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How Not to Read Literature: The Nazis' Appropriation of The Merchant of Venice

Cover Page Footnote

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How Not to Read Literature: The Nazis' Appropriation of *The Merchant of Venice*

In his essay "Reading Law, Reading Literature: Law as Language," James Boyd White extols the interpretive flexibility of literary and legal texts. White describes how a text's interpretations can change depend on different readers and cultural contexts, and warns against viewing literature as having "objective and determinate meanings." Reading White's argument provokes further questions regarding the consequences of viewing literature as having a set meaning. Can a literary work be interpreted in an attempted justification of a social or legal claim? If so, can literature be attempted to promote a morally corrupt agenda?

Perhaps no agenda has been immortalized as more opposed to literary values than that of the Nazis. Likely the most morally corrupt regime in history, the Nazi Party utilized and destroyed literature with brutal effect to promote their legal agenda. The Nazi Party's infamous book burnings destroyed thousands of volumes of literature written by Jewish authors. While the Nazis are infamous for their destruction of literature, less is known regarding the works promoted by the party. Perhaps the most striking literary figure revered by the Nazi Party was William Shakespeare. Several of Shakespeare's works were interpreted as promoting certain Nazi values. Easily Shakespeare's play most closely associated with Nazism is *The Merchant of Venice*. Shylock, the play's central antagonist, was perceived by the Nazis as embodying Jewish tyranny and inferiority. This paper seeks to explore how the Nazis' utilization and alteration of *The Merchant of Venice* to promote their Anti-Semitic legal agenda exemplifies the danger expressed by White of reducing literature to holding an objective, determinate meaning.

German enthusiasm for Shakespeare traces long past Nazism. Shakespeare's works began being performed during the early seventeenth-century, when English theatre companies crossed the channel and performed on German stages during the Restoration. Admiration for

Shakespeare surged in eighteenth-century German intellectual circles. The prolific German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe gave a lecture on Shakespeare in which he professed "once I had read an entire play, I stood there like a blind man given the gift of sight by some miraculous healing touch" (quod. in Spottiswoode). Shakespearestage, or "Shakespeare's Day", celebrations began being held. In their essay "Shakespeare under Different Flags: The Bard in German Classrooms from Hitler to Honecker," Barbara Korte and Kristina Spittel note how German intellectuals "saw in Shakespeare a fraternal spirit who would help them in their efforts to free themselves from the stifling corset of French classicism" (Korte and Spittel 268). This Shakespeare-influenced reaction against aristocratic French drama culminated in Germany's own literary movement known as *Sturm und Drang*, or "storm and stress". Shakespeare's impact on German culture became so strong that the phrase *Unser Shakespeare*, or "our Shakespeare," was coined. By the time the twentieth-century arrived, Shakespeare's works were a staple in German schools.

In order to comprehend the Nazis' relationship to Shakespeare and particularly to *The Merchant of Venice*, one must understand how rabid nationalism and Anti-Semitism dramatically altered German society. Germany's defeat in World War One neutered its global power, as the Treaty of Versailles resulted in massive territorial and financial loss. This installed a deep sense of shame and humiliation in the German public. A WWI veteran named Adolf Hitler recognized and sought to capitalize on his fellow German citizens' hunger for nationalist ideals. His manifesto *Mein Kampf* established the ideological framework of Nazism as based upon the notion of a German master race. *Mein Kampf* heralded the Aryans as "the Prometheus of Mankind" (Hitler 31) and claimed Germans possessed the purest form of Aryan blood. He decreed Aryan Germans require *lebensraum*, or "living space," in order to spread Aryan purity

and eventually achieve global dominance. This required the removal of Europeans deemed non-Aryan from their lands. *Mein Kampf* eerily proves how a work of literature can influence the law. Once Hitler became appointed Chancellor in 1933, the Nazi government's legal system was founded with the goal established in his manifesto to ensure Aryan supremacy in German society.

Of the numerous groups deemed inferior to the Aryans, none were as reviled as the Jews. Hitler viewed the presence of Jews in German society as “race-tuberculosis of the people” (“Adolf Hitler Issues Comment on the ‘Jewish Question’”). He decreed the Nazi Party’s “ultimate goal must definitely be the removal of the Jews altogether.” In September 1935, Hitler passed the Nuremberg Race Laws with the intention to strip the basic rights of Jews living in Germany. These laws consisted of two parts. The Reich Citizenship Law established Jews, and later Roma and Sinti, as beneath citizenship. Only those deemed having “German or kindred blood” (“Nuremberg Race Laws”) were considered citizens. Those of Jewish ancestry were deemed possessing inferior blood and were instead granted “subjects of the state.” This characterized Jews as not just legally inferior, but biologically inferior to Aryans. The Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honor forbade marriage or sexual relations between German citizens and Jews, branding this “race defilement.” This sought to ensure the purity of the German bloodline. By depriving Jews of the basic rights of citizenship, the Nuremberg Laws laid the legal framework for the Holocaust. The Nazis sought to purge the influence of Jews and other groups deemed inferior from German culture in order for the Aryan race to achieve dominance. This resulted in the virtual erasure of literature written by Jewish authors or expressing sympathy to Jews in the form of massive book burnings.

Whereas hundreds of authors' works were banned, Shakespeare's eminence in German culture remained. Shakespeare's works began to be interpreted as justifying the Nazi Party's extreme nationalistic and eugenic views. The German Shakespeare Society, a German intellectual society established in 1864, eventually became overrun with Nazi-affiliated scholars. Erin Strobl's essay "The Bard of Eugenics: Shakespeare and Racial Activism in the Third Reich" details how Nazis viewed many of Shakespeare's plays as advocating Aryan supremacy and racial purity. Hans F.K. Günther, an influential German literary scholar and a Nazi, read several of Shakespeare's characters as embodying national socialist virtues. He interpreted Shakespeare's depiction in the *Sonnets* of "a fair youth of the opening poems [who] is repeatedly urged to transmit his beauty" (Strobl 328) as encouragement for the Aryan race to multiply and spread their purity. He read certain characters such as Olivia in *Twelfth Night* and Helen in *All's Well that Ends Well* as "aware of racial superiority and demonstrat[ing] Shakespeare's instinctive grasp of eugenic potential" (Strobl 330). Another German scholar, Walter Hübner, described Shakespeare's writings as

truly Germanic in the elementary force of his feelings of love and hate; the allegiance between the nobility and its leader (history plays); characters haunted by inner conflict like Richard II, Hamlet, and also Prospero; man's love of nature; the Nordic apparitions of nebulous worlds. . . . The Germanic poet strives to give shape to willpower. The liberation of the German spirit through Shakespeare . . . became possible because the German spirit is Shakespearean - impetuous, scorning the finite, cosmopolitan.

(quod. in Kortel & Spittel 276)

Just as many of Shakespeare's characters were admired for exemplified the German spirit, others were read as exemplifying the inferiority of the "other". None was read as more

antithetical to the German spirit than *The Merchant of Venice's* Shylock. As the play's avaricious moneylending antagonist and Shakespeare's most noteworthy Jewish character, Shylock seemed emblematic of Jewish wickedness. Nazis academic such as Wolfgang Heller wrote sentiments that Shakespeare "has no sympathy for this man who is filled with evil and hatred against all that is noble" (quod. in Kortel & Spittel 276).

While a closer analysis of Shylock reveals nuance and complexity, strong traces of Anti-Semitism are clearly evident in Shylock's characterization. For centuries Jews have been stereotyped as avaricious. As a shrewd and greedy moneylender, Shylock falls into this stereotype. As soon as he first enters, Shylock obsesses over the merchant Antonio's debt to him, remarking "three thousand ducats, well . . . for three months, well" (1.3.1-3). Nowhere is Shylock's greed more evident than Shylock's reaction to his daughter Jessica fleeing from him with a bag of his money and the Christian Lorenzo:

"My daughter, O my ducats, O my daughter!
Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats!
Justice, the law, my ducats, and my daughter,
A sealèd bag, two sealèd bags of ducats,
Of double ducats, stol'n from me by my daughter,
And jewels—two stones, two rich and precious stones—
Stol'n by my daughter! Justice! Find the girl!
She hath the stones upon her, and the ducats." (2.8.15-22)

Here Shylock seems more outraged at the loss of his money than that of his daughter. His anger causes him to conflate the two, "daughter" and "ducats" becoming interchangeable. His greed borders on parody, as the loss of his ducats reverberates throughout his head. Shylock's

repetition of “ducats” and “sealed bag” indicates that the stolen money causes him more stress than losing his child. Shylock’s dismayed remarks regarding Jessica “flee[ing] with a Christian” and “Christian ducats” further pushes him into the realm of stereotype, as Jews have historically been perceived as exhibiting hatred towards Christians.

However, Shylock’s status as a victim at the hands of his daughter seems to invite the audience’s sympathy. His bias against Christianity likely stems from him repeatedly receiving discrimination at the hands of Christians. Shylock’s grudge against Antonio, supposedly the play’s protagonist, stems from Antonio having previously spat on him and calling him slurs. Shakespeare’s portrayal of Shylock’s repeated victimization indicates not that he intended to portray Shylock as an irredeemably wicked villain, but as a more complex and tragic villain. Shylock’s iconic “Hath not a Jew eyes?” monologue famously demonstrates his complexity and suffering:

He hath disgraced me and
hindered me half a million, laughed at my losses,
mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted
my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies—
and what’s his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not
a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions,
senses, affections, passions? Fed with the
same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to
the same diseases, healed by the same means,
warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer
as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not

bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you
poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall
we not revenge? (53-66)

Although Shylock's sympathetic aspects seem self-evident, Nazi scholars either willfully ignored or made excuses for this. The most common argument was that Shylock's calls for sympathy cannot be trusted. Korte and Spittel characterize Wolfgang Heller as "quick to point out that what the play does have to say in favour of the Jew's humanity comes 'only' from Shylock himself" (276). Rather than confronting Shylock's sympathetic traits, Nazi scholarship almost entirely focused on his negative traits.

A negative reading of Shylock would seem to yield a positive attitude towards Jessica for rebelling against her father. This yielded problematic to Nazi readings of the play, which resulted in a multitude of excuses from Nazi academics. Hans Gunther suggested in his essay "Shakespeares Mädchen" that Jessica "is such a flat character . . . because Jews lack the Aryans' inner life, and Shakespeare had perceived as much" (quod. Strobl 333). Korte and Spittel's essay details how teachers were instructed that, when teaching the play to German schoolchildren, to explain to the class that Shakespeare held a limited knowledge of race biology. Nazi academic Joachim Müller warned teachers that

One must not be prejudiced by the information . . . that she is the Jew's daughter and thus deprive her, on the basis of today's criteria of race and on the ground of this blood tie, of any possibility of distancing herself from her Jewish 'father'. It is necessary, first of all, to remember that Shakespeare had a highly acute sensitivity for race (illustrated so clearly in his conception of the Shylock character), but could of course not have any biological knowledge about race so that the great difference in character between the Jew's daughter

and her father, to him and his time, did not form a contradiction. (quod. in Kortel and Spittel 276)

Jessica's marriage to the Christian Lorenzo proved even more problematic to the Nazis' wholly Anti-Semitic reading of the text, as the Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honor forbade Aryan-Jewish intermarriage. To solve this perceived problem, the *Reichsdramaturgie*, the theatre wing of Joseph Goebbels' Ministry of Propaganda, proposed an altered version of the play "in which Jessica is turned into Shylock's foster child and all references to her Jewishness are cut" (Schnauder). They also dealt with passages that may elicit sympathy for Shylock by omitting them, most notably his "Hath Not a Jew Eyes?" monologue. By stripping Shylock of any sympathy this radical alteration of the text transformed Shylock into a seething, irredeemable Anti-Semitic caricature.

The Nazi Party propagandized *The Merchant of Venice* in German theatres as an indictment against Jewishness. Nazi member Lothar Müthel directed a notoriously Anti-Semitic staging of the play in 1943 at Vienna's Burgtheater. The play was commissioned by Vienna's SS *Gauleiter*, or "district administrator", in order to "celebrate the [city's] deportation of all the Jews" (Heschel 407). Shylock was played by leading German actor Werner Krauss as a hyper-exaggerated Anti-Semitic caricature. In a newspaper account of the play, Müthel describes the grotesqueness of Krauss's performance:

With a crash and a weird train of shadows, something revoltingly alien and startlingly repulsive crawled across the stage. . . . The pale pink face, surrounded by bright red hair and beard, with its unsteady, cunning little eyes; the greasy caftan with the yellow prayershawl slung round; the splay-footed, shuffling walk; the foot stamping with rage: the claw-like gestures with the

hands; the voice, now bawling, now muttering--all add up to a pathological image of the East European Jewish type, expressing all its inner and outer uncleanliness, emphasizing danger through humor. (quod. in Heschel 407)

Müthel's deeply disturbing vision of Shylock sought to completely de-humanize him. His choice of terms like "claw-like" hands and "crawling" equivocates Shylock to an animal. The Austrian reviewer Oskar Maurus Fontana also viewed Krauss's performance as animalistic, repeatedly emitting "animal-like screeches, grunts and hisses" (quod. in Schnauder). Likening Shylock to an animal suggests a perception of Jews as a sub-human race. Krauss's choice of "emphasizing danger through humor" in his performance suggests that he strove to persuade the audience into simultaneously viewing Jews as humorously buffoonish and a threat that must be eradicated.

The various Nazi interpretations of *The Merchant of Venice* shared the common characteristic of being "objective and determinate" in order to portray Shylock as personifying their extremely Anti-Semitic view of the Jewish race. The play's multiple passages depicting Shylock in a positive light were either ignored, excused on behalf of Shakespeare, or extracted from the text. Nazi scholars manipulated Shakespeare's intentions in order to conform to the political and legal platform of the Nazi Party. The rigidity of the various Nazi misinterpretations of *The Merchant of Venice* suggests that reading a text as conforming to pre-conceived notions of meaning can completely overlook or defy the author's intentions. Far more disturbing are the social and legal implications this poses. Nazi scholars attempted to read, teach, and stage *The Merchant of Venice* in order to persuade an audience that Jews are legally and biologically inferior to Aryan Germans. The Nazis' appropriation of *The Merchant of Venice* unfortunately proves that literature can be weaponized in an attempt to perpetuate the social and legal

subjugation of minorities. If the Nazi Party neglected to systematically alter the minds of German citizens through literature and culture, perhaps the Holocaust would never have occurred.

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