

Tel Aviv University  
Faculty of Humanities  
English Department

Launcelot in *The Merchant of Venice*: The Truth in Every Joke

Raz Elmaleh

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### **Launcelot in *The Merchant of Venice*: The Truth in Every Joke**

William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* employs a handful of nondescript servants, attendants, messengers, and intermediaries to whom Shakespeare at best gives a name. One underling's character, however, commands far more than a name: Launcelot Gobbo, the clown, who acts as all of the above, and as a confidante of Shylock's daughter Jessica. Although Launcelot performs no exceptional feats, and seems to have no unique effect on the overt plot as a servant and intermediary, he is yet highlighted with extensive dialogue and monologue, some of it well beyond the pale of comedy (however satirical,) and often concerning ethnicity, religion and morality.

In this essay, I intend to explore Launcelot's dramatic function and significance in *The Merchant of Venice*, namely the function of his monologues and dialogues vis-à-vis the play's original spectators, and specifically concerning ethnic, religious, moral, and ethical messages. I will argue that Launcelot serves, among other things, to mollify the audience's conscience regarding the play's uneasy juxtaposition of cultural, ethnic, and religious perspectives, while simultaneously enabling Shakespeare to express ethical criticism. My reading of *The Merchant of Venice* revolves around the play as a piece of theater that affects its spectators, and I am especially concerned with emotional effects. To sense the desired intention of my arguments, one must constantly visualize the play as it was originally intended: staged and acted in front of a live Elizabethan audience.

In her chapter on the professional buffoon, Enid Welsford recounts the story of French aristocrats who employed many fools and who "often chose their servants not for efficiency, but because – as Charles Lamb would say – 'they had a tincture of the absurd in their composition'" (20). Launcelot, indeed, has a formidable tincture of the absurd in his composition, and we sense that Bassanio does not necessarily hire him for

his competence as a servant. We receive confirmation of this from Launcelot himself, when he recalls how Shylock was “wont to tell me, I could do nothing without bidding” (II.v.8-9). But Launcelot does serve useful functions, both for Bassanio and for the play’s audience. His functions for Bassanio warrant a separate discussion, but there is at least one which he performs both for his new employer and for the spectators: comic relief - the reason he is hired. To a reader, Launcelot’s antics, quips and malapropisms are plenty sharp and original on paper, but must have been doubly so to a spectator when fleshed out by a professional Elizabethan comic. One thing that is perhaps less striking upon a non-acted reading of the play, however, is how sorely the audience would have *needed* comic relief.

Throughout the play, the audience is deluged with anti-Jewish, anti-foreign, anti-“Other” discourse. To all but Shakespeare’s most sophisticated spectators, I believe, this would have seemed ordinary and perhaps even welcome. Ania Loomba reminds us that

Questions of identity and difference became especially urgent in sixteenth-and seventeenth-century English culture because at this time the idea of an English nation developed... [and that in consequence] ...the representation of outsiders, especially in travelogues and in the theatre, contributed to the creation of ‘English’ identity precisely by exploring, locating, indeed constructing notions of ‘difference’ and of a hierarchy of peoples, religions, and cultures. (149, 150)

Thus, anti-Semitic diatribes (to cite the obvious example,) which to the present reader are morally disturbing, may instead have fostered a satisfied sense of wholesomeness and unity among the play’s original viewers. The average theater patron, seeing him or herself the true English person, might have found comfort in

belonging to the “right” side of the ethno-religious equation as presented by the play’s positive Christian protagonists. An average, sensible Elizabethan viewer, given a compelling and clearly-articulated choice to identify either with the Jewish scoundrel Shylock or with the play’s assortment of morally spotless and noble Christians, would doubtless have placed his sympathies with the latter. The play begins by making this choice seem simple and healthy, and by lulling the viewer into complacency. All the while, however, Shakespeare uses Shylock to chip away at this complacency, until he effectively threatens it with Shylock’s speeches in acts 3 and 4.

Shylock could easily have been made a one-dimensional character, the inveterate devil the play’s Christians make him out to be. In other words, he could have been Christopher Marlowe’s Barabas - Shylock’s popular, slightly earlier archetype. However, as Harold Bloom notes, Shylock may be accurately read as

...a reaction formation or ironic swerve away from Marlowe’s Jew of Malta. All that Shylock and Barabas have in common is that both are supposed to be not Jews, but *the* Jew. Shakespeare’s grim Puritan and Marlowe’s ferocious Machiavel are... antithetical to each other. (172-3)

One reason they are antithetical is because unlike Barabas, a cardboard maniac, Shylock has psychological depth, and in some matters even a defensible perspective. Shakespeare pits the perspective of Shylock – the “Other” – against the mainstream Christian perspective with which the average Elizabethan would have identified. Shylock’s outspoken confidence and pride in his own ethno-religious identity, his all-too-human motives for revenge, and his famous speeches - however they may have been compromised or ridiculed in even the most one-dimensional stage-play - disturb the otherwise homogenous flow of the play’s discourse on Jews and other outsiders. The

play's dramatic tension (romance, adventure, mortal danger,) which concerns its characters alone, is thus augmented with a moral and ethical tension, which also involves the audience. Perhaps "racism" or "anti-Semitism" would be concepts too arcane – or nonexistent at the time – to have sprung on an unsuspecting Elizabethan audience; but the idea of hypocrisy would certainly have been within their intellectual and emotional grasp.

Shylock is an "unashamed other." The Prince of Morocco essentially implores Portia to look beyond his skin tone, and Jessica embraces and reaffirms the Christian prejudice towards her own heritage. Both would only serve to cement the Elizabethan audience's sense of belonging to the best group. Shylock, in contrast, neither curries favor nor makes defensive apologies for himself. On the contrary, he is actively offensive, caustically deflating the Christian egos of characters and spectators alike by informing both what he thinks of them. First, he dismisses Antonio's mercantile glory, the umbrella under which Antonio's cronies stand, as a shaky amalgam of perishables; what is gained by adventurous risk can be lost by it:

...his means are in supposition... ventures he hath squand' red abroad, - but ships are but boards, sailors but men, there be land-rats, and water-rats, water-thieves, and land-thieves, (I mean pirates), and then there is the peril of waters, winds, and rocks: the man is not withstanding sufficient... (I.iii.15-23)

According to Frank Whigham, "Shylock's epistemology threatens [the Venetians'] heroic self-concept (and the supremacy it implies), revealing adventure at risk, dangerously akin to weakness" (104) - as in the above exchange, where Shylock casually turns Antonio, the play's Christian figurehead, from mogul to mortal. In doing

so, he brushes Christian self-mythicizing off the agenda: Christians may congratulate each other *ad nauseam*, but he himself will have none of it. Later, Shylock contemptuously rejects Bassanio's offer to dine: "I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you" (I.iii.32-3). He not only refuses the supposed honor of joining the Christian sphere: he despises it. Finally, in the straightest characterization, he labels the Venetian masqueraders "Christian fools" who are engaged in nothing more than "shallow fopp'ry" (II.v.33, 35). Shylock is nothing if not clear.

Returning intolerance for intolerance, then contempt for contempt, Shylock reaches the height of his hate for Christians in his revenge on Antonio, one of the audience's identifiable dramatic representatives. By mid-play (act 3 scene 1), in Shylock's first famous speech, his accusations can hold as true for an audience identifying with the play's Christian characters, as they do for the characters themselves. Lastly, and perhaps most psychologically terrifying, is the sense that Shylock deeply knows Christians – that while they fool each other into believing they're saints, they can never fool *him*.

If it weren't for Shylock's proud and accusatory attitude, and his authoritative recrimination of Christian vanity, idiocy and hypocrisy, the play would have showcased an essentially uniform message about Jews and other outsiders as compared to Christians. But *The Merchant of Venice* plays a cruel trick on its spectators: it lulls them into identifying with one side of a moral equation, and then, in increasingly-sharper gradations, implicates "their" side in ethical corruption. To the right audience, at the right time, Shylock would have been a monstrous surprise.

Enter Launcelot Gobbo, who plays a double trick: he protects the spectators' identification with the just and right, while allowing it to be further destabilized. Of all the play's Christian characters, none favorable to Jews, there is none as devoutly *anti-Jewish* as Launcelot. Although he is only provided reason for disliking *one* Jew

(Shylock,) and although he is closely acquainted with one *nice* Jew (Jessica,) Launcelot's tone throughout the play is directed against Jews in general. The play gives him ample stage time to profess his views. In Launcelot's first appearance, the stage all to himself (II.ii), he sets his position when in a moral choice between the Devil and the Jew, he chooses the Devil. In his concluding discussion with Jessica (III.v), he brands her innately damned for having Jewish blood.

Other Christian characters, while advocating the need for Jewish redemption, at least permit its possibility. Antonio sees such opportunity even for Shylock: "The Hebrew will turn Christian, he grows kind" (I.iii.174). Lorenzo chooses a Jew for a wife, believing that at heart she is Christian and that she can be saved by conversion, which is good enough for him. Jessica herself sees her Judaism as a curable disorder and proclaims herself "daughter to [Shylock's] blood... not to his manners" (II.iii.18-19). But Launcelot permits no such latitude, and doesn't try to. He makes no dispensation for Jews, and presents a uniformly negative and easily-comprehensible view: he doesn't like them. An exemplary instance of this is the fact that in his stage debut – the Shylock-versus-Devil dilemma - Launcelot refers to Shylock simply as "The Jew," thus casting this particular Jew, as in Bloom's note of Barabas and Shylock<sup>1</sup>, as the dramatic representative of the entire Jewish race. Similarly, Launcelot informs old Gobbo that his master is "a very Jew" (II.ii.100), the import of which appears self-explanatory to the clown. To him, Judaism is axiomatically negative.

Launcelot is funniest when dealing out meaningless antics. These serve as pure comic relief which still works today. His anti-Jewish discourse, on the other hand, is served in a much less humorous vein, sometimes plain serious. In my view, Launcelot

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<sup>1</sup> See Bloom 172-3, quoted earlier.

aims to convey more truth than joke in these passages. His discussion with Jessica on hereditary damnation (III.v), for example, is practically academic. Therefore, it is my opinion that an acted Launcelot would have functioned not only as comic relief but also as *moral* relief. He would not only have calmed the spectators' nerves, but would have done likewise to their conscience, which was to be assailed by implication in hypocrisy.

The two relief roles are inseparable, for it is precisely Launcelot's flippant manner that allows him to defuse weighty issues. Although himself virtually-serious part of the time, Launcelot robs the play's ethical criticism of its sting first by making light of it, and second by presenting a clear and decisive view which removes the Christian characters - and spectators - from any remaining doubt. I concur with C.L. Barber's assertion that "The solidarity of the Venetians includes the clown, in whose part Shakespeare can use conventional blacks and whites about Jews and misers without asking us to take them too seriously" (*The Merchants*, 182); yet to the Venetians I would add the audience itself, for by making no dispensation for Jews, Launcelot makes an enormous dispensation for the spectators. He frees them from self-judgment, distances them from the moral fray, and safeguards their confidence in their own merit. He ratifies the truth of the audience's righteousness, established at the beginning of the play and later destabilized by Shylock's accusatory foreign perspective. Just as Shylock is unapologetic, so is Launcelot, and any spectator whose conscience is harassed may find a carefree ethical haven in Launcelot's broad, generalized prejudice. Launcelot, therefore, stands for more than smug complacency or self-satisfaction: he stands for fear and the powerful denial mechanisms that fear can engender. The audience is not blind, and the threat posed by Shylock to their self-image – an image made all the more assailable by the play's self-aggrandizing, pro-Venetian, anti-Other rhetoric – should have been difficult to miss or dismiss.

In its many layers, overt and subtextual, *The Merchant of Venice* is a wonderful illustration of the way in which hypocrisy and criticism counterbalance each other to mediate between the contending realms of economy and morality - hypocrisy bending the truth and criticism stripping the truth bare. If one should look for a real-life instance of the balance between moral idealism and financial interests, what better example than theatre itself, and what better microcosm than *The Merchant of Venice*?

The play was meant to garner income, and the audience would ultimately have had to feel comfortable with it. Any overt discomfort in the play would have had to be resolved: a mystery would have to be revealed, a drama brought to its culmination, and a zany comic misunderstanding untangled. The same holds true for the ethical tension visited upon the audience: it must be eliminated. The Venetians' victory is the Christian audience's victory, and the audience must feel victory was won fairly. To make them feel so would have been Launcelot's first trick, which serves finance. But there is yet another trick, which serves the moral realm.

Plainly stated, Launcelot's second trick is that he is a clown, and there is no telling where a clown truly stands. His farcical figure could as easily be a gross parody of the audience as a moral prop. As Launcelot meets Old Gobbo immediately following the former's introduction as an unequivocal Jew-hater, it is worth noting that Launcelot directs the following sarcasm not to his father, but to the audience: "Do I look like a cudgel or a hovel-post, a staff, or a prop?" (II.ii.65-6)

It is not necessarily in the spectators' best interest that Launcelot makes the pill of one's own hypocrisy easier to swallow, that he allows them to further sanctify their sacred prejudices. For in fact, Launcelot says nothing to *contradict* Shylock's criticism. He simply makes it easier to ignore on a purely emotional level, and desensitizes the

spectators to the possibility that *The Merchant of Venice* is criticizing *them*. “Launcelot’s generic ‘foolishness,’” says Thomas Moisan, “permits the play to articulate elements of social criticism without appearing to engage or take them seriously” (203). Viewed in this light, it is possible that Shylock’s most blithe detractor also functions as one of the Jew’s staunchest supporters.

Barber, in tracing the origins of Shakespeare’s comedies back to Saturnalian festivities, detects within the comedies the festive tradition of symbolic struggle between natural, positive outbursts of joy and negative, dour killjoy spirits:

...the poetry about the pleasures of nature and the naturalness of pleasure serves to evoke beneficial natural impulses; and much of the wit... acts to free the spirit as does the ritual abuse of hostile spirits. (*Festive Comedy*, 7)

Barber’s characterization of those hostile spirits and of their exorcism in Saturnalian festivals fit Shylock and the Venetians’ treatment of him to a tee:

The butts in the festive plays consistently exhibit their unnaturalness by being kill-joys. On an occasion ‘full of warm blood, of mirth,’ they are too preoccupied with perverse satisfactions like pride or greed to ‘let the world slip’ and join the dance... Behind the laughter at the butts there is always a sense of solidarity about pleasure, a communion embracing the merry-makers in the play and the audience, who have gone on holiday in going to a comedy. (*Festive Comedy*, 8-9)

The evil spirit in *The Merchant of Venice* is exorcised by supposedly sublimating Shylock into something more acceptable – into one of “us.” “Shylock,” says Whigham, “cannot maintain his heterodox identity: he is stamped into the mold designed for him”

(111). Launcelot pulls a hefty share in this aggressive “sublimation” of Shylock, killjoy to Venetians and spectators alike. Yet, Barber adds to his analysis of festive exorcism, “While perverse hostility to pleasure [that is, Shylock] is a subject for aggressive festive abuse, highflown idealism“ – for example, that of a smug spectator – “is mocked too” (*Festive Comedy*, 9). By obscuring the borderlines between real and surreal, and between fact and joke, Launcelot makes those borderlines easy to traverse. Laughter is a powerful opiate, and a complacent spectator could unwittingly land on the fools’ side of the border at any moment. Then the joke would be on him.

One such joke possibly played on the audience in *The Merchant of Venice* is that the spectator is allowed to identify with, and admire, a social stratum of leisurely aristocrats, rich merchants, and their cronies. Whigham, who outlines the way in which rhetoric draws class lines, notes that:

The irony in *The Merchant of Venice* seems most explicable if placed in the gray area between deception and self-deception, rhetorical conspiracy and illusion. (101)

and that:

...criticisms are tucked safely out of sight, and we are left with what appears to be an entertaining play. (The Elizabethan political climate was hostile to playwrights who meddled with matters beyond their proper sphere. Obtrusive neatness is thus often legalistic camouflage, a sign of prohibited criticism underneath.) (103)

It may be, then, that the Venetians’ strident negative focus on Shylock, aided by Launcelot, camouflages another distinction inherent in the play: the distinction between those who are independently wealthy and those who are not. An Elizabethan commoner

watching *The Merchant of Venice* might have relished the sense of ethnic unity the comedy would conjure within the audience. An aristocrat or wealthy merchant watching it might have enjoyed the disunity of class that the play outwardly glosses over. Both, I believe, would have been duped, and not the least by Launcelot Gobbo.

In his treatment of fools as lower-class radicals, Christopher Hill notes that “A few intelligent rulers, by listening to their fools, may have broken through the cloud of flattering courtiers who stood between them and public opinion” (Hill, 277). Launcelot’s cunning double-trick is that he can simultaneously operate as the opinion and as the cloud that obscures it. At the beginning of Shylock’s trial, when Portia asks “Which is the merchant here? and which is the Jew?” (IV.i.170), a gullible spectator may have an all-too-ready answer for this profoundly emblematic question. I believe that one of Launcelot’s strengths in *The Merchant of Venice* is that, with the clown as with his inventor, you may never really get such an answer.

In final support of my take on Launcelot’s functions, it is worth noticing that he neither says nor does anything of importance, nor even of amusement, in the fifth act. By this stage, Shylock has been “exorcised,” clearing the stage for a Christian show of “unity,” and overt social criticism has been safely veiled: the clown’s vociferous duties are over. Then, and only then, is Launcelot finally reduced to a meaningless cog to which Shakespeare at best gives a name.

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