otherness. Each group, whether it is the Jewish characters, the Christian mercantile Venetians, the women of Belmont or the parade of suitors from various geographies, exists in juxtaposition to one another. A production of *The Merchant of Venice*, as we found at UMASS, relies on the successful comparison of each group to one another to make sense of the morality of the play as written.

For example, of these groups, the Christians are written as the righteous group. By setting them as the standard, Shakespeare creates a rubric within which all other groups are measured. In contrast to the Venetian and Belmont Christians, the suitors are geographic and cultural interlopers, and their suit for Portia's hand a laughable buffoonery. While the buffoonery is necessary to establish the righteousness of Bassanio's suit, the suitors reveal their flawed character as they fail in judgment, unable to correctly navigate the riddle of Portia's portrait in the caskets.

In another iteration of the juxtaposition that reinforces the power of the Christians, Shylock's otherness allows for a gentle critique of their power. He says, in response to Bassanio's assertion that he would rather sacrifice his wife than lose his dearest friend Antonio:

These be the Christian husbands. I have a daughter;

Would any of the stock of Barrabas

Had been her husband rather than a Christian!

Shylocks indicts Christian hypocrisy by first implying a difference of values between himself and Basannio, without this he would not criticize Bassanio. Secondly, he invokes the descendants of Barrabas to underscore his point. In the biblical tradition, Barrabas

was the notorious prisoner released at Passover instead of Jesus by Pontius Pilate. In this text Shylock states that even the worst Jew would be a better husband than a Christian, implying a significant difference between men of the two religious groups. In this example, the characters are more nuanced, but the power and righteousness of the Christian group is established by their ultimate difference from the “other”, the Jewish Shylock.

For storytelling purposes, these dichotomies are easily articulated visually on stage. As many costume designs distinguish between the Montagues and Capulets through color or texture, and many costume designs for *Merchant* make a clear visual distinction between Shylock, and the Christian Venetians. In the 2010 Shakespeare in the Park stage production, starring Al Pacino and designed by Jess Goldstien, Shylock and Jessica are distinguished from the Christians by head covering. Shylock wears a yarmulke, and Jessica a kerchief, while the Christian men wear western bowlers or boaters, and the Christian women are bareheaded. This is a nuanced difference, one that allows Shylock’s “othering” to vary in prominence depending the scene.

In this same production, the Prince of Morocco is even more so defined as “other.” His clothing recalls the 1600 painting of Abd el-Ouahed ben Messaoud ben Mohammed Anoun (b.1558), Moorish Ambassador to Queen Elizabeth I, now housed at the University of Birmingham Shakespeare Institute. Both the actual ambassador and the fictional Prince of Morocco wear a white turban and robes with a scimitar. The flowing robes and light color clearly set Morocco apart from the other characters, all who wear dark and saturated western day wear circa 1890. This difference is not fluid, as Shylock’s is. Unlike Shylock’s text, which allows him to move in and among the

Christian society with varying degrees of success and safety, Morocco is always set apart, both by his text, his implied skin color, and in this design, his costume.

[Table X] [Table XI]

Costume designs for plays dealing with “the other” such as this function best by articulating where the dominant culture is visible and how their power is expressed. In the UMASS production of *Merchant*, as I imagine in most productions, the Christian Venetians and Belmontians are the power in the play. White heteronormativity is the next layer of power, articulated through the debasement or ridicule of characters designated as Jewish, or from Morocco or Aragon. Additionally, through Antonio’s loss of Bassanio to Portia, the homosexual relationship is devalued. In a superficial reading of the text, the “us” in *Merchant* is intended to be a member of the white/Western hetero community, and therefore “in” on the jokes at the expense of the ethnic or sexual minorities.

However, I believe it is an outdated expectation that our audiences are all white, western and straight. In Western Mass, where UMASS is located, an anecdotal look at the local theater audience reveals peoples of many ethnicities, multiple religions and a variety of economic philosophies, sexual orientation and gender non/conformities. Not only do we as practitioners have the responsibility to consider our audiences when creating a play, I believe we also have the responsibility to respond to the cultural scholarship and larger artistic conversation that rejects white ethnocentrism and exclusivity.

With this belief, I designed *Merchant* as a self-contained world, in which the visual relationships were dependent on a thorough reading of the whole. Unfortunately, while I was creating a clear sense of order among those relationships, and locating the power

within the play with Portia and the Christian Venetians, I was also supporting the problematic attitudes expressed by those relationships. In producing a play such as *Merchant* in the Pioneer Valley, a successful design would need to acknowledge the difficulties in establishing an “us” and “them,” as I did in satisfaction of the script. But beyond that acknowledgment, critical engagement with who the “us” is, is crucial. Placement of the “us” as the white heteronormative Christians is logical and easy, but not the only path to a productive examination of the script. That the UMASS production of *Merchant* missed the opportunity to explore who we identified with, and who we excluded, both in our production but also in our own modern community is one of my lasting disappointments with our process.

Ethnicity and The Other

Each “othered” group, whether it is ethnically, religiously or sexually defined, is solidified as “other” by being the butt of a joke. The audience is treated to Portia’s wit as she and her maids humorously reject each suitor’s suit in II.I for reasons both character and ethnically driven. However, her ethnocentrism and racism is most clearly revealed in her relief at Morocco’s failure to choose the correct casket. “Let all of his hue chose me so” she says as he leaves, rejecting all suitors of color simultaneously. Her bigotry is matched and exceeded by Antonio's treatment of Shylock. Interestingly, the individual attitudes of these two main characters do not translate to acts of individual oppression against the “others.” Both expect business to go on as usual, Portia does not bar Morocco from her home, and Antonio expects Shylock to loan him the money. It is the natural

order of things, implied in this world that rightfully punishes the “others” while privileging the European Christians.

Portia is also critical of Aragon, another suitor who has traveled far to attempt his suit of her. Her rejection of his suit is evident in her relief at his failure to choose the right casket. Each suitor is set up as an outsider, or interloper, foolishly attempting the hand of the white woman. Not only do the characters laugh at these characters, but they are written so that the audience will as well. In Act 1.2, Portia responds with wit and ridicule to all previous suitors, as she and Nerissa laugh at their attempts to gain her hand in marriage. Later, in 2.9, as Prince of Aragon debates the virtues of each casket, he says,

“I will not choose what many men desire,
Because I will not jump with common spirits
And rank me with the barbarous multitudes”

In the UMASS production, these lines were delivered directly to the audience, implying they were the barbarous multitudes. This moment was perhaps the most comically successful of the entire show. However, it did, once again, locate the audience as the “us”, and as different from the failing Prince of Aragon. By reinforcing the absurdity of the suitor’s suit, and by making the audience complicit in their rejection, humor is powerful tool by which Shakespeare lays the foundations of the play’s bigotry.

Religious Bigotry: Christian Anti-Semitism

Throughout the play, the Christian community engages in anti-Semitic behavior, both directly against other characters, and indirectly, as recounted by one character to another. Antonio verbally attacks Shylock during I.III, as Bassiano asks for the loan.

Antonio not only calls him a “dog” but also affirms his past treatment of Shylock. He is proud of having spit on Shylock in the street, and promises more assault in the future.

Salarino and Solanio both clown at Shylock’s expense, recounting the loss of his daughter and her theft with a great deal of derision. In III.III, they connect Shylock’s poor performance as a loving father adequately bereft of his daughter with his Jewishness, and connect his grief instead to the loss of his ducats. In this moment the audience witnesses the intentional second-hand conflation of greediness and Jewishness, a combination that is used to justify Shylock’s demise. The trait and the character are inextricable linked by the Christians within the play, and it is this linking that contributes to the history of the Jewish stereotype.

Anti-semitic attitudes are present in the language and action of other members of the Christian community as well. Lancelot’s first speech in which he debates the virtues and sins of leaving his master is full of negative assumptions about Jews, even equating “the jew, my master” with “a kind of devil”. Despite the potential humor of this abusive speech, Lancelot’s text connects the audience directly to the Elizabethan’s negative attitudes regarding Jews.

Homosexuality and Heteronormativity

In addition to the use of an ethnic other as the butt of joke or for moral instruction, both of which result in anti-Semitism and ethnocentrism, Shakespeare also creates an additional other in the sad and potentially homoerotic Antonio. In the same way Shylock is used to reveal the hypocrisy and therefore strengthen the Christian ethnocentrism of the play, Antonio is used to solidify the righteousness of the heteronormative relationship

and the institution of marriage. This is accomplished primarily through Bassanio's celebrated marriage to Portia, and by the comedy that is produced by the male bonding during the court scene. The loving yet obtuse relationship between the main character, Antonio, and his close friend Bassanio is cause for mirth, and not to be taken seriously. Salerino and Solanio, the play's gossips and exposition, verbally assault Antonio's feelings for Bassanio and clue the audience to its absurdity.

In Shakespeare's time romantic love and marriage were two separate and distinct experiences.²⁵ Romantic love, an emotional or physical consumption of a deep connection or attraction between two people, was a separate experience from marriage, which was a legal and social contract between two families, designed to maintain the stability of the dominant economic and cultural institutions. Consummated relationships between men were not legal, but were not uncommon.²⁶ A contemporary perspective on the marriage practices of the Elizabethans suggests some men married women to participate in the legal financial and social hierarchies available to them through those institutions.

In *Monstrous Manner*, Bailey writes that the anxiety surrounding the apparent instability of these hierarchies and institutions was the source of the legislation of appropriate clothing and behavior on stage. In addition to governing clothing organized by class, the sumptuary laws also dictated appropriate garb by gender. Women were not allowed to wear breeches in public, for example, a practice that drew both condemnations from the pulpit and guarded admiration from the theater world for those who dared, such

²⁵ Farberas

²⁶ FIT 14

as in “The Roaring Girl”.²⁷ Women were also barred from performing on stage, which created a culture of accepted theatrical cross-dressing among male performers. Both laws point to the existence of a thriving culture of individual expression and autonomy outside the dutiful institution of marriage. In fact, the anxiety surrounding the potential instability of heteronormativity and its connection to a stable economic system reached such crisis that in the Sumptuary Laws of 1594 Queen Elizabeth criticizes the over budgeting for finery and sumptuous garb by young nobles as a national security issue, saying that by purchasing so many goods from outside England, the youth disrupted the international trade balance and put England at financial risk of ruin.²⁸ A similar argument was used when cross-dressing was eventually banned from the stage and women allowed to perform publicly. The cross-dressing actor, like the actor who dressed as his “betters” was believed to be a threat to the public’s morality. It was believed that through repetitive witnessing, the feminization of the cross-dressing male actor would lead to the feminizing of the men in the audience, again creating a national security issue.²⁹

Despite the then-current nationalistic anxiety expressed over an unstable heteronormativity, our modern audiences will most likely understand the thwarted love affair between Antonio and Bassanio from a modern perspective, and superimpose our contemporary ideas about soul-mates, love marriage and individual romantic autonomy on to the Shakespearian character. In fact, without the context of the past, much of the nuance of the love affairs and marriages within the play are lost on a modern audience. Instead of celebrating with the couples as they marry, as the text clearly intends for us to

²⁷ Middleton and Dekker

²⁸ Council of the Privy 1

²⁹ Howard 318

do, many modern audiences may feel badly for Antonio's loss of Bassiano. This is especially true when the play is performed as written, with little or no commentary or translation by the creative team.

In another example, if we understand Shylock's original forced conversion as an act of mercy, and therefore a marker of white Christian benevolence and power, the three marriages in V.I is an expression of white Christian heteronormative power. Antonio has one line in the scene, when he laments, "I think all this unhappiness is because of me." Again, this is a potential laugh line, reassuring the audience that like Shylock, he rightfully does not get what he wants. The ideologically correct structure of the play ensures that the non-normative character is mocked for reaching beyond his status.

CHAPTER VII

MERCHANT DESIGN: OVERVIEW

My initial response to *Merchant* was an awareness of how dangerous a place was Elizabethan Venice. Economic profit was repeatedly prioritized over human life. Shylock, in IV.I, conflates his request for a pound of flesh with the Christian practice of owning slaves. This moment could be an indictment of Christian hypocrisy, when considered among the larger argument for mercy present in the scene. Slavery was established in England around 1573 by Sir John Hawkins,³⁰ about 30 years before *Merchant* was published. England had begun to participate in the transatlantic slave trade, abducting people from West Africa who were then sold into labor in London and other large cities. Shakespeare and his London audience would have been aware of the practice, and possibly aware of the beginnings of the associated abolitionist movement.

The mention of this abhorrent practice tells us just as much about Shakespeare's imaginary Venice as it does Elizabethan England. Flesh is marketable and profitable. This implication is bolstered by the then reputation of Venice as a pleasure capital³¹, where courtesans were readily available. European youths of stature were reportedly brought to Venice by their well-meaning fathers to begin their sexual education among the women for sale in Venice. Further exploration of this Elizabethan understanding of Venice revealed that actual Venetian Jewish women were required by law to wear a number of sartorial identifiers. Earrings were the most common item legislated, and one of many that both Jewish women and courtesans were required to wear.³² This visual link

³⁰ Hawkins 1

³¹ Rosenthal 1

³² Juhasz 13

between Jewish women and courtesans may have created the sense that Jewish women and courtesans were equally sexual available, an unfortunate example of how semiotics can function. This may have been an ancestral feed to the sexually desirable trope of the Jewish woman Erdman discusses³³. This context informs our understanding of the play, and creates a Venice, where, for all its wealth and secular Christian posturing the traditional Christian virtues of chastity, mercy or compassion for the downtrodden are not prioritized.

In order to visually score my sense of Venice as a place of sex and danger, I used hard shiny synthetic fabrics with animal textures like snake or alligator and dark metallic in bronze and gold. The colors of Venice were rich dark hues, saturated teal for Antonio, bronze and pumpkin for Bassanio and a deep plum for Gratiano. While no man carried a traditional weapon, the sumptuous clothing which encased the men like armor suggested a kind of impenetrable public facade which used a show of wealth as a system of value. It is a world where fashion and money dictate your status, and everyone has an entourage. We created a sense of youth culture through implied high fashion, a styled nonchalance. Venice men wore makeup, jewelry, and the gold-accented boots.

I also found Venice to be a secular place, in part because of the lack of authentic spirituality or religious expression, but also because of the secular law that maintains an equal protection for all who trade in Venice. This is the function by which Shylock can appear in court with confidence. It indicates that successful economic activity is valued over personal beliefs. This attitude is additionally present in the text when it reveals that the Jew and the Christian live close by one another; share the street regularly in passing

³³ Erdman 40-42

and whose business activity is well known to one another; The Jew and the Christian also share a servant, again strengthening the social or class hierarchy that privileges economic success over religious affiliation. While research indicates that 16th century European Jewish populations were definitely persecuted, and at times forced to live in a separate community from Christians, there is little evidence of a practicing self-contained Jewish community in London at the time *The Merchant of Venice* was written. Even in Venice, it does not appear that Jews were ghettoized until a decade or two after the premier of Merchant.³⁴

To communicate the proximity of Jews and Christians to the audience, I strove for a Jewish look and a Christian look that would intersect at the junction of wealth and status. While there are a few key differences between the clothing of Shylock and Tubal and the Christian Venetians, namely the longer length and monochromatic palette of their cassocks, and their four corner Venetian hats, these differences were not enough set Shylock and Tubal outside the world of Venice. The two groups shared a use of lightweight silk and gold decoration in similar proportion as well as similarity proportioned shoulder extensions. These shoulder extension created a similarly articulated silhouette from the waist up for the two groups. In combination, these elements mark Shylock and Antonio as equally successful, and perhaps equally wealthy. The visual connection between Shylock and Antonio underscores the similarity between the two characters, both outsiders in some way, and both with something to lose, yet positioned peripherally within each other's financially and socially spheres.

In response to the period research I had done, and to the agency they share, the

³⁴ Raccah-Djvire 260.

women of this play were my initial inspiration. Despite the primacy of the Venetian men in the script, the character of Jessica became the lynchpin of my Venetian design, and the focus of my understanding of Shakespeare's Venice. She is the only Venetian woman we meet, and the only Jewish woman. In the early research stage of our design process, I proposed to the team a Jessica who had already rejected her father's religion, a Jessica who was secular from the beginning. Her costume emerged quickly: she wore a large farthingale supported skirt and a conical bodice with sleeves: the silhouette of familial duty and social appropriateness. But, I proposed, she is also part of the youth culture of Venice, concerned with fashion and with enough agency to meet with Lorenzo, fall in love, devise a plan and escape her father's religion and house. I designed a costume for her that would locate her among the Christian Venetians, articulating her desire for proximity to them, and one that would underscore the secular nature of Venice. I suggested the relationship between Jessica and Shylock to be a contemporary relationship between father and daughter, fraught with the same rebellions and generational conflicts our UMASS students might experience. I dressed her similarly to the other youthful carousing characters, such as Bassanio, in rich reflective but flat surfaces, and exposed her neck and upper breast to highlight both her modern agency and confident self-sufficiency.

At one early design meeting, I also proposed a look for courtesans that would have contextualized Jessica's sartorial choices as comparatively tame. While courtesans were not explicitly written in the text, the director and I had discussed the possibility of adding a number of women to the street scenes. I was in favor of this, as I felt it would further flesh out the world of Venice as a dangerous place of salable sex and imminent

violence. I suggested a partially veiled woman, with exposed skin, tattooed in gold, and wearing little more than the large farthingale-supported skirt. As prostitution and salable sexual companionship is, in my opinion, a supporting pillar of patriarchy, I linked the courtesan to the respectable woman via silhouette, but indicated her sexual availability through her disproportionately exposed skin and substantial decoration. The courtesans were eventually cut, but I kept Jessica's costume unaltered as it related strongly to the other Venetians.

Portia, Nerissa and the entourage, comprise the majority of Belmont, Venice's more feminine counterpart. The production team agreed Belmont should contrast with Venice; and as our director explained it: Venice is to New York City as Belmont is to Montauk. Following this analogy, I created Belmont as a softer more pastoral place than Venice, a place of music and gracious entertaining, safe from the violence of the city. To illustrate the luxurious yet more casual feeling of Belmont, I chose soft, somewhat transparent and lightweight fabrics, like breezy silk and cotton blends, organza and lightweight taffeta. To describe the luxury and autonomy of wealth of Portia's estate I used the language of old money, gold and pearls, to describe it. The palette of Belmont, gold, yellow, royal blue, eggshell blue is preppy and royal, dynamic yet refined.

After establishing the period silhouette and palette for Belmont and Venice, I approached the costume plot from a hierarchal viewpoint, in that I designed from the top down. This approach did not immediately address the problematic issues of the script but it did set up the visual system by which the "us" and the "them" was to be determined. It also is the structure by which I indicated status within the separate groups. In order to establish the look of the Venetians, I designed Antonio first. Of the Christians, Antonio

is perhaps the most powerful, and the wealthiest, and certainly the closest to being a protagonist. Through his costume I indicated the importance of wealth and exteriority in the public lives of the Venetians. However, while he is wealthy and successful, he is not showy or flashy. Like the monochromatic design Tiramani created for Rylance's *Twelfth Night*, and similar to my costume for Shylock, Antonio's costume is also of a single hue, varying only in subtle pattern and value. This costume described his sadness; I felt he needed to look subdued but elegant, allowing the younger, less morose men in the text to carry the plume of flamboyancy.

This choice to create a somber Antonio was also informed by my desire to subvert potential homophobic stereotypes. Certainly, he describes his mood as sad in the opening lines of the play. But, because Antonio clearly loves Bassanio and loses him amid mockery, a more elaborate or flamboyant costume might be read as supporting the comedy at his expense, indicating that it is justified because a homoerotic relationship between men is uncomfortably laughable. I designed for Antonio the most elegant costume of the Christian Venetians to indicate he is to be taken seriously and that his love is valid; I avoided any stereotypical flamboyant "gay" visual stereotyping of Antonio. As in the other examples of monochromatic costume, this approach allows for a greater connection between a modern audience and the period costume through the familiarity of a uniform male look, similar to the modern suit.

I also attempted to create modern synergy between Portia and the text. While the script does not explicitly call for a costume change between her public and private scenes, I created for Portia an informal look to be worn at home with her entourage. This consisted of her bodice, worn throughout, a soft-layered petticoat-like skirt and

serviceable boots. Portia, a character of great autonomy, intelligence and agency, can, with one notable exception, make her own decisions and dictate what happens to her. The actors' movement in this skirt is natural, unimpeded and bold, allowing Portia's physicality to match her personal agency.

In contrast, when she meets with the suitors, and after she is married, the soft skirt is replaced by an enormous skirt supported by a farthingale, heavily ornamented and structured. In these scenes, she is on display as a prize to be won. The embellished structured skirt connects her to the world of duty and obedience, whether to a father or husband, and the seeming restriction of her actual movement reflects that position of lessened agency.

These two skirts in juxtaposition with one another also tell the story of many wealthy women of the time. During the Elizabeth era, many upper and middle class women of means enjoyed a great deal of social freedom and relatively unrestricted mobility specifically in urban centers, yet were still fettered as legal nonentities, dependent on husbands and fathers for social and financial legitimacy. Through the costume design I wanted to convey the incredible agency Portia has as a women in this environment, and also underscore the magnitude of what she relinquishes for marriage. Additionally, greater mobility and modern movement, only possible in the softer skirt, not only translates Portia's agency but also generates empathy in a modern audience by allowing them to see themselves mirrored in her physicality.

With each design choice, my translation of *The Merchant of Venice* at UMASS did remain focused on our director's original priority, which was to determine the meaning and scope of the play on the bodies of our actors. As a creative team we agreed to this

fluid approach and I wanted to be a collaborative and responsive member of the team. To allow for maximum flexibility during the rehearsal process, I constructed a costume design that would allow for the inclusion of pulled costumes easily. While I did use modern fashion conscious fabrics in the build, my palette and silhouette were fairly conservative, and therefore it was relatively easy pull or rent costumes of similar feel. This flexibility allowed me to accommodate casting and character changes without diluting the integrity of the design.

I also allowed the character of Lancelot Gobbo to develop in rehearsal before implementing his original design. As a clown, positioned somewhere between Hamlet and Feste, and a servant of first Shylock and then Bassiano, Lancelot Gobbo has the intellect to speak truth while he amuses. Shakespeare's clowns often illuminate the heart of a play, either through wit or bumbling, and Lancelot is no different. I was interested in waiting to develop his costume primarily because in a fluid process, what this character would represent, and comment on, was also developing. I also was interested in waiting, because the actor playing Lancelot Gobbo was a physically inventive clown, and I wanted to give him a costume he could clown with. In the final design, Lancelot Gobbo wore a soft doublet with voluminous slit sleeves, and a double cape. His garments could be used in multiple ways, the sleeves could be worn as hanging sleeves, mimicking Shylock's sleeve silhouette, or used as bottomless pockets. The cape, a motley rust wool jersey, became a skirt as Lancelot gently mocked Jessica.

I was able to make these late accommodations because as soon as the team and the director had approved the core of my design (Shylock, Antonio, Portia, Bassiano and Gratiano) the Costume Shop was ready to begin production. We employed a kind of

staggered production schedule, beginning with the known build. However, as the rehearsal process progressed I became more aware of a divergence from the discussed design and the evolving show. Because I felt the play was moving into problematic territory, and because the evolution happened so late in the process, I was not willing or able to accommodate all of the director's and actor's findings.

The most distressing, and most revealing, requests were for items that would identify a character's religious or ethnic affiliation in a problematic way, such as a yarmulke for Shylock's or an oversized turban for the Prince of Morocco. While these requests were simply outside the approved design, I also felt they would, if incorporated, compromise the show's ethical integrity. I rejected the yarmulke as too modern, and too Jewish. I wanted to avoid inserting an authentic modern Jewish experience into our production, as we had not collectively considered what it would mean to subject an identifiable modern Jew to the abuse dictated by the script. I rejected the oversized turban as too ethnically specific, arguing that by placing Morocco outside of the recognizably North African and Islamic tradition, we would avoid subjecting an actual African or Muslim to the ridicule Morocco endures. While I stood by my decision to reject the yarmulke and turban, I wondered if it was a, albeit late, window into a more heavily stereotyped aesthetic. As previously mentioned, I could conceive of a production of Merchant which fully embraced the stereotypes. However, when I was asked in a rehearsal report to darken the Prince of Morocco's skin, I began to suspect that my use and understanding of stereotype was different from our directors. Without an accompanying critical and extensive conversation, this request seemed to be an attempt to patch a rehearsal room problem, and not an attempt at answering that originally important

question, “Why this play now?” I diplomatically rejected a makeup change for Morocco, on the grounds that in this context it constituted blackface. I believe if we had implemented blackface in this situation, we would have reinforced the minstrel tradition and its history of racism, not subvert it.

In these situations, the costume design was able to sidestep certain specific and problematic issues of representation. However, it was not able to avoid all issues of representation, or mitigate the problematic text, in instances where the performance and costume were not in agreement. My rejection of visual Jewish stereotypes was not matched in the portrayal of Shylock, who was performed with a Brooklyn Jewish accent. Feedback from UMASS faculty regarding the “daughter and ducats” scene suggested that despite the costume, Shylock still was “read” as the greedy stereotype because of the performance. The performance of the Prince of Morocco was almost universally condemned among faculty for reinforcing Orientalist tropes. The Prince of Morocco punctuated his lines with swipes of his sword, jumping from level to level, creating a level of chaotic energy unmatched by any other character or scene. There is a distinct connection in his performance to the stereotypical depictions of Muslims as irrational and violent men. Regrettably, our Prince of Morocco also spoke a gibberish salutation, and bowed with the same arm configuration as Jeanie in the 1960’s television show *I Dream of Jeanie*. In this situation, my decision to eliminate ethnic specificity in the costume design for Morocco contributed to the perceived Orientalism of his portrayal. Had the creative team addressed our expectations for these problematic characters, and been intentional from the beginning about their role in the production, I believe we could have avoided many of the issues of representation with which the faculty and student body

took issue. It was this experience in particular that revealed the absolute necessity for critical collaboration when producing problematic scripts.

Is this a limitation of the act of translation, and is it the same for all period plays, or just the problematic ones? In a play like *The Liar*, a farce by Pierre Corneille written in 1644, a generalist period costume design supports the action of the play by contextualizing the attitudes and indicating status or relationships. An anecdotal survey of commonly produced period plays suggests that the act of translation is the same for all scripts, that the costume design is a kind of code which reveals important information to the audience. However, when considering problem plays, such as *Merchant*, or *Taming of the Shrew*, what these acts of translation ultimately reveal are the issues that are problematic to a modern audience. A costume design that only satisfies the basic needs of articulating the relationships, status, etc. within the play but has no point of view will always support, rather than subvert, any problematic issues in a script.

While working on the UMASS production of *The Merchant of Venice* I found the relationship between text and design choices articulated in a very clear manner. Not only did satisfying the basic needs of the script reveal the problematic issues therein, but any choice I did make to alleviate the bigotry of the script was only successful so far as the direction and actor choices would allow. To be clear, the structural bigotry within the script read as bigotry, regardless of any costume choice intended to mitigate it, when the actor or director choice supported rather than subverted the structural bigotry. Therefore, when designing a period show, the translation of period attitudes and structures for a modern audience can only be as successful as the collaboration between the actor, director, and designer.

APPENDIX

IMAGES



Image 1: Michael Hayden and Kevin Kline in Henry IV
(Photo © Paul Kolnik)



Image 2: Richard Easton in Henry IV
(Photo © Paul Kolnik)



Image 3: Robert Dudley, 1st Earl of Leicester
Unknown Anglo-Netherlandish artist circa 1575



Image 4: Still from the Movie “Much Ado About Nothing”
Directed by Kenneth Branough, 2002



Image 5: Ethan Hawke in Henry IV



Image 6: The Ditchley Portrait; Queen Elizabeth
Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger, c.1592



Image 7: Queen Mary at Coronation
Artist unknown c. 1553



Image 8: Twelfth Night. Kings Players



Image 9: The Peacham Drawing c. 1595



Image 10: Prince of Morocco in *The Merchant of Venice*



Image 11: The Portrait of Abd el-Ouahed ben Messaoud ben Mohammed Anoun,
Moorish Ambassador to Queen Elizabeth I
c. 1600