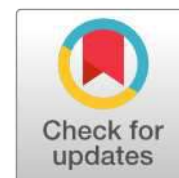


“ALL THAT GLITTERS IS NOT GOLD”: REFLECTIONS ON JAVOR GARDEV’S PRODUCTION OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE’S “THE MERCHANT OF VENICE” AT THE BULGARIAN NATIONAL THEATRE

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Abstract

The article reviews Javor Gardev’s recent production of Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* on the stage of the Bulgarian National Theatre in the context of the play’s long debated generic ambiguity and the “unpleasant” issues it confronts. It argues that even though, due to good historical reasons, the issue of antisemitism has attracted most of the attention so far, the central “unpleasant” issue in the original text is patriarchy and the inequality between men and women. The play and the production’s divergent treatments of this issue are considered in the context of today’s antifeminist backlash, as well as the more general tendency to withdraw from traditional Western values, such as democracy, freedom, human rights. The current global and locally Bulgarian perspectives are discussed in order to demonstrate the urgency of taking a clear stand in support of these values.

Keywords: English literature, drama, Shakespeare, theatre, politics, culture, Bulgaria

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What makes *The Merchant of Venice* “unpleasant”?

William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* is a problem play in at least two interrelated ways. On the one hand, it poses a problem to critics by eluding clear-cut generic categorisation. On the other, it is likely to create problems to directors because it touches issues that have remained sensitive ever since Shakespeare's time. In terms of genre, the play, although formally a comedy, combines both tragic and romantic characteristics, and as W. H. Auden observes must be classed among Shakespeare's "Unpleasant Plays" (1962). As far as "unpleasant" issues are concerned, the foremost problem undoubtedly is the play's antisemitism. A more careful analysis would uncover also other important forms of otherness – women as the Other gender, foreigners (aliens) as the ethnic, racial and linguistic Other, homosexuality as the Other sexual orientation. Nevertheless, the text of the play manages to accommodate all these problems in a logically coherent, meaningful structure that even has a happy ending.

The generic ambiguity of *The Merchant* derives mainly from the play's twofold design. It weaves together two distinct plots that take place in two disparate settings. The first develops in Venice and tells the story of the sordid, "pound of flesh" bond and the harsh punishment of Shylock. The second unfolds in Belmont and relates how Bassanio wins Portia's hand in marriage by choosing among three caskets. From the point of view of Shakespeare's London, Venice is a realistic place – a hectic, early modern, mercantile city, where what matters is entrepreneurship, business acumen and the accumulation of capital. Belmont, on the other hand, is a romantic, fairy-tale, idealisation of the feudal aristocratic past. In the world of the play Venice is a man's world, while Belmont is controlled by women.

The Venetian plot has many of the traits of a Shakespearean tragedy. Antonio is melancholic. He takes a loan from Shylock to fund Bassanio's attempt to marry the rich heiress of Belmont, despite the mutual hate between the Christian and the Jew. He haughtily agrees to the malevolent "pound of flesh" bond to both prove his love for Bassanio and his contempt for Shylock. He experiences a series of financial catastrophes, as his argosies are wrecked in different parts of the world. He fails to repay the loan on time and so Shylock obtains the right to execute his bond. The Duke of Venice understands that the law is on the Jew's side and no matter how wrong it may seem to let Shylock exact his pound of flesh, it is infinitely worse to undermine the rule of law,

because what holds together the whole of the Venetian Republic and its ethnically and religiously diverse citizens is the trust in its common legal norms. Therefore, Antonio is doomed. After an unexpected legal twist, however, he is discharged of his obligation and Shylock is punished for his cruelty. The Jew is ruined and humiliated. Even though it formally seems deserved, Shylock's plight feels too brutal and undignified.

Conversely, the Belmontian plot has most of the features of a Shakespearean romantic comedy. It centres around a brilliant young woman, Portia, who is "curbed by the will of a dead father" (I.ii.24). In a typically patriarchal fashion, her father has arranged for a lottery by which her future husband is to be determined – a husband she can neither choose nor refuse. Nevertheless, Portia manages to have her own way and marry the man she wants. She also shows unequivocally to Bassanio that she is not to be underestimated and, as a wife, she won't tolerate to be used or abused in any way. Portia achieves all this by becoming the mastermind of the play. She gives a subtle clue to her chosen suitor as to which casket to choose, perhaps without him even being conscious of it, by means of a song that both thematically suggests that outer appearances often lie, and rhythmically points at the word "lead" – the material of which the casket is made. She also assumes a male identity and resolves the Venetian plot. Under the guise of a "young and learned doctor" (IV.i.146) she intervenes in the court trial and resourcefully reverses its outcome. She also uses the opportunity to teach Bassanio a lesson about the importance of being true to his wife. In her crossdressing venture she is paralleled by her waiting-gentlewoman, Nerissa, while in her emancipation from her father's oppression by Jessica, Shylock's daughter – both of whom also find their husbands by the end of the play. Thus, the romantic plot seems to overpower the tragic one and very reasonably both Francis Meres in his *Palladis Tamia* (1598) and John Heminges and Henry Condell in the *First Folio* (1623) list *The Merchant* among Shakespeare's comedies.

Antisemitism

So, where does the "unpleasantness" come from? The most conspicuous "unpleasant" issue in the play clearly is antisemitism. Even though both as a term and as an ideology antisemitism emerged in the late 19th century, and as we now know led to the Holocaust – the most terrible crime in recorded human history – it had been predated by centuries-long Christian hostility to the Jews. The primary source of this hostility is doctrinal and results from Judaism's rejection of the central Christian claim that Jesus was

the Messiah and Son of God. Consequently, ever since medieval times Jews were presented by the church as “Christ’s killers” and became typical victims of oppression in Christian societies. In 1144 a boy, William, was murdered in the English town of Norwich. Although the murder was never solved, the Jewish community was accused of having tortured and killed the boy. Rumours about this case spread across Europe and became the basis for the “blood libel” – a series of fabricated accusations against Jews for allegedly murdering Christian children to take their blood. Conversely, the limited employment opportunities for Jews (together with the doctrinal prohibition for Christians to take usury) led them towards the occupation of moneylending. This was advantageous to medieval rulers, because the weak social position of Jews allowed rulers to abuse them, tax them additionally, channel negative attitudes toward them, and scapegoat them whenever needed. As a result, people’s resentment of Jews grew so much that medieval kingdoms had to banish them altogether. They were first expelled from England and forbidden to return on pain of death (1290), then from Germany (1350), France (1394), Spain (1492), Portugal (1497) (Beller, 2007).

By Shakespeare’s own time the Jewish population of England had been long gone. There was a small number of Jews, mostly converted to Christianity, living in London. Nevertheless, stories about Jews circulated still: “Jews lured little children into their clutches, murdered them, and took their blood to make bread for Passover. Jews were immensely wealthy—even when they looked like paupers—and covertly pulled the strings of an enormous international network of capital and goods. Jews poisoned wells and were responsible for spreading the bubonic plague. Jews secretly plotted an apocalyptic war against the Christians. Jews had a peculiar stink. Jewish men menstruated” (Greenblatt, 2012). The English dramatist who first infused almost all of these stereotypes into one dramatic character was Christopher Marlowe in his play *The Jew of Malta* (1589). In his antihero, Barabas, Marlowe seems to be trying to stuff all anti-Jewish prejudices all at once. He plots, lies, schemes, bribes, betrays, murders, pushes others to bankruptcy, even poisons his own daughter. The effect is grotesque. A more careful analysis of Marlowe’s play would find that he is amplifying the evil features of his antihero, in order to lay bare their implausibility, as well as to expose the equally evil Christian and Muslim characters in the play, but to the less careful eye it would be just a reinforcement of the familiar negative stereotypes.

In 1594 Queen Elizabeth's own physician, Roderigo Lopez, a Portuguese Jew who had converted to Christianity and joined the Church of England, was accused of plotting to poison her. The accusation was based on information that Lopez had accepted payment of a large sum from the Spanish king, Philip II, to do some important service. The queen was unconvinced and delayed the proceedings. When finally the prosecutor indicted the suspect he described him as "a perjured murdering traitor, a Jewish doctor, worse than Judas himself". The purported perfidiousness and greed of the accused made sense – the fact that he was of Jewish origin added credibility to the accusation. He defended himself and protested his innocence, but was eventually found guilty, then hanged, drawn and quartered. Lopez's trial motivated the Lord Admiral's Men to revive Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, even though the author had lost his life during the previous year. A few years later Shakespeare's *The Merchant* premiered on the stage (Greenblatt, 2012).

Shakespeare found most of the material for his play in a 14th-century Italian novella which partakes of a *Decameron*-like collection entitled *Il Pecorone* by Giovanni Fiorentino. It tells the story of an impoverished nobleman Giannetto who travels to Venice and borrows money from his godfather Ansaldo to sail three times to Belmonte where he plays a game with a rich and beautiful lady according to which they go to bed and if Giannetto manages to make love to her, she will marry him – if he falls asleep, he will lose everything he has. The lady drugs him every time and he falls asleep, until the third time when an attending lady warns him to avoid drinking the wine he is given. By the time of Giannetto's third voyage Ansaldo has run out of money, so he has borrowed from a moneylending Jew. He has also undertaken the "pound of flesh" bond. The loan becomes overdue and the Jew claims execution. The lady secretly travels to Venice, disguises herself as a lawyer from the University of Bologna, and overturns the trial. Still disguised she manages to obtain from Giannetto a ring he received from his wife for which he is later held accountable before it is finally discovered that the lady and the Bologna lawyer were the same person. Ansaldo marries the attending lady who helped Giannetto.

The figure of the Jew in the novella is stereotypical. It is important for the development of the plot but has no depth of its own. This is not the case in Shakespeare's dramatisation. Clearly inspired by Marlowe's Barabas but also, it seems, by the tragic real-life context of Lopez's trial, he developed a complex villain. Unlike Marlowe who

exaggerated the negative traits of Barabas *ad absurdum*, Shakespeare used a strategy he had already perfected in historical tragedies like *Richard III* – he provides access to the mind of the villain and lets him explain himself the trauma that drives his wicked behaviour. The culmination of this is Shylock’s “Hath not a Jew eyes” speech in Act III, scene i. The realisation that Jews and Christians share the same humanity and therefore are equal in dignity casts a new light on Shylock’s character and the overall meaning of the play.

Xenophobia and racism

Other “unpleasant” issues are also added by Shakespeare to Giovanni Fiorentino’s original story. Today we would call them xenophobia, racism and homoeroticism. The first four (of altogether seven) scenes that take place in Belmont are dedicated to Portia either talking about, or meeting her suitors – a Neapolitan prince, a German Count (Palatine), a French Lord (Monsieur le Bon), a Baron of England (Falconbridge), a Scottish Lord, another German (the Duke of Saxony’s nephew), the Prince of Morocco and the Prince of Aragon. She inevitably speaks about them in terms of national stereotypes. This creates serious comic potential – she ridicules the Neapolitan for thinking only about horses, the first German for lacking vigour and a sense of humour, the Frenchman for being too neurotic, the Englishman for not speaking any foreign languages, the Scotsman for being too meek and gullible, the other German for drinking too much, the Moroccan for having “the complexion of a devil”, and the Spaniard for being too proud and foolish. On a more sinister note, Shylock is eventually punished under Venetian laws that protect the locals and mandate excessive sanctions for any aliens that misbehave.

Even though English society had started opening up to refugees fleeing the religious wars already under the rule of Henry VIII, there were still outbursts of public discontent against the foreigners even in Shakespeare’s own time. There were riots in 1592, 1593 and 1595 in the context of which Shakespeare contributed to a never-performed play *Sir Thomas More*, in which the eponymous character, in the capacity of Sheriff of London, confronts the crowd on “Evil May Day” – a historical xenophobic riot that took place in 1517. One of the two passages authored by Shakespeare is Thomas More’s speech in which he makes the rioters imagine what it would feel like if they were to end up in the shoes of the “wretched strangers”, in order to demonstrate to them their “mountainish inhumanity” (Pollard, 2010).

Some of these "strangers" were Elizabethans of different skin colour. 16th-century London was inhabited by Persians, Indians, East-Indians and, of course, "negars and blackamoors". The numbers of the latter apparently increased dramatically by 1600 as slaves were freed from captured Spanish ships¹. In his other Venetian play *The Tragedy of Othello* (1603) Shakespeare confronts the issue of race directly. The psychological destabilisation of the Moor owes, at least in part, to him being a black man climbing up the social ladder in a white men's world and marrying a white woman. In manipulating Othello and turning the other characters against him Iago exploits existing racial prejudices, e.g. by describing Othello as a "black ram" or a "Barbary horse" mating with Brabantio's white daughter to produce monstrous offspring (I.i.94-127). Placing such a character at the centre of one of his great tragedies means that Shakespeare was not indifferent to the problems of race and wanted to show to his contemporaries what it felt like to be abhorred, feared and envied because of your skin colour.

Homoeroticism

Homoeroticism is subtly suggested in *The Merchant*. Antonio is melancholic and seems to harbour a more-than-friendly interest in the much younger Bassanio. According to Solanio, he "only loves the world for him" (II.viii.52). There seems to be a rivalry between Antonio and Portia for Bassanio's attention, which is eventually won by Portia by dressing up as a man and outwitting everyone. Unlike his counterpart Ansaldo in Giovanni Fiorentino's original text Antonio does not marry in the end. The homoerotic sensibilities of the play may have even remained unnoticed were it not for the long list of instances in Shakespeare's works where this theme is explored from various perspectives – e.g. the relationship between the speaker and the "Fair Youth" in the *Sonnets*, Phoebe and Ganymede in *As You Like It*, Orsino and Cesario, Olivia and Cesario, as well as Antonio and Sebastian in *Twelfth Night*.

It is important to note that the terms *homosexuality*, *heterosexuality* and *bisexuality* emerged in the 19th century. Early modern people did not have a need to determine their sexual orientation. The major distinction was between the heterosexual monogamy in marriage for the purposes of procreation, promoted by the Church, and sodomy, i.e. all sorts of diversions from this norm, including extramarital sex, non-

¹ At the turn of the seventeenth century, Queen Elizabeth's Privy Council issued three documents that authorised the removal of "negars and blackamoors" from England.

procreative sex, oral sex, anal sex, mutual masturbation, homosexual sex, group sex, bestiality, etc. Another important idea that can help us understand the notion of sexuality of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, is Platonic love. In simplified terms, it claims that there are different forms of love (eros) – the baser forms are connected with the desire to engender offspring, while the more elevated ones – with the desire to engender wisdom. So, love between two men, typically an older, wiser one and a younger, more beautiful one, can be understood in terms of love. Thus, Platonic love covered a wide range of relationships some of which could be considered homosexual today. Yet another related idea is that of Renaissance philosopher Pico della Mirandola which presents man as a “great miracle” because he is a spiritual intelligentsia endowed with free will. The purpose of free will is for man to choose what form of life he prefers. This idea was later adapted by humanist scholar Juan Luis Vives into his *Fable about Man*, in which man is an actor who can play every part – he can be a plant, animal, man, woman, even a god.

Patriarchalism

However, the most central “unpleasant” issue in *The Merchant* is not xenophobia, racism, homoeroticism, or antisemitism – it is patriarchalism. It runs throughout the whole play and all female characters are confronted with it. Portia must find a way to liberate herself from the oppression of her dead father, but also avoid oppression in her future married life. The first part of her agenda is paralleled by Jessica – a character missing in the original novella – who wants to escape from her status of a Jew’s daughter by becoming a Christian’s wife. The second part is paralleled by Nerrissa who, just like Portia, wants to make sure that her husband will not underestimate her and will treat her respectfully. The importance of completing the two phases of this process is stressed comically by the story of the clown, Lancelot Gobbo, who musters courage to change his worse master for a better one – but still remains a servant, and escapes from the devilish Jew – only to land on a black Moorish wife.

Like antisemitism, patriarchalism also has its origin in the Christian doctrine. The Book of Genesis gives two reasons for the subjection of women. First, woman was created for man, of his own flesh, not the other way around (Genesis 2:18-25). Second, woman was guiltier than man in committing the original sin, so she was punished to be ruled over by him (Genesis 3:16). These reasons were still used to determine the political, economic and social status of women at the time of Shakespeare. This is clearly demonstrated in a legal

compendium *The Law's Resolutions of Women's Rights* published in 1632 but apparently composed during Elizabeth's reign. The comprehensive description of a woman's legal status uses these biblical reasons to explain why "women have no voice in parliament, they make no laws, they consent to none, they abrogate none. All of them are understood either married or to be married and their desires are subject to their husband". Girls were effectively barred from grammar school and university education even if their social and economic status allowed for it. They were considered intellectually less capable and therefore unsuitable for humanist education. Instead, those of them who received training would master practical skills that would make them better in their roles inside the family as wives, mothers and mistresses of households. When women married their legal personality would be merged into that of their husbands. By law a married woman could neither enter into contracts, nor sue independently of her husband (Kaplan, 2016).

The historical situation of women was clearly at odds with the example of the monarch, a woman who eventually decided not to marry and have children. It was also in contradiction with the idealisation of women in the amorous culture that pervaded not only private, but also public life. In this context Shakespeare confronted this issue in one of his earliest plays, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and continued exploring it throughout his career. While the histories and tragedies are centred around masculine heroes, the comedies are dominated by women (Bamber, 1982). It is sufficient to think of Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing*, Rosalind in *As You Like It*, Viola in *Twelfth Night* and Helena in *All's Well that Ends Well* in order to make out the consistent message conveyed in these plays. Women are certainly not inferior to men. In terms of courage and intellect they sometimes surpass them. Hence, keeping women in subordination is groundless and therefore wrong.

Shakespeare even seems to have a favourite dramatic device to demonstrate this on the stage – cross-dressing. At a crucial moment in the plot a woman would dress as a man, assuming thus male privileges, e.g. the possibility to travel freely, to be treated equally, to speak from a position of authority, and thus would solve an apparently unsolvable problem. Interestingly, this motif is present in Giovanni Fiorentino's novella which was used as the source for *The Merchant*. And in the chronology of Shakespeare plays it is most probably the earliest instance of its use. Shakespeare apparently found the device dramatically useful because he immediately extended its use. In *The Merchant*

all women dress as men at some point – Jessica to escape from her father, while Portia and Nerrissa to help their husbands and to assert their status.

Of course, cross-dressing provided additional comic potential due to the fact that female parts in Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre were typically performed by young men. Later in *As You Like It* Shakespeare tested the limits of the device by having a boy actor play a woman, Rosalind, who pretends to be a male character, Ganymede, who pretends to be Rosalind. In *Twelfth Night* Orsino and Olivia both fall in love with Viola while she is pretending to be a man, Cesario, and the love triangle is only solved when her identical twin-brother Sebastian arrives, who is in turn fancied by Antonio. Besides the potential for humorous twists and homoerotic jokes, cross-dressing opposed the dogmatic nature of gender roles, and by extension that of other similarly social conventions, to the universality of the human essence, and highlighted the freedom of the human being to fashion his or her own self in the world.

From the point of view of performance history, *The Merchant* enjoyed lasting popularity both in England and outside of it. The figure of Shylock quickly asserted itself as the central concern of the play. A major influence on 19th-century productions was that of Henry Irving which premiered in 1879 in London. It was respectful to Shakespeare's text, tried to be historically accurate in terms of setting and costume, upheld Victorian values and stereotypes, and most importantly focused on Shylock who was presented as a complex tragic figure that captured the imagination of the audience and elicited their sympathy. The modernist alternative to Irvin's approach was to foreground the comic plot of the play and present Shylock as a stereotypically grotesque Jew. An extreme version of this approach, featuring a completely dehumanised version of Shakespeare's character, was used as antisemitic propaganda by the Nazi regime in Germany in the 1930s. After the end of the Second World War, when the whole of humanity became aware of the monstrous crime of the Holocaust, the question of how to portray Shylock in *The Merchant* became understandably sensitive. As a result, the comic dimension of the play was often suppressed in post-Holocaust stagings. A noteworthy production that managed to restore the balance between the two generically dissimilar plots and all the "unpleasant" issues of the play was that of Trevor Nunn for the National Theatre in London in 1999. A variety of other productions reflected other specific political anxieties, e.g. why did Russia's post-communist transition go wrong (Robert Sturua's production

that premiered in 2000) or the global financial crisis and its implications for social injustice (Daniel Sullivan's production that premiered in 2010) (Sokolova, 2014).

Javor Gardev's recent Bulgarian production

In May 2024 a new production of *The Merchant of Venice* premiered at the National Theatre in Sofia. It was directed by one of the foremost Bulgarian theatre directors – Javor Gardev. A graduate of the renowned National Classical Lyceum, holding university degrees in theatre directing but also in philosophy, Gardev quickly established himself as a highly intellectual theatre-maker both at home and abroad. With his long list of achievements and accolades his work inevitably receives a lot of attention from theatregoers and is influential on fellow artists. Over the years, Gardev has demonstrated a taste for Shakespeare and especially in Shakespearean super-productions. In 2006 he rocked the stage of the National Theatre with his bold, high-octane production of *King Lear*. In 2012 he put on the same stage the most ambitious *Hamlet* that Bulgarian audiences had seen in a long while.

In his *Hamlet* Gardev used for the first time in the theatre the new Bulgarian translation of Shakespeare's best-known drama made by Alexander Shurbanov – distinguished academic and accomplished poet himself. This year's production of *The Merchant* again presented a new Bulgarian translation by Shurbanov which was published simultaneously with the premiere. It uses easily accessible, contemporary Bulgarian language, but at the same time recreates with the highest level of scholarly precision both the complex meaning and the poetic rhythm of Shakespeare's original. The academic team consulting Gardev increased including also London-based Shakespeare scholar Boika Sokolova who has written extensively about *The Merchant*.

Gardev's new production clearly lived up to the expectations created by the previous ones. It gave the audience the theatrical event of the year. It brought together an excellent team of actors – both upstart and well-established ones. It presented respectfully Shakespeare's text in its graceful new translation. It was lively and dynamic, visually impressive, musically stirring, linguistically polyphonic, well-advertised. As a reviewer observed, on the opening night it grabbed the audience, half-the intellectual elite of the country, by the throat and ruthlessly conquered it. Paradoxically, Gardev did not achieve this by pleasing them, but by forcing them to acclaim something that was unpleasant (Kambourov, 2014).

In his directorial concept included in the playbill Gardev focuses on the notion of “hot temper” (I.ii.18) which he interprets as a metaphor for inexorable primordial passions or tensions that precede ideology and rationalisation. These passions, claims Gardev, account for intuitive attraction or repulsion between people, which results in conflicts that cannot be explained in doctrinal, ethnical or gender terms. The passions and the emotions resulting from them are subsequently rationalised and arranged in logically coherent narratives. These narratives, however, do not help individuals control their passions, but rather group them in ideological camps where they channel their shared passions to further antagonise them. Therefore, concludes Gardev, ideological rationalisations are no remedy for the eruption of these passions. The memory of past wars is no guarantee for the preservation of peace. Those who study the Night of Broken Glass, in order to learn from history, may be exactly the ones who will incite future pogroms.

Following this agenda Gardev reached far beyond the limits of the usual “unpleasantness” of *The Merchant*. The Venetian men – Antonio, Solanio, Salarino, Bassanio, Gratiano and Lorenzo – were presented as unpleasant. They were young, arrogant, bad-mannered, foul-mouthed, bored, focused on ways to make easy money and spend it on entertainment. Antonio seemed frustrated and angry rather than melancholic. Solanio and Salarino demonstrated freakish identities of skinheads who were secretly drag-queens. There was an overall sense of toxic masculinity, and a kind of male bonding based on it. The women of Belmont – Portia and Nerissa – looked needy, neurotic and hysterical. There was a hint of a homosexuality between them as well. It also looked like Nerissa manipulated Portia into choosing Bassanio to be her husband, because she was secretly in love with Gratiano, and then sent via Gratiano instructions to Bassanio about which casket to choose. Against this background the most likeable character unexpectedly was Shylock. This was the case, even though Samuel Finzi – the production’s brilliant Bulgarian-German guest star of Bulgarian-Jewish descent – delivered a very careful and balanced performance. His Shylock was neither a wronged romantic hero, nor a cartoon villain. Jessica acted like an angry teenager – she spoke little but slapped everyone who came within her range.

A central accent of Gardev’s production, which was added to Shakespeare’s play, was the theme of multilingualism. Each of Portia’s unsuccessful suitors, who have no cues

in the original text, addressed her on video and recited to her a love sonnet in his own language – Italian, Latin, French, English, Scottish English and German – to which she responded in the respective language. Later when the Princes of Morocco and Arragon arrived, they also spoke in Arabic and Spanish. In private, Shylock and Jessica spoke in Ladino – an old variety of Spanish spoken by Sephardic Jews. No doubt, this directorial decision required significant efforts on the part of the actors to learn their cues in all the languages and also learn how to pronounce them. Linguists and native speakers were recruited as consultants. On the surface, it seems that the purpose of all this is to demonstrate globalization and how we are all made up of different linguistic and cultural layers. In the context of the directorial concept and the particular “unpleasantness” of Gardev’s production, however, there may be a more sinister message. The fear and hatred for the Other may not be a result of communication failure or lack of sufficient knowledge. Portia and Shylock on the stage seem very proficient in others’ languages – but they still hate them.

Another major departure from Shakespeare’s play was the removal of the cross-dressing device from the court hearing scene. Instead of disguising themselves as men and intervening personally in Antonio’s trial, Portia and Nerissa sent two actual men, the servant Balthasar and the jurist Bellario, to do the job for them. This contributed to the already suggested impression that Portia may be rich, but she is not very smart or capable herself, and completely derailed the feminist theme from Shakespeare’s original play. In the final scene when it became clear that Bassanio and Gratiano had broken their promises to their wives and had given away their rings – Portia threw a pitiful tantrum and seemingly in an act of self-punishment started throwing around the stage heavy money bags piled there during the trial scene. Bassanio understood that he would have to choose between Antonio and Portia, punched his Venetian friend, pushed him off the stage, and ended up in an uneasy embrace with his new wife.

By the end, even though nobody died, it had become crystal clear that Gardev’s version of *The Merchant* was not a comedy. It was not a tragedy in the formal sense either. It was tragic in a deeper sense. It conveyed the message that human strife and inequality are unsurmountable, that Christians will always humiliate Jews and Jews will always try to avenge themselves – of course, this is just a metaphor for the relationship between any given religious, ethnic, national or other groups, that men and women will be forever

locked in a battle for supremacy and whoever prevails will inevitably oppress the loser. Hence, Western ideals, such as freedom, equality, human rights, rule of law, seem to be unattainable illusions. From this vantage point, Portia's beautiful speech about "the quality of mercy" (IV.i.190-211), which was repeated several times during the production, sounded like a piece of utopian nonsense – since in fact no one on the stage showed any intention to practise what it preached.

Thus, Gardev's production clearly mirrors crucial negative features of the reality we live in. After a decade of end-of-history optimism following the fall of the Berlin Wall during which we all thought that the Cold War was over and Western democracies had prevailed, we have witnessed a gradual backsliding in the support for democracy, classical liberalism and human rights. There were some genuine disappointments, such as the global war on terrorism or the global financial crisis of 2007-8, but after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and definitively after Brexit and the election of Donald J. Trump as the 45th president of the United States in 2016 no one anymore doubted that there was a "new" Cold War. All this exacerbated after February 2022 and Russia's unprecedented military aggression against neighbouring Ukraine. What possibly only citizens of countries from the former Soviet Bloc understood was that the "new" Cold War was actually the old Cold War, it simply never ceased. Those who knew how to abuse communism quickly learned how to abuse capitalism and the democratic state as well. An economic system that values the accumulation of capital is naturally susceptible to corruption, while a political model based on free speech – to disinformation.

The innovation that changed the rules of the game, however, was the invention of social media and their underlying algorithms for distributing content almost instantaneously on an unprecedented scale. Originally, these algorithms were designed to attract people, harvest and process the data they produced, and target them more adequately with advertisements of goods and services they are likely to buy. Soon, it was discovered that the same algorithms reward hate speech online and are ideal for targeting people with disinformation they are likely to believe. This discovery was quickly weaponized by Russia and its allies in the "new" Cold War in a persistent attempt to undermine citizens' belief in the value of democracy, classical liberalism and human rights and so destabilise the countries that promote them. A major strategy is identifying existing cleavages in Western societies and exploiting them by flooding social media with

disinformation narratives that contradict internationally acknowledged principles, the position of the government, the authorities, the judiciary, the academic community, etc (Maci, 2024). In a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society disinformation will try to stir up ethnic and religious conflict; in case of a refugee crisis, it will incite xenophobia and racism; it will take advantage of inherent homophobia to spread fear of a secret plan to brainwash children to make them all gay.

Interestingly, the cleavage between men and women also partakes of this story. Over the years the feminist movement has gained significant ground, mainly in Western countries, in countering discrimination, right to vote, to hold public office, to equal employment, to own property, to enter into legal contracts, to free movement, to education, to health, reproductive rights, freedom of violence, etc. In recent decades, however, feminism has suffered a backlash, which has intensified in correlation with the onslaught against democracy and human rights. This backlash has taken many interrelated forms. The most direct one is violence against women². There is also a rise in anti-abortion action on a global scale³. In some places there is opposition to sexual and reproductive health education. Yet another form of anti-feminism, spreading like wildfire on social media, is toxic masculinity. Ranging from the pseudo-academic YouTube talks of Jordan Peterson to the scandalously misogynistic TikTok ramblings of Andrew Tate its proponents assert the "natural" inequality between men and women, and preach to return to "traditional", i.e. patriarchal, family values where women are "tradwives", "homemakers" and should "sacrifice" themselves in the name of procreation. Naturally, these controversies are gladly amplified by Russian disinformation, where Vladimir Putin is banning the "child-free ideology" and thinking to restore the Soviet tax on childlessness.

In Bulgaria all these factors combine to create the perfect storm. After 35 years of unsteady and troublesome efforts to integrate with Europe and the West, the country is now on the brink of drifting back into the orbit of Russian influence. Even though after the collapse of Communism Bulgaria was formally re-established as a democracy, ex-communists and their successors retained powerful positions in the political, corporate

² EU survey on gender-based violence against women and other forms of interpersonal violence. Eurostat. European Union, 2022.

³ An Unstoppable Movement: A Global Call to Recognize and Protect Those Who Defend the Right to Abortion. Amnesty International, 2023.

and criminal sectors, and thus perpetuated their control over the state and its institutions. The result was unbridled, long-term embezzlement of national and European funds and pushing the country closer and closer to Russia. The efforts of democratically minded citizens and their political representatives have achieved important goals like Bulgaria's membership in NATO and the European Union, but have not managed to liberate the state from what has taken the shape of systemic corruption pervading all spheres of life. Of course, the captors of the Bulgarian state have spared no means to discredit the authentically democratic forces. After the advent of social media and disinformation it has become infinitely easier to distract people, exploit their biases, turn them against each other and generally away from responsible political mobilisation. Now, what crystallises amidst the strange hotchpotch of apathy and aggressive rows on "unpleasant" issues is a worrisome fantasy for "strong-hand" government.

In this context, it is hard to tell whether Gardev's production of *The Merchant* is influenced by negative social trends or tries to expose them. After all, it broods over the "natural" character of inequality, toys with toxic masculinity, and suppresses the feminist plot. Just like the tragic actual history of Jews has put pressure on directors to be careful with the "unpleasant" issue of antisemitism, the current actual threat on democracy, human rights, and in particular women's rights, both globally and locally, should compel them to be careful also with the other "unpleasant" issues. In Bulgaria the threat is so immediate that everyone, who is aware of this, cannot but take a clear stand. The 400-year-old solution proposed by Shakespeare in *The Merchant* is simple but appealing. All forms of inequality are essentially similar. If we honestly accept the idea of our underlying shared humanity, we can overcome the most fundamental of them – the inequality between men and women. If we manage to do this, we can deal in the same way with all the rest.

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