

“Murder cannot be hid long”: Blood, law, and justice in William Shakespeare’s Venice

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Abstract: There appears to be no mystery surrounding the crimes committed in William Shakespeare’s two Venetian plays, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*. Shylock is condemned as an “alien” proven to “seek the life of [the] citizen” Antonio; Othello commits suicide following the shocking realization that he has killed his innocent wife, Desdemona; “The time, the place, the torture” for the “hellish villain” Iago, who instigated their death, is left to the spectator’s imagination. However, various contemporary writers have not been satisfied with these scenarios and have instead written further crimes into Shakespeare’s plots. Naomi Alderman’s radio drama *The Wolf in the Water* (2016), Clive Sinclair’s short story “Shylock Must Die” (2018), and Andrea Pennacchi’s novel *Una foresta di scimmie* [*A Wilderness of Monkeys*, 2025] appropriate the genres, modes, and tropes of crime literature to test the continuing relevance of Shakespeare’s comedy and tragedy. After an overview of the crimes attributed to the Jews in medieval and early modern times, this study discusses these adaptations to explore issues of crime and justice in connection with the political themes more traditionally associated with Shakespeare’s works.

Keywords: *crime fiction; adaptation; Shakespeare; Venice; Merchant of Venice; Othello; Naomi Alderman; Clive Sinclair; Andrea Pennacchi.*



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Introduction

Truth will come to light, murder cannot be hid long;
a man's son may, but in the end truth will out.
(*The Merchant of Venice* 2.2.73-5)¹

me pareva che Biasio col cortelo
tagiasse a fete el caro mio putelo!
*I thought of Biasio with his knife
cutting my dear child into slices.* (Foscarini 39)

Venice has long been the city of paradoxes (Platt 57-94), and we start with one. The clown Launcelot summarizes the basic law of crime fiction: there is a hidden crime, and the mystery will eventually be solved. Yet in his story, there is neither crime nor solution. In fact, Shakespeare's two Venetian plays, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*, seem to have no mystery. Shylock is blocked before he spills a single drop of Antonio's blood by cutting the pound of flesh he is legally entitled to. Othello commits suicide following the shocking realization that he has killed his innocent wife, Desdemona. “The time, the place, the torture” for the “hellish villain” Iago (5.2.366-7), who instigated their deaths, is left to the spectator's imagination. There is murder, there is punishment, but no mystery.

Three twenty-first-century writers have been inspired by these scenarios, yet not fully satisfied, and have added further crimes to their adaptations of Shakespeare's plots. Naomi Alderman's radio drama *The Wolf in the Water* (2016), Clive Sinclair's short story “Shylock Must Die” (2018), and Andrea Pennacchi's novel *Una foresta di scimmie* (“A Wilderness of Monkeys”, 2025) appropriate the genres, modes, and tropes of crime literature to test the continuing relevance of Shakespeare's *Merchant*. This study examines these texts to explore crime and justice in relation to the political themes traditionally associated with Shakespeare's Venice, as well as their relationship to the narrative and emotional structures of crime writing, criminal investigation, and punishment, one of the most popular lenses through which we observe our own society. After a brief survey of the historical and literary relationship between Venice, crime, and justice, and a focus on a single crime, the three adaptations will be examined in detail in light of tentative conclusions.

Shakespeare, Venice, crimes

As millions of tourists travel to Venice today to admire its romanticized beauty, it is easy to forget that, to early modern eyes, the city was primarily a political paragon of independence and commercial success. In a carefully cultivated mythography, Venice's image rested less on military achievements or famous individuals than on the stability of

¹ All quotations from Shakespeare's plays are from the Arden editions listed in the Works Cited. Translations of Italian works, unless otherwise stated, are mine.

its institutions and the balance of its legal system. As the Venetian Cardinal Gasparo Contarini put it, in the translation of Queen Elizabeth's courtier Lewis Lewkenor:

This is that rare and excellent thing, wherein Venice seemeth to shine, and to surpasse all antiquitie, for though it is apparant that there hath beene many commonwealthes, which haue farre exceeded Venice as well in empire and greatnesse of estate, as in militarie discipline and glory of the wars: yet hath there not beene any, that may bee paragond with this of ours, for institutions & lawes prudently decreed to establish unto the inhabitants a happie and prosperous felicitie. (Contarini 5-6)

The centrality of justice remains clearly legible today in the allegorical statue towering on the Palazzo Ducale, Venice's most majestic palace and the seat of its ancient political power, placed even higher than the statues of the Doge and Saint Mark's Lion. Echoes of the myth reverberate in Shakespeare, directly and indirectly:

ANTONIO The Duke cannot deny the course of law,
For the commodity that strangers have
With us in Venice, if it be denied,
Will much impeach the justice of the state,
Since that the trade and profit of the city
Consisteth of all nations. (*The Merchant of Venice* 3.3.26-31)

The play's plot pivots on the idea that a ruthless religious outsider can claim the body of a virtuous insider under an ostensibly impartial law. Shakespeare's dramatization does not reflect the reality of the Venetian legal system, but it captures the importance of its projected neutrality.

The same applies to *Othello*, where the African general can secretly marry a senator's daughter with the Duke's and the other senators' approval, further proof that impartiality is inseparable from the urgent need to employ him against the Ottoman enemy. In the same tragedy, we find even more detailed references to the Venetian policing system. When Brabantio discovers that Desdemona has eloped with Othello, he calls to "raise some special officers of night" (1.1.180); Contarini specifically mentions a magistrate "being the heades of the officers by night [who] doe thoroughly examine the cause of the offender" (Contarini 84).

In both cases Shakespeare foregrounds and probes the reputation of Venice as a cosmopolitan metropolis, which suggested to the English traveler Thomas Coryat that the grandiose St. Marks' square, quoting an ancient pun, was not just the centre of the city (*urbis forum*) but the centre of the world (*orbis forum*): "There you may see many Polonians, Slavonians, Persians, Grecians, Turks, Jewes, Christians of all the famous regions of Christendome, and each nation distinguished from another by their proper and peculiar habits" (Coryat 29).

The myth of Venice's fair and neutral justice also appears in the folk tradition of the Fornareto, the baker's boy, a story so popular that it inspired multiple adaptations in drama, opera, and film and, paradoxically, a miscarriage of justice (Toso Fei 73). In 1507, Piero

Fasiol, a young baker’s apprentice in Venice, found a silver knife scabbard and excitedly showed it to his girlfriend Annella, who urged him to return it. On his way back, he discovered the body of the nobleman Alvise Guoro and, while examining it, became stained with the victim’s blood. Witnesses saw him standing beside the corpse holding the scabbard and assumed he was the murderer. Arrested, tortured, and forced into a false confession, Piero was condemned to death despite his innocence. Only moments before his execution, the true killer, Lorenzo Barbo, confessed to the crime out of jealousy, but the message arrived too late, and Piero was beheaded, turning the case into one of Venice’s most notorious miscarriages of justice. The story goes that the next day, the Doge called a meeting of all the judges and admonished them with words that were to be passed down in Venetian courtrooms for three centuries, whenever a death sentence was being considered “...e ricordéve del povaro fornareto”. However, no official document recorded Piero Fasiol’s story. The reason? Some argue that the Republic’s judicial system must not be discredited by a single miscarriage of justice. Others suggest that it appeared in the nineteenth century as yet another nostalgic look at the Serenissima.

To evoke now another paradox, the myth of Venice as the serene republic (*La Serenissima*), a city of liberty, stability, tolerance, beauty, and wise government, harboured a dark counterpart. The counter-myth known as the Black Legend presented Venice as a place of political repression and secret surveillance, espionage and denunciation, moral corruption and decadence, sexual excess and masquerade, cruelty disguised as civility. In Thomas Otway’s tragedy *Venice Preserv’d* (1682), which shaped the English imaginary more powerfully than historical works, Venice becomes a site of conspiracy, corruption, betrayal, and political violence. Lord Byron transformed Venice into a glamorous city of erotic freedom, political decadence, and historical decline, especially in *Marino Faliero* (1821), which focuses on a Doge executed for treason. In the twentieth century, Venice becomes the city of disease, obsession, decay, and death, most notably in Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice* (1912). The Gothic tradition in literature and film continues well into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (see Thieme), and Venice has become a rich setting for crime fiction because of its long-standing symbolic associations with death, mystery, and labyrinthine spaces. The city’s canals, narrow alleys, ambiguities, and hidden corners make it an ideal environment for narratives of crime and investigation, with a long list of authors including, in English, Patricia Highsmith, Donna Leon, Michael Dibdin, Gregory Dowling, Philip Gwynne Jones and, in Italian, Alberto Tosco Fei, Paolo Forcellini, Roberto Tiraboschi, Matteo Strukul, Anna Vera Sullam (see Mattarucco, McGuire, Vidal Perez). The tourist industry offers crime tours and walks, and since 2024 the city hosts Venice Noir, an annual international festival of Noir literature.

Crime in Shakespeare’s Venice

At first sight, the tragedy of *Othello* should be more conducive to an inquiry into Shakespeare’s crime, with its violent deaths, conspiracy, and murder-suicide. However, *this* masterpiece subverts two fundamental tenets of crime writing. As Alessandro Serpieri remarks: “*Othello* is probably the first play in which a tragic plot develops out of a non-existent, phantasmal fabula” (53, my translation). Although it is deeply imbued with the

language of detection, its plot rests on the destruction of rational thought, deduction, and cognition, as Iago systematically undermines Othello's logic and certainty. While he urges his captain to look closely for the truth, he constructs an alternative reality that can never be verified because it doesn't exist.

IAGO: I speak not yet of proof:
Look to your wife, observe her well with Cassio.
Wear your eye thus, not jealous nor secure. (*Othello* 3.3. 199-201)

Secondly, once the crime is uncovered, Othello (and the audience) is denied even the satisfaction of motive.

OTHELLO: Will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil
Why he hath thus ensnared my soul and body?
IAGO Demand me nothing. What you know, you know.
From this time forth I never will speak word. (*Othello* 5.2.298-301)

If Othello stages a crime without proper (re)solution, the *Merchant* offers a resolution without a crime.

SHYLOCK: This kindness will I show.
Go with me to a notary, seal me there
Your single bond, and, in a merry sport,
If you repay me not on such a day,
In such a place, such sum or sums as are
Expressed in the condition, let the forfeit
Be nominated for an equal pound
Of your fair flesh, to be cut off and taken
In what part of your body pleaseth me. (*The Merchant of Venice* 1.3.139-47)

The "pound of flesh" is one of those phrases that have escaped from Shakespeare's works to take a life of their own. It is a horror-story trope oddly implanted in a comedy, with a promise of blood that is more appropriate for a gory tragedy. Many Shakespearean illustrations have framed the exact moment before the pound of flesh is bound to be extracted from the body of Antonio, with Shylock whetting his knife and holding its scales in an uncanny reenactment of a typical murder scene and a simultaneous caricature of the symbol of justice enshrined on Palazzo Ducale, marking the metaphysical difference between the merciless Jew and his Christ-like victim. We can frame the episode as crime if we connect it to another Venetian legend. The story is so enduring that it has given its name to a vaporetto stop. Could you imagine Whitechapel Station on the District line in London named after a serial killer? "Next stop, Jack the Ripper, mind the gap."

Sulla riva de Biasio l'altra sera
So andata col putelo a chiapar aria,

ma se ma Stretto el cuor a una maniera
che la mia testa ancora se zavarìa:
me pareva che Biasio col cortelo
tagiasse a fete el caro mio putelo!

*On the Riva di Biasio the other evening
I went with my child to get some air
My heart sank to such a degree
That my head is still spinning
I thought of Biasio with his knife
cutting my dear child into slices.* (Foscarini 39)

As evoked in this traditional poem and vividly recounted by Alberto Toso Fei, a regular customer at Biagio Cargnio’s famous Venetian tavern was enjoying a bowl of the host’s celebrated stew when he discovered a small bone in it. The object proved to be a child’s finger, prompting him to alert the authorities. A search of the tavern revealed the remains of children that had apparently been used in Cargnio’s stews and sausages. Arrested and forced to confess, Biagio was convicted of murdering and butchering an unknown number of children. His body was then quartered and strung up in four corners of the city. His house was razed to the ground, but the site remains named after him, since Venetian toponyms frequently derive from local tradition rather than official designations. This also explains why, alongside the prevalence of saints’ names and old professions, smaller calli often bear highly picturesque names, such as Calle della Morte (Death Street) or Rio Terà degli Assassini (Filled-in Canal of the Assassins), where I spent my childhood and whose profound darkness allegedly made it an ideal location for murder.

Eating children is a morbid fantasy that has fuelled a far more consequential legend. As James Shapiro shows in the aptly titled chapter “The Jewish Crime” of his seminal *Shakespeare and the Jews* (1996/2016), the *Merchant* is haunted by a number of atrocities attributed to the Jews since the Middle Ages and particularly urgent in Shakespeare’s time. “Even when taken independently, the various parts of this ‘Jewish crime’ – especially child abduction, circumcision, and cannibalism – appear to have touched deeply on fears that no doubt stretch across cultures but seem to have had a special urgency in early modern England” (111). A number of interlaced beliefs marked the Jewish body as different, emanating a certain distinctive stench or having male menstruation, as a corporeal punishment for rejecting Christ. This also changes the potential implications of Shylock’s famous monologue “Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?” (3.1.53ff), making his questions less rhetorical than a modern sensibility might assume. Most of this lethal mythology fixated on blood, which Jewish men were supposedly losing in an unnatural way and having to replace with Christian blood. “The feminized male Jew’s leaky body, then, is inescapably bound to shame, dissolution, and crime, in contrast to the shameless, whole, masculine, and divine image of the Christian male” (Shapiro 108). As early as the thirteenth-century *Miraculorum et Exemplorum Memorabilium*, Thomas of Cantimpré argued that Jews had mistaken *sanguine Christiano* (“Christian blood”) for *sanguine Christi* (“the blood of Christ”),

interpreting the former literally as the physical blood of Christians rather than recognizing the latter as the redemptive blood of Christ. In this antisemitic theological construction, the literal-minded Jew thus rejects the spiritual meaning of Christ's sacrifice and instead cruelly pursues actual Christian blood (Shapiro 38). Versions of this theory continued to circulate in theological arguments throughout late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Europe, also drawing on the semantic and symbolic association between blood and money, which gained particular resonance from the medieval identification of Jews with moneylending. This nexus of Jews, blood, money, and violence proved remarkably durable, surviving long after its original theological framework had receded.

The first documented accusation of ritual murder (or blood libel) occurred in England with William of Norwich (1144), but the phenomenon also extended to the Venetian Republic, providing another exception to the myth of Venice's impartial justice. In fifteenth-century Portobuffolè, a group of Jews was falsely accused of murdering a Christian child and was publicly burned in Saint Mark's Square. Two novels, by Caryl Phillips and Andrea Molesini, fictionalize this episode, suggesting that Venice's central authorities recognized the accusation as a fabrication but, for political reasons, were unwilling to challenge the local judges' verdict. The medieval accusation continued well into the nineteenth century, and arguably its tropes still circulate today (Teter 2020).

Heather Worthington has remarked that crime fiction's origins are closely linked to the development of print culture in Europe from the fifteenth century onward. Observing how crime narratives had always circulated orally in any society, she highlights how it is the invention of printing that marks the beginning of crime fiction: "[p]rinting technology enabled the rapid and relatively instantaneous publication of matters of public interest, and crime was of interest to the public" (*Key Concepts* 103). The accusation surrounding the death of Simon of Trent in 1475 coincided with the printing press's rapid expansion and became one of the earliest demonstrations of the new medium's capacity to disseminate false information across Europe. Printed accounts and images of the alleged ritual murder circulated rapidly across Italy and the German-speaking lands, with the printing press proving, as Po-chia Hsia puts it, "indispensable in creating a major cultural event out of the Trent blood libel" (*Trent* 56). In this sense, the Simon of Trent affair can be regarded as an early instance of what we would now call "fake news": a fictional crime transformed by a new communication technology into a widely circulating transnational narrative.

Strictly connected to the fantasy of ritual murder was the focus on the Jewish ritual of circumcision, which had posed a fundamental problem in the genesis and dissemination of Christianity. To spread the message of Jesus, still connected to the Jewish norms he observed, Paul found a brilliant theological solution that would remove a ritual that could have hindered conversion. In *Romans* 2: 28-29, Paul argued that "a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code". Paul made circumcision irrelevant as a physical practice: true circumcision must be spiritual rather than corporeal. When Christianity became the official religion of Europe, this generated the problem of what to do with the circumcised, the Jews (the internal circumcised) and the Muslims (the external circumcised). The circumcision of Jesus was traditionally reconfigured, as explained in the popular fourteenth-century work the *Golden Legend*, as the first instance of the shedding of Christ's blood, and thus the beginning of

the process of the redemption of humanity. Medieval and Renaissance theologians repeatedly stressed this, highlighting Jesus's suffering as a demonstration of his humanity and a foreshadowing of his Passion. As Julia Lupton puts it, "[i]n European Christendom, circumcision would come to denote a preserve of atavistic, dangerously materialistic rites whose persistence continues to challenge the narrative of Western history" (*Citizen-Saints* 32). In a long process, the spiritual Christian supplanted the carnal and literal Jew. But the obdurate and literal-minded Jew cannot understand Paul's clever metaphor, and Shylock's pound of flesh can be read as the Jew who misreads Paul and instead of embracing Christianity tries to perform a physical circumcision of Antonio's heart.

A relevant example is in our first-hand witness Thomas Coryat, who visited the Ghetto of Venice in 1608 and showed great curiosity towards this rite he could not possibly see in England: "Their circumcision they observe as duly as they did any time betwixt Abraham (in whose time it was first instituted) and the incarnation of Christ. For they use to circumcise every male childe when he is eight dayes old, with a stony knife. But I had not the opportunitie to see it" (78). Coryat would eventually satisfy his curiosity in Constantinople, but when he proves the good protestant and tries to debate and convert a learned rabbi, he is surrounded by "forty or fifty Jewes", some of whom "beganne very insolently to swagger with me, because I durst reprehend their religion" (81). Afraid they "offered me some violence", Coryat tries to withdraw towards the bridge at the entrance into the Ghetto and is miraculously rescued by the English Ambassador Sir Henry Wotton, who lived nearby. This adventurous escape may be realistic or just a convenient way of reassuring Coryat's readers that his consorting with the Jews was unequivocal. But as Shapiro remarks: "For those who wrote commendatory poems to Coryate's book – including Laurence Whitaker – this Jew threatens not death but circumcision: 'ware Tom, I advise thee, /And fly from the Jews, lest they circumcise thee'" (Shapiro 115). Coryat's escape from a generic threat of violence was reimagined as an attempted circumcision and this imagined scene also became an illustration on the very title page of *Coryats Crudities* (1611) as well as, four hundred years later, of Shapiro's book.

Shylock in London and Coryat in Venice show how fact and fiction follow – chase! – one another. The Jews were punished physically for their spiritual sin of refusing Christ, but they reiterate the mistake by demanding literally innocent Christian blood instead of the symbolic Blood of Christ. Yet mixing real blood and bread is central to the Catholic ritual, as many Protestant advocates, like Reginald Scot, were keen to observe. So, the near-murder at the heart of *The Merchant of Venice* has also been read as the reenactment of the killing of Christ. It took until 1965 for the Catholic Church to formally repudiate both accusations, rejecting the deicide charge – the myth of collective Jewish guilt for the execution of Jesus – through the landmark Vatican II declaration *Nostra Aetate* while simultaneously dismantling long-standing ritual murder cults. As James Shapiro concludes, the various crimes and transgressions historically attributed to Jews, which had a remarkable longevity and continue to manifest themselves through explicit accusations or various tropes, can often be understood as forms of cultural projection, in which Christian society displaced onto the Jewish other its own fears and anxieties about religious, social, and bodily difference.

PORTIA (BALTHASAR): Tarry, Jew!
 The law hath yet another hold on you.
 It is enacted in the laws of Venice,
 If it be proved against an alien
 That by direct or indirect attempts
 He seek the life of any citizen,
 The party 'gainst the which he doth contrive
 Shall seize one half his goods, the other half
 Comes to the privy coffer of the state.... (*The Merchant of Venice* 4.1.342-50)

At the end of the fourth act, which, quite uniquely in Shakespearean performance history, has occasionally been used as the last act, the juridical system dramatized by Shakespeare turns the tables. Not corresponding to any real Venetian or English legal procedure but crucially mixing them for theatrical purposes, the play suddenly creates a state of exception and mutates what had been a legal bond into an attempted murder. Finally, a crime occurs, but no justice follows.

Writing back to Shakespeare

Three adaptations of the *Merchant* – a radio drama, a short story, and a novel – turn the *Merchant* into modern mystery and crime fiction. Before examining their specifics, we can note some commonalities. The most significant similarity is that they all merge Shakespeare's fictional universe with the real history of Venice's Jewish community, as Harry Freedman's excellent overview, *Shylock's Venice* (2024), recently summarized. They all directly or indirectly participated in a recent historical moment where the 500th anniversary of the Venetian Ghetto and the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death led to the first performance of the play in the Ghetto by the Colombari company and a mock appeal in which a jury presided over by U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg reconsidered the judgment against Shylock, with lawyers arguing on behalf of Shylock, Antonio, and Portia (Bassi and Chillington Rutter 171-92). Secondly, following a standard rule of Shakespeare adaptation, they revisit the *Merchant* plot from the vantage point of minor characters, choosing Jessica, Tubal, and...William Shakespeare, respectively, and casting them as detectives to reimagine the play's events. All writers also play with anachronism, offering thinly veiled political parables for the present or tongue-in-cheek references. Last but not least, true to the modern codes of crime fiction, they all have a murder mystery for which the solution will not be disclosed in this article: no need for spoiler alerts, since I am going to report the crimes, but I will not reveal the names of the criminals, leaving to the reader the pleasure of finding out for themselves.

A Wolf in the Water (2016)

A Wolf in the Water imagines the life of Jessica, Shylock's daughter, twenty years after the events of *The Merchant of Venice*. Living in Venice as a Christian convert, she secretly continues to practice Judaism while hiding her true identity. In this sequel, Jessica

investigates a murder falsely attributed to the Jews of the Venetian Ghetto, uncovering a political conspiracy that forces her to confront her suppressed Jewish identity and ultimately reverse the structures of economic, marital, and religious power and the trajectory of religious conversion that had governed Shakespeare's comedy. Jessica and Lorenzo are now wealthy, socially prominent Venetians with two children. Jessica has converted to Christianity and outwardly embraced her new identity. Internally, however, another voice manifests in the play as the narrator, becoming a sort of conscience ("The water of baptism touched only the skin, after all. Somewhere within this good Lamb of God beats a heart that still remembers what it was to be a Jew in Venice", Alderman 6) that increasingly forces Jessica to confront the identity and memories she has suppressed. The plot is set in motion when Tubal tells Jessica that his daughter Anna, once Jessica's close friend, has been arrested for the murder of Father Domenico, a papal legate whose body has been found in the Ghetto with his throat cut. Anna and some twenty other Jews are accused, and Anna is due to be burned. Jessica is initially reluctant to get involved, both because she does not want to be dragged into the Ghetto's past and because she fears Anna's interrogation by the Inquisition. Years earlier, when Jessica's infant son was gravely ill, Anna helped cure him through a combination of traditional remedies and Jewish prayer. Jessica interpreted his recovery as an intervention by the Jewish God and consequently never had either of her children baptized, despite pretending otherwise. Anna therefore possesses evidence that could expose Jessica as a secret Jew, with potentially fatal consequences.

The murder forces her to confront her past, her relationship with her father Shylock, and the compromises she has made to survive, and effectively turns her into a detective. Alderman contributes to the revisionist trend that seeks to reclaim Jessica as a positive heroine, reconciling the emancipatory potential of the rebellion with the patriarchal rule embodied by her father (as privileged by feminist readings) and her connection to Jewish identity, against the tendency of Jewish appropriations to cast her as an ungrateful renegade. A typical example is Howard Jacobson's modern retelling *Shylock Is My Name* (2016), where the daughter figure Beatrice Strulovich is a spoiled and rebellious teenager who replays Jessica's rejection of paternal and Jewish identity by eloping with an antisemitic footballer. Alderman is an eclectic author and in this occasional piece (aired by BBC Radio 3 on Sunday, 22 May 2016, in *Drama on 3*) she echoes her debut novel *Disobedience*, a novel about a lesbian woman who returns to the Orthodox Jewish community that once rejected her, and *The Power* (2016), a speculative novel imagining a world in which women develop the ability to inflict electrical shocks, radically reversing existing structures of gender and power. With *The Wolf in the Water*, written following a residency in Venice, she arguably adopts the strategy followed by authors such as Erica Jong, Faye Kellerman, Mirjam Pressler and others, which Michelle Ephraim describes in the following terms:

feminist writers embrace *The Merchant* as an opportunity to collapse Shakespeare's dichotomy of oppressive Jewish father/miserable Jewish daughter and to explore how the play can generate the interpretive possibility of a daughter who ultimately values her Jewish identity as fundamental to her conception of selfhood. (Ephraim 343)

As her own innovation, Alderman writes a radio drama, a genre with an obvious genealogical link to Shakespeare and a long-standing affinity with crime fiction. Both forms depend upon incomplete information and require their audiences to reconstruct unseen events from voices, testimony, and fragmentary clues. To give an example of her multilayered strategies of adaptation, let us look at this dialogue centred on Jessica's visit to Anna in the Doge's prisons (nowadays a popular tourist itinerary). First, we hear the narrator's voice (akin to the Shakespearean chorus), which pits the comfort Jessica finds in the Doge's daughter Augusta's quarters against the constraints of her Jewish past, equating the Ghetto she left behind with prison.

NARRATOR: The Doge's prisons are at the very summit of the palace. Infested with insects, stinking of excrement, they are positioned directly beneath the lead roofs, so that they are boiling hot in summer and now, in winter, icy cold. The Lady Jessica thought she had left such cramped quarters far behind her, and had found her proper place in Augusta's generous apartments. Still. Here she is. Paying a visit to another old friend. (Alderman 17)

Then we hear Jessica, who is not only fashioned in the unorthodox role of the detective but is also playing the coroner, nodding to the hidden traditions of female medicine and perhaps to the many contemporary crime procedurals (from Patricia Cornwell's Kay Scarpetta stories to TV shows such as *Crossing Jordan* and *Body of Proof*) where women are medical examiners.

JESSICA For goodness' sake, I have a letter here bearing the seal of the Doge's mother herself. I'm here with this distinguished Doctor to examine the body of the murdered priest.

PRIEST But my lady, that letter doesn't say anything about examining a body.

JESSICA Do *you* want to be the one to tell the Doge's mother that you refused to allow her personal physician access to the body of the murdered man?

[...] Look at this. He was stabbed once in the back. And his throat was cut. Whoever did it, this wasn't a fight - he was running away. They grabbed him. Knife in the back, quick slit of the throat.

TUBAL My lady? Forgive me. Have you ever even seen a body before?

JESSICA (shrug) I saw my father after they pulled him out of the canal. He was also stabbed in the back. I thought about it a lot afterwards. It's not hard to work out the basics of a crime. If you want to. (Alderman 25)

Appropriating the traditionally masculine authority of scientific expertise and the cultural heritage of the Ghetto, where medicine was one of the few professions allowed to the Jews besides moneylending associated with Shylock, Jessica casts her mind back to the moment when her father was murdered, in another clever twist of the Shakespearean plot devised by Alderman. She then imagines Shylock praying in Hebrew in his prison cell while his guards offer multiple and mutually contradictory reasons for their hatred of Jews.

MAN (sings softly to himself) *Avinu Malcheinu, chaneinu ve'aneinu ki ayn banu ma'asim.*

GUARD There goes the old man now. His beard's shorn and he went into the baptismal water two whole months ago, but still he sings those Jew songs.

GUARD 2 We hate him.

GUARD There are so many reasons to hate him.

GUARD 2 Maybe because he loaned us money.

GUARD Maybe because he refused to loan us money.

GUARD 2 Maybe we've been sent by the palace to get rid of this embarrassment to the city of Venice.

MAN (singing) *Aseh imanu tzedakah va'chesed.*

GUARD Maybe we just hate Jews. The way they come into the city, taking work from honest Christians, their strange foods and disgusting smells. The way they're so poor.

GUARD 2 And so rich. And so foreign. (Alderman 59)

One can certainly hear the echoes of modern antisemitism but also, more broadly, of the anti-immigration slogans of the twenty-first century. As an additional touch, Shylock's second Hebrew line *Aseh imanu tzedakah va'chesed* ("Treat us with charity and loving-kindness") hints at the fact that God in the Jewish tradition is both righteous and merciful, against the rhetoric of the Old Testament God of vengeance and retribution versus the New Testament God of forgiveness that has structured the play and much of its critical afterlife.

Jessica will ultimately crack the case, even as the story offers no real happy ending. Keeping the main elements confidential, we will simply add that Jessica ingeniously and somewhat ruthlessly reclaims her agency at every level, within the family, the community, and society, becoming economically and psychologically independent and integrating rather than suppressing her Jewish past.

"Shylock Must Die" (2018)

"Are there many private eyes in Italy?" said the Rabbi.

"At least two," I said, "Tubal Sr and his son. To the best of my knowledge."

"My predicament is this," said the Rabbi: "I owe money to a loan shark. You are thinking such a creature is as kosher as a lobster. But to whom else could I turn? (Sinclair 5)

Clive Sinclair's short story "Shylock Must Die," from the eponymous posthumous collection, reimagines the Merchant from Tubal's perspective as a hard-boiled detective in Renaissance Venice. Building on Gareth Armstrong's one-man play *Shylock* (1998), which cast Tubal as a sympathetic narrator who reclaims Shylock's story from the history of his theatrical representation, Sinclair creates a more biting, humorous first-person internal narrator who investigates a violent crime involving a Jewish boy. Tubal uncovers a darker version of events in which Antonio and Bassanio appear not as romantic heroes but as ruthless and morally corrupt figures. Shylock is portrayed with sympathy, while the famous

“pound of flesh” demand emerges as a response to systemic cruelty against Jews. The story blends noir, satire, and literary revisionism to expose antisemitism and challenge Shakespeare’s traditional narrative. Rachel Lowry’s review captures Sinclair’s style: “You know that you are in a Sinclair story by the rapidly shuffling allusions, the high-wire cycling of puns and wordplay, the plunges from high seriousness to slapstick” (Lowry 29). A perfect example is Sinclair’s use of the Venetian blinds trope, a recurring visual motif in film noir whose slatted shadows suggest imprisonment, secrecy, surveillance, and moral ambiguity. By obscuring vision while allowing partial glimpses, they serve as a fitting metaphor for hard-boiled detective fiction, a genre in which motives, identities, and truths remain concealed. The story opens with Tubal Jr. recalling how merchants brought many manuscripts from China in the wake of Marco Polo’s famous travels:

Poor Venetians hung these impenetrable stories on their walls in place of tapestries. My father had a brighter idea: he hung his over the windows. Later he devised a way of altering the angle of the leaves, so that he could control the amount of light that entered his office. He liked the chiaroscuro effect that this created. It resembled life, he said, in which some things are revealed and others hidden. He called his invention a Venetian blind. When friends asked him how they too could make a Venetian blind his answer was always the same: You poke his eyes out.

“As far as our family is concerned,” he said to me, “the more blind Venetians the better.” He made his living by seeing what they could not see, by penetrating darkness and mysteries on their behalf. He was their private eye. (Sinclair 3-4)

Fully exploiting the codes of hard-boiled fiction and using anachronism for humour, Sinclair picks the traditional figure of the client from the gallery of real Venetian Jews, choosing perhaps the most prestigious of these figures.

My next client was none other than Rabbi Leone Modena himself, a man of wisdom, and some ten years my senior. He had been impressed, he said, by the exemplary discretion I had shown in my dealings with Signora X. He took a seat. The light wrapped itself around him like a prayer shawl. (Sinclair 5)

Leon Modena (1571–1648), whom some have also identified as the “learned rabbi” with whom Coryat debated in the Ghetto, was a polymath whose copious intellectual output includes a treatise on Jewish rites that Henry Wotton commissioned for James I. A leading figure in Jewish cultural life in Venice, this Renaissance polymath also wrote the peculiar autobiography *Life of Judah* (see Cohen). In a genre rarely practiced by rabbinical figures, Modena vividly evokes the Ghetto’s social and intellectual life. Placing him at the centre of a crime story is all but incongruous: apart from his lifelong obsession with gambling, which eventually left him destitute, his autobiography chronicles the devastating loss of two of his beloved sons, one of whom died as the result of an alchemical experiment while the other was murdered by a gang of delinquents, as recalled in this passage:

As soon as he emerged, they surrounded him and struck him on the head, bruising him without drawing blood. Then they stabbed him in the throat with a sword or a spear, so that he fled, shouting,

"Father, Father, I am dying!" Blood spurted out like a spring, and as he could not make it home, he went to the house of my brother-in-law Johanan, may God his Rock protect him and grant him long life. There he threw himself into bed, rolling in blood. Before the doctor could arrive, he had lost his lifeblood. [...] He was buried that day next to his brother, my son Mordecai of blessed memory. Upon his coffin, while it was being carried, was placed his blood-soiled clothing. This sight, and the sound of my cries and those of my woebegone wife, caused every heart and eye to shed tears. Even Christians and Turks grieved. (Cohen 120-1)

Like Alderman's crossover, Sinclair blends the facts of Modena's life with Shakespearean fiction. In this alternative version, Modena's son Zebulun is kidnapped, and Shylock lends Leon Modena the money to pay the ransom. But Modena gambles away half of it before the exchange, and the boy is murdered when only half the ransom is delivered. But unlike Alderman, who dramatizes the historically frequent scapegoating of Jews for real and imaginary crimes alike, Sinclair replaces the actual Jewish killers of Modena's son with a well-known figure from the *Merchant*.

Out of the darkness three figures emerged; two men nearing thirty, flanking a boy not yet thirteen: Zebulum. The man on the right was holding a lantern, which paved the canal with cobbles of gold. Because they were dealing with Jews, they did not bother to hide their faces.

"Here is your boy," said the man with the lantern. "Where is the money?"

"Here is one half," I said.

"And the other?" said the man with the lantern.

"You will have that tomorrow," I said, handing over the satchel.

"Antonio," said the man without the lantern, "these Jews take us for fools."

So saying he silently slipped a stiletto from its scabbard and sliced open the boy's belly, as if he were a trout. (Sinclair 7)

Shylock then forgives the loan and, years later, identifies Antonio as the murderer and persuades Tubal to finance his revenge through the pound-of-flesh bond. The plot thickens when Jessica disappears with Lorenzo, and Shylock hires Tubal to find her. After following the couple to Genoa, Tubal finds Jessica aboard a ship carrying women to the Americas and helps her escape. Convinced that Lorenzo has sold her into sexual slavery, he tries to warn her, but she refuses to abandon her lover. Back in Venice, Shylock's defeat in court leaves him humiliated and forcibly converted. Jessica later approaches Tubal with alarming news of a conspiracy against her father's life. The subsequent plot twists make the short story even more compelling and, as in *The Wolf in the Water*, give Jessica considerably more agency than she has in Shakespeare's play or, arguably, even in Alderman's drama. Sinclair turns Shylock's daughter into a highly original version of the classic hard-boiled detective-fiction femme fatale.

Pastiche, parody, satire. Sinclair's postmodern *Merchant* offers a salutary alternative to the moralizing temptations that accompany some rewrites of an endlessly controversial play. His characters share the typical callousness, cynicism and disillusionment of hard-boiled fiction, creating an original short-circuit between a quintessentially American genre, an early seventeenth-century Venetian setting mediated by Shakespeare's canonical text, and the characteristic British Jewish humour of the author.

Una foresta di scimmie [A Wilderness of Monkeys] (2025)

Each of the three writers considered here has brought to Shakespeare a particular background, expertise, and sensibility. Where Alderman combines her feminism and her familiarity with Jewish religious texts and milieu and Sinclair embodies a certain tradition of Jewish secular humour (and both bring English writers' intimate familiarity with Shakespeare), the Italian Andrea Pennacchi brings to his own passionate love for Shakespeare his acting experience and his knowledge of Venetian language, history and culture. Pennacchi is a very popular stage and screen actor who has recently published two novels in which William Shakespeare features as a character, a young student at the University of Padua who travels to Verona and Venice where he personally experiences the events that will eventually give him material to write *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Merchant of Venice* (a third adaptation seems to be in the making). Nationally famous for his satire of parochialism and provincialism in the Veneto region, Pennacchi has shown that his linguistic inventiveness works as well in the novel's longer form as in his hilarious television sketches. A telling example that blends erudition and wit in a fast-paced narrative, Pennacchi taps into the Italian tradition of misspelling Shakespeare's name, since its first appearance in print in Italy. Where eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Italian critical works record spellings such as Sasper, Shakespier, Sachespar, Jhakespeare, Sakespir, or Seckpaire (the latter emended in a footnote as 'Seckspaire', see Bassi), Pennacchi uses the gimmick of having young Will's Italian companions calling him in turn Sguicsber, Shproloquier, Sghitspir, Sceispirhi, Scagspere, Sciexper, Shelkisperr, Schiantsper, Scandalsper, Darkspoer, Scampesper, Showspere, Scansasper, Sceltesper, Scimisper, Scursper, Sgersber...

A Wilderness of Monkeys, a quotation from the *Merchant* (3.2.111) and the title Howard Jacobson wanted for his own novel, follows a young Will wandering through late-sixteenth-century Venice, hoping to find passage back to England and becoming entangled with a colorful band of companions. With a nod to local folklore and international gossip, the novel opens at Ca' Dario, a magnificent Renaissance palace on the Grand Canal associated with at least seven violent deaths, the most gruesome in 1970 when its aristocratic owner was murdered within its walls by his boyfriend, a sailor who fled to London and was himself later murdered, and an inevitable curse (Giuffrida n. pg.).

Ca' Dario, Venice, Saturday, 5 March 1588

Antonio is dead.

You do not need Luc's medical knowledge to understand that, nor my experience on the battlefield. It is obvious even to Will, who is only just beginning to make the

acquaintance of the world: all you have to do is look at the glazed eyes staring into space, the mouth frozen open in a silent scream, the bloodless lips, the waxen complexion.

That, and the enormous square hole where his heart should be. (Pennacchi 9)

When the wealthy merchant Antonio is found murdered under mysterious circumstances, Will and his friends fall under suspicion, and their investigation leads them to encounters with Shylock and Tubal. The amplitude of the novel form allows Pennacchi to expand on the life and circumstances of the Ghetto of Venice, the Jewish area that Shakespeare never mentions in the *Merchant* and yet presupposes by turning the anonymous Jewish moneylender from the mainland found in his source Pecorone into the Shylock who lives in Venice and interacts daily with the Christians. In 1516 the Venice Senate decreed the removal of the Jews, who had fled to the city after the rout of Venice at the battle of Agnadello in 1509, 'from the body of the city'. Until then Jews could work in the city, die in the city (the cemetery dates back to the fourteenth century), but not reside there for longer than two weeks. After a heated debate over the threat of contamination they posed and after considering their expulsion, they finally decided to confine them to the former 'Public Copper Foundry' (Geto del rame del nostro Comun), used in the past to manufacture artillery, securing their services while keeping them safely at the margins. Constrained within the narrow limits of an island, the Ghetto became at once a place of segregation and a safe haven for refugees, possibly one of the best compromises in Europe at the time. Pennacchi captures the place's ambivalence, for instance, when he evokes the confidence with which the local Jews welcome the news of Shylock's strange bond.

Laughter. The entire Ghetto seemed to vibrate with it: loud among the men in the square, muffled among the readers and the rabbi in the synagogue, subdued yet penetrating among the women at work. Everywhere, only one phrase could be heard:

"A pound of flesh!"

It was the phrase Tubal brought back to the band the morning after Shylock's dinner at Ca' Dario, when they found him beside the bedside of Gobbo the watchman, after their fruitless search for Jessica around the Castelletto.

[...] "Shiloh demanded a pound of Antonio's flesh as a penalty."

"Well, that's one hell of a penalty. Why not just go to a butcher and..." Vincenzo snorted. "No wonder the whole Ghetto is laughing." (Pennacchi 142)

In another reference to local culture that is at once sophisticated and popular, Pennacchi weaves Judeo-Venetian words and phrases into his lively dialogue, the vernacular blending Hebrew and Venetian spoken in the Ghetto well into the twentieth century (Fortis 129). The jovial atmosphere later gives way to anguish and concern, mimicking the continuous oscillation between stability and precariousness that Venetian Jews experienced in the almost three centuries they were confined in the Ghetto, until Napoleon's army burned its gates in 1797.

In the main square Tubal awaited them, his face dark with worry, and motioned them into Shylock's house. Will was not prepared for the sight before him.

The moneylender sat in a corner of the large room, staring blankly at a kind of tureen cradled in his bloodstained hands.

As they approached, they saw what it contained: a heart, coagulated blood mingling with fresh blood still seeping from the organ.

"Is it human?" Will asked, horrified.

"It certainly looks like it," Luc replied, intrigued. "And it must have been taken recently, because there's still liquid blood. It hasn't all clotted yet." [...]

"Someone framed Shiloh," Tubal concluded first.

"If they catch him with that tureen, he's dead." (Pennacchi 210)

Once again, the details of the investigations will be withheld here. While offering an enjoyable, satisfying mystery, Pennacchi comments on cosmopolitanism's present and past. The social interactions he fictionalizes avoid a quite common polarization in depictions of the Ghetto, describing it as neither the precursor of the Nazi concentration camp (as in lachrymose versions of Jewish history) nor the multiethnic oasis pictured by those who romanticize the Serenissima. When Will himself faces the main murder suspect and demands justice, this character (who will remain anonymous here) responds with bitter laughter: "In Venice, justice is bought and sold on the Rialto, like stockfish and spices" (Pennacchi 281). Pennacchi uses a popular genre that explores the moral ambiguities of our time while entertaining readers and spelling out the characters' ambivalence.

Conclusion

In *Shakespeare's Criminals: Criminology, Fiction, and Drama* (1999), Victoria M. Time revives a nineteenth-century tradition by bringing Shakespearean drama into dialogue with criminology. Treating the plays as an imaginative archive of criminal behaviour, punishment, and social control, she applies a range of criminological theories to Shakespeare's characters and situations, from rational choice and social learning to labelling and conflict theory. In her discussion of the *Merchant*, she examines how deviance is socially defined and criminality produced within unequal legal and political power structures. The three adaptations analysed here adopt an analogous approach, using the resources of imaginative literature and the codes of crime fiction to explore similar dynamics. By blending the historical realities of early modern Venice with Shakespeare's comedic plot, they produce compelling narratives that also offer the characteristic gratifications of contemporary crime fiction.

They may also expand what Kevin Curran has defined as Shakespeare's "legal ecologies": networks in which law shapes individual identity through relations among people, objects, institutions, and environments. Rather than adopting purely individualist models of identity or attempting to represent any specific legal system, Shakespeare often presents selfhood as distributed, communal, and materially embedded. The *Merchant* explores what Curran calls "cosmopolitan hospitality" (75), in which law, commerce, and civic rights accommodate strangers, while casting a doubtful eye on the possibility of truly

equitable justice. In this respect, like Shakespeare’s original, Alderman, Sinclair, and Pennacchi tell stories in which the law is neither fair nor impartial, despite the Venetian myth of justice.

One last, necessary question concerns the relationship between these twenty-first-century adaptations and the cultural mechanisms of anti-Judaism inscribed within *The Merchant of Venice*. In other words, do they debunk, displace, or deconstruct the alleged Jewish crimes discussed by Shapiro? We can safely say that all three texts openly engage with antisemitism: they are dotted with references to anti-Jewish stereotypes, predominantly in their popular forms, as in the case of Shylock’s guards in Alderman. Yet, in one final Venetian paradox, the modern genres Alderman, Sinclair, and Pennacchi adopt require mapping these stories onto a predominantly secular worldview. Epistemologically, modern detective fiction is fundamentally a post-Enlightenment genre that privileges empirical evidence, rational reconstruction, causality, individual motive, and secular systems of law and justice. Ethically and psychologically, these adaptations foreground moral relativism, corrupt power, and human frailties. This translation inevitably diminishes the theological matrix of *The Merchant of Venice*. By making murder literally happen within the world of the *Merchant*, they paradoxically turn the violence Shakespeare’s comedy manages to contain into actual violence, while potentially obscuring both the theological tropes inscribed in the play and their surprising longevity. It would be ungenerous to expect a whodunit to grapple with complex medieval theological concepts (Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* comes to mind as a famous exception, though it hardly qualifies as pure detective fiction). These adaptations may therefore also merit attention for their ability to send curious readers back to Shakespeare and to modern critical interpretations of his work. Murder cannot be hid long, Shakespeare tells us, but some truths take much longer to come to light.

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