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<http://www.skenejournal.it>

[info@skenejournal.it](mailto:info@skenejournal.it)

Dir. Resp. (aut. Trib. di Verona): Guido Avezzù

P.O. Box 149 c/o Mail Boxes Etc. (MBE150) – Viale Col. Galliano, 51, 37138, Verona (I)

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ROBERTA MULLINI\*

## ***A Momaria and a Baptism: A Note on Beginning and Ending in the Globe Merchant of Venice (2015)***

Abstract

The New Globe 2015 performance of *The Merchant of Venice* made a very dark comedy of a so-called ‘romantic’ one. Not only is Shylock shown as a victim of Venetian anti-Semitism from the very beginning, but he also turns out as a pitiful – and deeply pitied – character because of the addition to the end of the play created by the director Jonathan Munby. The article, after summarizing the role of the initial and final phases of dramatic texts, discusses the beginning and ending added by Munby, also through some reviewers’ responses to the production both in London and in the USA. Historical information about Venetian Jews’ conversion to Christianity is given as well. It then articulates its own standpoint claiming that the additions made by the director to the original text, while legitimate as artistic objects and directorial choices, diminish the play’s complexity and constitute a sort of performative paratext to the play. (The research is based on the “Globe on Screen” DVD version of the play).

KEYWORDS: Shakespeare; *The Merchant of Venice*; beginning; ending; New Globe; Jonathan Munby; Marin Sanudo; Martin Luther

### **1. Introduction**

Beginning and ending are always crucial moments in any literary text. In drama, moreover, the beginning of the onstage action has to be particularly appealing to the audience who is introduced into an unknown fictional world at that very moment, hopefully by relevant words and events. The ending, on the other hand, should be plausible after the staged facts, acceptable as verisimilar according to the preceding incidents, and – unless in the case of open-ended texts – such as to conclude the story shown during the performance.

The dramatic failure in starting a play is comically ridiculed in Richard Brinsley Sheridan’s *The Critic* (1779), where the play-within-the-play entitled *The Spanish Armada* (written by the protagonist Mr Puff) starts with

\* University of Urbino – roberta.mullini@uniurb.it

two characters telling each other things they already know, so much so that Mr Dangle – one of the onstage spectators – asks: “Mr. Puff, as he [one of the speakers] *knows* all this, why does Sir Walter go on telling him?”, to whom the author retorts: “But the audience are not supposed to know anything of the matter, are they?” (2.2, Sheridan 1781: 57), thus underlying the audience’s need to be informed, but also the necessity of verisimilitude in the dramatic opening. Sheridan, in this beginning, shows the necessity for a dramatist to inform the audience by making the characters introduce facts either unknown to one of them at least, or so relevant that their possibly existing shared knowledge is set aside in order to foreground the event itself, ‘tellable’ because of its cultural or social value (see Dodd 1983: 44-8).<sup>1</sup> All Shakespearean plays, on the other hand, adopt clever and bright strategies to show their audiences into the plot, so that the spectators are alerted to what is going to follow and, indeed, do not react as Mr Dangle. Even the *incipit* of *King Lear*, which is so often omitted in modern performances, is important for the plot since it introduces information – through Kent’s and Gloucester’s doubts about Lear’s recent wavering behaviour – concerning the king’s likely feeble mind as a symptom of his looming madness, thus setting the tone for further events (see Mullini 1983).

Endings are relevant in order to round off events and smooth the spectators’ way back to their own real life after the theatre’s ‘suspension of disbelief’. And this also obtains in such an open-ended play as Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, where the final words “Let’s go” are immediately contradicted by the stage direction “*They do not move*” (Beckett 1977: 94): in the almost immutable world of the play Vladimir and Estragon cannot (must not) do anything but wait for Godot. And this is what the static sequence of the ending tells the audience. How will the spectators react? Will they accept the absurdity of the situation as a comic or as an existentially tragic ending? Much, of course, depends on how the director and the actors of a specific performance have ‘read’ the play. For example, in their international tour some years ago Ian McKellen and Patrick Stewart relied much on comedy and the laughs from the audience, while the 1980s performance of the University of Maryland College Park Visual Press (which announced its version as “Beckett directs Beckett” and claimed that the director Walter D. Asmus had worked after Beckett’s own *mise-en-scène*) sounds and looks much more sober and pessimistic.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Dodd’s article still offers a productive synthesis of the tools useful to investigate dramatic discourse, mainly derived from discourse analysis, pragmatics and from the semiotics of drama. The concept of ‘tellability’ is based on Harvey Sacks’ conversational analysis theory (see Sacks 1995).

<sup>2</sup> See the Beckett (1985?) *Waiting for Godot* video and the “Beckett Directs Beckett” (BDB) website.

## 2. Beginning and Ending in the Globe *Merchant*

The two examples presented so far show, notwithstanding their diversity, how the beginning and the ending phases of a play are extremely significant for the whole dramatic texture and meaning. In the case of *The Merchant of Venice*, the textual *incipit* consists in Antonio's dialogue with his friends about his own melancholy ("In sooth, I know not why I am so sad", 1.1.1; Shakespeare 1985) and the ending, apart from the very last lines spoken by Gratiano and full of sexual innuendoes, is left to Portia, who invites indoors all characters present in Belmont, where "we will answer all things faithfully" (5.1.299), i.e. she and Nerissa will explain to their baffled husbands the whole truth about the trick of the rings. Initial sadness is then contrasted with final mirth, even if we know that Antonio will be excluded from the heterosexual wedding feasts. So far, then, for the textual beginning and ending. But the 2015 Globe production of *The Merchant* resulted particularly interesting because it offered – beside the actors' skill and brilliance – an adaptation consisting mostly in something added at the very beginning of the play and at its ending. The choice of this production for the present research is due to the specificity of these additions and their impact on the general reception of the performance, an aspect that all reviewers highlighted when the play was performed at the Globe in 2015 and in the USA the following year. In particular, they dwelt on the ending of the play (whether praising or disavowing it; see section 5 below), which is certainly the most striking feature of this performance.

What follows, an analysis of the additions to the Globe performance or, rather, of these new beginning and new ending of the play, is based on the DVD version of the 2015 production of *The Merchant* (Globe on Screen 2016), featuring – among the others – Dominic Mafham as Antonio, Jonathan Pryce as Shylock, Rachel Pickup as Portia, Daniel Lapaine as Bassanio, Phoebe Pryce as Jessica; director Jonathan Munby.

The production starts with a showy spectacle of music, dances and a song in Italian about the power of love and fidelity in a love relation: all performers wear typical masks of the Venetian carnival, and their costumes, excluded those of a Cupid in white and gold, are mainly dark and red. White and yellow, if not gold, are also the costumes of two dancers, a man and a woman, celebrating a sort of marriage whose 'priest' is Cupid himself. The ending is nothing but Shylock's forced conversion through baptism, with actors wearing long white robes bar the celebrant, who wears a violet chasuble. All chant in Latin and the priest

speaks verses from the Catholic Credo also in Latin.<sup>3</sup> After being baptized (holy water is poured on Shylock's head and face), a dejected Shylock leaves the stage through the groundlings. There is no jig, in spite of the year-long Globe tradition to end a play with this routine combining "song, dance and game [which] was often performed at the end of the play in Shakespeare's time as a way of bringing together the players and audience".<sup>4</sup> The curtain call is performed very quietly by the actors coming on, and going off stage and being clapped very warmly. The abolition of the jig is also a signal of the difference of this *Merchant* from other Globe plays, if one thinks that a final jig ended not only comedies but also *Richard II* in 2003, for example, and such a tragedy as *Titus Andronicus* in 2006 as well as *Doctor Faustus* in 2011, after all in line with the Globe 'original practices' productions aiming at performing early modern plays as they were in the Elizabethan-Jacobean era.<sup>5</sup> The audience in the theatre and the DVD spectators, therefore, were/are left with the 'tragedy' of Shylock as their last and bitterest taste of the play, in comparison to which Antonio's final isolation appears almost irrelevant, not to say anything of the comedic endings among the married couples, which nearly risk being forgotten given the prevalence of Shylock in the limelight.

Jonathan Munby's radical choice to have Shylock's baptism performed is certainly the most striking of his directorial decisions. Furthermore, just before this staging Jessica/Phoebe Pryce kneels and starts singing a sorrowful song in Hebrew as to mark her father Shylock/Jonathan Pryce's doleful imminent destiny. There are not only "two godfathers" at this chris-

<sup>3</sup> The directorial choice to have the priest wear violet for a baptism looks rather strange, this liturgical garment being linked rather to penitence and moments of suffering than to christening, unless it was chosen exactly to highlight the sacrament of penitence. But who should repent in this event, and of what? Shylock because he is a Jew, or the religious authority for forcing Shylock to conversion?

<sup>4</sup> The quotation is drawn from the Globe website definition of 'jig' (Globe Jig). Contrary to what the DVD shows, the PDF *Visual Story* brochure of the *Merchant* – downloadable from the Globe website – mentions a final jig ("The company dance a jig at the end of the play", 2016: 16). To be sure about the presence or not of this sequence during performances, I mailed the Globe info staff, who quite promptly answered that "It appears the *Visual Story* was mistaken as there was no jig at the end of the 2015 production of *Merchant of Venice*" (personal communication, 4 October 2017).

<sup>5</sup> The fundamental document attesting the performance of jigs also after tragedies is Thomas Platter's journal entry for 21 September 1599, when he attended a performance of *Julius Caesar* "in the house with the straw-thatched roof", at the end of which "they [the actors] danced wonderfully with each other, extremely gracefully after their fashion, always two dressed in men's clothes with two in women's clothes" (qtd in Katritzky 2012: 132).



tening as Gratiano says (4.1.394), but all the characters are there, witnessing the conversion and joining the priest and his deacons in their chant (Jessica included, this time).

The sympathy with which Shylock is portrayed is actually nothing new, since – beside the many theatrical productions which have tried either to foreground or to hedge the play’s alleged anti-Semitism – the general public certainly remembers Michael Radford’s fairly recent cinematic version of the play (2004) with Al Pacino playing Shylock, Jeremy Irons Antonio, and Joseph Fiennes Bassanio. In the film the beginning coincides with a procession of gondolas aboard which some priests are preaching against the Jews, whereas the ending shows Shylock locked out of the Ghetto, i.e. rejected by his own community, and Jessica alone, while contemplating her ring (her mother’s ring that she has stolen from her father when eloping, but which Radford still shows at her finger), thus signalling her second thoughts about her marriage with the Christian Lorenzo. Radford’s film, therefore, appears to play the role of an analogue for the ending of the 2015 Globe *Merchant*.

### 3. The Director’s Additions

In their reviews most critics on both sides of the Atlantic (after the 2015 London season *The Merchant* toured in New York and Chicago in 2016) highlight the ending rather than the beginning. And, of course, not without a reason, since the final addition rounds off the character of Shylock as a “more sinned against than sinning” (3.2.60, Shakespeare 1997) figure, in Munby’s attempt at presenting a direction for twenty-first-century post-holocaust audiences. Before analysing the ending of the play, although it is certainly the most controversial part of the performance, it is worth spending a few words on the *incipit*.

#### 3.1 *The Beginning*

The play, as mentioned above, starts with masked people dancing and singing, accompanied by two drummers, a wind instrumentalist and a man with castanets, on a torch-lighted stage. Two of the players are on a dais, hinting perhaps at the Venetian stages of Commedia dell’Arte actors or of medical vendors as portrayed in Giacomo Franco’s engravings, especially the “entertainment which quacks offer daily in St Mark’s Square to the people of all nations . . .” (“Intartenimento che dano ogni giorno li Ciarlatani in

Piazza di S. Marco al Populo d'ogni natione . . .", 1610; see Zorzi 1990).<sup>6</sup> Two brief flashes of white light sparkling from the floor of the dais accompany the arrival of Cupid. What Munby presents certainly wants to reproduce a moment during a Venetian carnival, but the type of spectacle performed onstage resembles a *momaria* more specifically, i.e. one of the performances by the various "Compagnie della Calza" which were made up of amateurs so called because of a recognizable device on their stockings when performing their textless shows along the streets of Venice or in a patrician house (see Muraro 1981 and Mullini 1993). Theatre reviewers simply talk of 'carnival', or – as to the type of spectacle – of a 'masque', but a *momaria* had nothing to do with (English) masques, in spite of Shakespeare himself describing as such the street revels during which Jessica leaves Shylock's house (2.5 and 2.6), when "Christian fools with varnish'd faces" (2.5.33) move around the town, according to Shylock's words.<sup>7</sup> As witnessed by the Venetian diarist Marin Sanudo, *momarie* were performed in Venice as early as 1502 (Sanudo 2008: 70). The editors of the just mentioned selection of passages from Sanudo's journals define a *momaria* as "a performance, often accompanying a banquet, wedding feast, state reception, or other festa, involving music, dance, mime, and frequently acrobatics" (545). Molmenti (1880: 350) underlines that *momarie* were a form of spectacle "onninamente veneziana" (typically and exclusively Venetian).

This beginning, then, creates a joyous atmosphere and, taking the cue from the text itself, exhibits what Shakespeare only mentions through Shylock's speech:

What, are there masques? Hear you me, Jessica:  
 Lock up my doors; and when you hear the drum  
 And the vile squealing of the wry-necked fife,  
 Clamber not you up to casements then,  
 Nor thrust your head into the public street  
 To gaze on Christian fools with varnish'd faces;  
 (2.5.28-33)

While the music and dance are going on, a character arrives onstage, takes off his mask and hat and looks neutrally around, clearly not taking part in the general euphoria. Then two red-capped and unmasked men, in long robes that have a yellow circular ribbon attached on the chest, enter the stage through the right door (facing the audience) appearing extraneous to the general feast. Their apparel, especially the yellow ribbon

<sup>6</sup> Unless otherwise stated all translations are mine.

<sup>7</sup> The English spectacle nearer the Venetian *momaria* is the mumming (see Wickham 1974: 136; Westfall 1990: 33).

and the red cap, reminds the audience of the early modern discriminatory sumptuary laws applying to Venetian Jews, but also of the badges prisoners had to wear in twentieth-century Nazi concentration camps. Centre stage they are attacked, spit at by two of the maskers and one of them is also thrown to the ground. At this point, with a choral and joyous cry the revellers leave the stage, while the two abused people get down from it through the groundlings. Alone remains the man who had unmasked himself with two others; then the “In sooth, I know not why I am so sad” speech begins.

This character, then, when the textual play starts, reveals to be Antonio, whereas neither of the two Jews, as the audience will realize later, corresponds to Shylock. Of course, those spectators who can recognize Jonathan Pryce’s face soon see that this actor is not involved in the present non-verbal event. Therefore, the two abused Jews are there as metonymic figures for both what Shylock will later say when accusing Antonio of “spet[ting] upon my Jewish gabardine” (1.3.107), and for the destiny of all Venetian Jews. This introduction, therefore, carries out Shakespeare’s words concerning not only the Venetian carnivalesque atmosphere, but also the religious and professional tensions between Christians and Jews. In other words, this beginning translates words into visual images which the audience will very probably recollect later, when the lines connected to these situations and gestures will be pronounced by the performers.<sup>8</sup> It also anticipates the love theme of the play (in the words of the song), and Antonio’s melancholy, since he does not join the merry atmosphere of the dancers. In this way, the beginning – even without dialogues as often happened during a *momaria* – leads the spectators towards the story helping them create hypotheses for the advancement of the plot (or, for those already in the know, trigger an attitude of comparison with previous performances).

### 3.2 The Ending

The ending is also an enactment of a part of a speech spoken during the text, exactly just before the trial is over in 4.1. The Duke has pronounced his sentence which is not a death sentence as Gratiano would like it to be,

<sup>8</sup>In the text this situation is present in 1.3.101-7: “SHYLOCK. Signior Antonio, many a time and oft / In the Rialto you have rated me / About my moneys and my usances: / Still have I borne it with a patient shrug, / (For suff’rance is the badge of all our tribe) / You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog, / And spet upon my Jewish gabardine”.

but condemns Shylock to the confiscation of everything he owns.<sup>9</sup> To this Antonio adds, with the tone of a merciful concession, that half of Shylock's properties (which the Duke destines to Antonio) be only administered by him and, in the end, constitute a legacy for Jessica and Lorenzo. But the "quality" of Antonio's "mercy" is "strained", to use Portia/Balthasar's words in her famous speech at the beginning of the trial (4.1.182): he asks (or, better, requires) that the Duke's pardon be executive only provided Shylock "presently become a Christian" (383), thus conveying his strong anti-Jewish standpoint. Antonio's request originates from Christian theology and must not be confused with nineteenth- and twentieth-century anti-Semitism, since it does not show any racist prejudice. According to the Church's tenets and – of course – within a Christ-centred discourse, if Jews convert to Christianity they are saved. Somehow and interpreted in line with early modern theology, Antonio's words really proclaim his mercy, so much so that a contemporary critic observes, rather polemically, that:

Antonio's stipulation that Shylock convert to Christianity stands as the greatest act of kindness and mercy that he could have possibly rendered his tormentor. Antonio saves Shylock from eternal damnation. At least in the Globe, in the 1590s. (Beauchamp 2011: 55)

Further allusions to the Jew's conversion come from Gratiano, who comments soon later, just before Shylock leaves the stage (where, as far as Shakespeare wrote, he will never appear again),

In christe'ning thou shalt have two godfathers, -  
Had I been judge, thou shouldst have had ten more,  
To bring thee to the gallows, not to the font.  
(4.1.394-6)

In these three lines there are three keywords connected to the (forced) conversion: godfathers, christening and (baptismal) font, three words which Jonathan Munby must have kept in his directorial mind when envisaging the ending of the Globe *Merchant*. The word 'conversion' never occurs in the text, although the verb 'to convert' is used twice: once after the casket scene when Portia declares that, Bassanio having won the 'lottery' allowing him to marry her, herself with all her wealth "to you and yours is now converted" (3.2.166-7). The other occurrence is in 3.5, where it acquires its full religious meaning when Jessica jocularly 'translates' to Lorenzo

<sup>9</sup> In fact, Gratiano's words clearly display their speaker's violent attitude: "Beg that thou may'st have leave to hank thyself, / And yet thy wealth being forfeit to the state, / Thou hast not left the value of a cord, / Therefore thou must be hang'd at the state's charge" (4.1.360-3).

Launcelot Gobbo's words about the economic risks of too many Jews becoming Christians:

He tells me flatly there's no mercy for me in heaven, because I am a Jew's daughter: and he says you are no good member of the commonwealth, for in converting Jews to Christians you raise the price of pork.  
(3.5.29-33)

#### 4. About the "Conversion of the Jews": Theology and History

Even though used scantily, the verb 'to convert' and the derivative noun ring a bell in one's ears because of the Catholic prayer "for the conversion of the Jews", removed from the Good Friday liturgy only in the twentieth century and substituted by a more general one mentioning Jews' and Christians' common God.<sup>10</sup> In the old "Oratio pro Judeis" the Jews were called *perfidii Iudaei*, a definition which may have been one of the causes of popular anti-Judaism along centuries. The adjective *perfidus*, though, especially after twentieth-century philological research, has revealed to have no morally negative meaning, it preserving nevertheless the implication of 'infidels' attributed to the Jews (see Nicolotti 2012: 481).

On its side, the Reformist world, after Martin Luther's initial sympathy towards the Jews (in his essay "That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew", 1523; see Luther 1962), had turned – in Germany at least – to their cruel and violent persecutions, when Luther published his booklet *On the Jews and Their Lies* in 1543 (Luther 1971). However, the latter was never translated into English in early modern times (a first translation appeared only in 1948), therefore it can hardly be counted among the 'sources' which might have influenced the play's anti-Jewish discourse.<sup>11</sup> Anyway, there is an interdiscursive link between Luther's sentence "wherever you see a genuine Jew, you may with a good conscience cross yourself and bluntly say: 'There goes a devil incarnate'" (Luther 1971, Part 6),<sup>12</sup> and Launcelot's definition of Shylock first as "a kind of devil" and then as "the very devil incarnation" (2.2.23, 26). The *OED*, however, shows evidence of the existence of the phrase as early as 1395 and not necessarily connected to Jews. In the Church of England's *Book of Common Prayer* (1549) there also existed a collect to be recited on Good Friday and parallel to the Catholic "Oratio pro Judeis": the text

<sup>10</sup> See Nicolotti 2012 on the century-long presence of this prayer in the Catholic Church and its twentieth-century transformations.

<sup>11</sup> See Michael 2006 for a comprehensive history of the relationship between Christianity and anti-Semitism.

<sup>12</sup> For convenience, the quotation is taken from the *On the Jews and their Lies* website (Luther JTL).

of this prayer, though, did not contain any negative adjective, but nevertheless invoked God to “haue mercy upon all Jues, Turkes, Infidels, and here-tikes, and take from them all ignoraunce, hardnes of harte, and contempt of thy worde” (Fol. lii<sup>r</sup>).<sup>13</sup>

Historical evidence of conversions of Venetian Jews is included in Sanudo’s journals, where an entry for August 1522 tells that:

[fu batizato] David, fiol di uno fiol di Cervo di Verona, qual, hessendo a certa festa da sier Bernardo Marcelo podestà di Verona, fo invidado . . . a farsi cristian, et cussi fo contento farsi. (Sanuto 1891: 291)

[David, the son of a son of Cervo of Verona, was christened; he, being at a certain feast at Bernardo Marcello’s, the podestà of Verona, was invited . . . to become a Christian, and so he agreed.]

Another case is recorded on 19 December 1528, when in Vicenza,

In chiesa di Frari Menori hessendo stà quella conzata benissimo . . . uno hebreo di anni 17 nominato Vivian . . . ha voluto farsi christian. . . essendo persuaso da alcuni frati, . . . lui constante di voler essere christian. . . El ditto Zudio vene benissimo vestido di negro (Sanuto 1897: 501-2)

[In the church of the Friars Minor, which had been beautifully decorated . . . a seventeen-year old Jew named Vivian was solemnly baptized. . . persuaded by several friars . . . , he decided to become a Christian. . . The Jew came very well dressed in black (Sanudo 2008: 341)]

According to Sanudo’s testimony, at least in pre-Counter Reformation Venice, Venetian Jews who abandoned their faith were not absolutely compelled to do so; on the contrary they were either ‘invited’ or ‘persuaded’ to become Christians. In any case, no violence emerges from Sanudo’s stories. The diarist, furthermore, remarks that both occasions were festive ones and, for the second case, he writes that the conversion ceremony was a civic spectacle accompanied by merry music of “trumpets and pipes” (“trombe et pifari”, 1897: 502]. It is true that after the Counter Reformation the traditionally tolerant Venice embittered its laws, nevertheless even in such a treatise as the *De iudaeis et aliis infidelibus* by the jurist Marquardus De Susannis (1558), forced and immediate baptism is not counselled. This is the author’s advice:

Si quis tamen Iudæus, vel alius infidelis velit baptizari, & postulet baptismum non debet incontinenti baptizari, sed expectari debet donec voluntas

<sup>13</sup>This collect was also present in the British subsequent editions and removed only after 1962, but it still represents a moot problem: for the current situation in Canada (where the “prayer for the conversion of the Jews” is still part of the official liturgy), for example, see Anglican Church of Canada 2016.

eius fuerit patefacta, . . . & debet persistere apud Christianos per dies quadraginta antequam baptizetur. (1558: 131v)

[If a Jew or any other infidel wants to be baptized, and asks for baptism, he must not be christened at once, but he has to wait in order for his will to be clearly manifest . . . and he must live with Christians for forty days before being baptized]

On the same page De Susannis also adds that “nobody must be compelled to [accept the Christian] faith if unwilling, nor forced, but accepted only if voluntary” (“*invitus ad fidem nullus debet compelli, nec aliquo cogi, sed voluntarius tantum admittitur*”, *ibid.*). In spite of these ‘enlightened’ words, De Susannis repeats the usual list of anti-Jewish accusations, and history shows how violently Jews were dealt with all over Europe. But, perhaps, it is not a case that the quoted phrases are from a lawyer from the Venetian region, where Jews were, in the end, tolerated as such, even though discriminated against and relegated inside the Ghetto.

That Shakespeare might have known Sanudo’s (manuscript) diaries is absolutely impossible; it is similarly improbable that he had access to De Susannis’s treatise. He, then, seems to rely on common (Catholic and Anglican) stereotypes about anti-Jewish behaviour, while locating his story in a city famous for its toleration; the abusive language against the Jews present in the play also sounds ‘traditional’, especially if one considers that, as is generally known, officially there were no Jews in England after their expulsion by King Edward I in 1290. The playwright apparently works through a syncretic approach to the Jewish issues, thus making the *Merchant* palatable to and acceptable by his own late 1590s London audience, while also introducing words and situations which look ahead and can justify future audiences’ more compassionate readings of, and reactions to, Shylock’s destiny.

## 5. The Reviewers’ Reactions

The first reviewers of the Globe performances in May 2015 focus on the ending of the performance, beside stressing Jonathan Pryce’s overall passionate acting of a role which remains considerably complex, and the efficacious casting: Dominic Cavendish, for *The Telegraph*, claims that Pryce “provides the most sympathetic Shylock I’ve seen” (Cavendish 2015); Kate Kellaway, for *The Guardian*, states that “Pryce’s naturalism is wonderful” (Kellaway 2015); Stephen Collins, for *British Theatre*, declares that the actor “makes Shylock that most frightening of villains: the ordinary, everyday, utterly wronged man” (Collins 2015).

Holly Williams, for *The Independent*, writes of “Munby’s clever final move”, i.e. “to stage with solemn and dismaying pomp, Shylock’s baptism” (Williams 2015); Lucy Brooks, for the *Culture Whisper* site, declares that “his [Munby’s] addition at the end of the show gives a clear sense of the weight of tragedy” (Brooks 2015); Dominic Cavendish lists the final sequence – “the vile ceremony of Shylock’s enforced baptism” (Cavendish 2015) – among the factors which contribute to the “harrowing” treatment of the Jew. Michael Billington, for *The Guardian*, pinpoints Shylock’s forced conversion as “a closing directorial coup that will . . . define this production in years to come” (Billington 2015).

Charles Isherwood, the *New York Times* critic of the performance at the Lincoln Center in New York in 2016, also comments on the “harrowing note” of the final sequence (Isherwood 2016); Lawrence Bommer, in his review of the production in Chicago for the *Stage and Cinema* website, writes that, because the play is “a creature of its time . . . it teems with Christian arrogance”. However, this latter critic introduces a dissonant note in an otherwise unanimous chorus of approval when he adds that the baptism stages “an improbably martyred Shylock” (Bommer 2016).

In her turn Emma Brockes, reviewing the event in New York for *The Guardian* (Brockes 2016), finds that in the performance, which “has truths to impart about modern hatred, violence and prejudice” and is “a barometer for the anxieties of the times”, “the end of the play felt overblown . . . The effect of the play was as of a punch to the gut and the smell of fire from the torches lingered long after the end” (a smell of fire, in my opinion, that one might also attribute to Shylock’s burning at the stake, were it not that the Jew is not condemned to be burnt, even though Pryce’s face when baptism water dribbles down frowns with inner suffering as if scorched).

That showing the forced conversion is a bit too much is also the opinion of Alexander Gilmour, the *Financial Times* critic. In his review of the London spectacle in 2015 he observes that Shakespeare “did not write this coda”, adding sarcastically that “he missed a trick for this is the miserable highlight of the night”, thus revealing his disapproval of the final addition, which he further on defines “seductive”, albeit “superficial (and basically preposterous)” (Gilmour 2015).

## 6. Conclusion

Gilmour’s, then, is not a lonely discordant voice when he blames the Globe ending. Marilyn Stasio, reviewing *The Merchant* in New York for *Variety*, also considers “this one last piece of stagecraft” to be “totally over the top” (2016). Personally, I think that these reviewers’ standpoint is fairly justifi-



ble. In a production which claims to be – at least on the cover of the Globe DVD – “**Shakespeare’s** *The Merchant of Venice*” (my emphasis), the staging of Shylock’s forced conversion indeed creates a *Merchant* “for 21<sup>st</sup> century [sic] audiences” because of its insistence on the process of our recognition “of contemporary circumstances and the current significance of words such as ‘alien’” (as Christopher Henley writes for the *Chicago Tribune*, 2016). Nevertheless by adding visual and performative glosses to the Shakespearean text this version produces a definitive interpretation of the text that, had Shakespeare done it, would have lost great part of its ambiguity and of its multifarious value.

At the end of the play the “merry” but fierce bond between Antonio and Shylock retorts heavily against the Jew, who is compelled to accept it (“I am content”, he answers Portia’s questions “Art thou contented Jew? what dost thou say?”, 4.1.389-90). The dispossession of his own goods and, especially, of his own identity as a Jew, is inscribed in the Venetian law, in a “contract that would like to be considered as due to Christian love, but that clearly ends as a violent contract implying the coercion of the Other. It is in itself a deathly bond, arising out of the European ethnocentric false consciousness, and out of its many forms of tragic intolerance”, as Alessandro Serpieri writes in the “Preface” to his translation of the play (1987: L).<sup>14</sup>

As such, in the text the final end of Shylock is inscribed in the ending of Act 4, but omitted from the stage and left to that vast area of Shakespearean offstage unsaid which often enriches the plays and prompts audiences to continuously create possible interpretations.

In the DVD Globe production of *The Merchant of Venice*, instead, Jonathan Munby has ‘glossed’ and interpreted this unsaid for us by engrafting fragments of (possible) history into Shakespeare’s story, both in the beginning and in the ending of his *Merchant*, bracketing the text within two pieces of performative (and interpretative) paratext. This, in the end, is not ‘Shakespeare’s’ *Merchant*: it is – in all its legitimacy and artistic validity, of course – Jonathan Munby’s one.

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<sup>14</sup> “un contratto che vorrebbe passare per contratto di amore cristiano, ma che risulta chiaramente quale contratto di coercizione del Diverso: contratto, dunque, anch’esso di ‘morte’, prodotto dalla falsa coscienza dell’etnocentrismo europeo, dalle sue tante tragiche intolleranze”.

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