Season 4, Episode 1: “The Merchant of Venice: Ghetto”
Transcription

An actor performs a selection from The Merchant of Venice:

That thou shalt see the difference of our spirit,
I pardon thee thy life before thou ask it.
For half thy wealth, it is Antonio’s;
The other half comes to the general state,
Which humbleness may drive unto a fine.
– The Duke, The Merchant of Venice, Act 4, Scene 1

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Host Aaron Henne: Welcome to the first episode of the fourth season of theatre dybbuk’s *The Dybbukast*. This episode is presented in partnership with the Department of History at George Washington University. I'm Aaron Henne, artistic director of theatre dybbuk. With this episode, we begin a three-episode series connected to concepts that intersect with theatre dybbuk's most recent production, *The Merchant of Venice (Annotated), or In Sooth I Know Not Why I Am So Sad*. That production combines text from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* with Elizabethan history and news from 2020 through 2023. In doing so, it seeks to illuminate how, during times of upheaval, some people may place blame for their anxieties on an “other".

Aligned with the show’s considerations, each of the episodes will take a different approach to looking at Shakespeare's still controversial play and the history surrounding it. And so, we begin the series with an investigation of *The Merchant of Venice* and its relationship with the Venetian Ghetto. In examining the history of the word, “ghetto,” we look at how that history overlaps with, and deviates from, ideas contained in Shakespeare's play.

At the top, you heard an actor from theatre dybbuk read an excerpt from *The Merchant of Venice*. Throughout the episode, you will hear a variety of such readings, as well as those taken from historical documents and other written works. Dr. Daniel Schwartz, Professor of Jewish History at George Washington University, guides us through this exploration, sharing some of the concepts contained in his book, *Ghetto, The History of a Word*. And now, Season Four, Episode One: "The Merchant of Venice: Ghetto”.

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Dr. Daniel Schwartz: This issue of how the ghetto got its name: You have to go back to Venice, in 1516, and, at that time, the Venetian Senate orders that the Jews relocate – those who are living in Venice at the time and anyone yet to come – to this little island in the northern periphery of the city, called Ghetto Nuovo, which means, "new ghetto".

Actor 2: *"All Jews currently living in various parts of the city and those that come to the city hereafter are bound to go at once to live together in the houses situated in the Ghetto."*
– edict from the Venetian Senate, March 29, 1516

Daniel: Why is this place called ghetto? So the theory is that it was connected to the presence of a foundry, a copper foundry for the production of ammunition in the Venetian Republic. So how does, like, foundry lead to ghetto? It relates to the — we think — Italian term, *gettare*, which means, like, to pour or to cast, which would relate to the casting of molds and metal for the production of ammunition. It's interesting — like, the probable origins of the Jewish ghetto in terms of the name itself really lie in a kind of happenstance; simply the fact that this is where this foundry was. The island already had this name at the time Jews were forced to move there. Over time, ghetto became the de facto term in Italy for the idea of a compulsory, segregated, and exclusive Jewish quarter. Over the course of the 15th century, the Ghetto Nuovo is really built up somewhat. And so when the Jews move there in 1516, you already have what's called the Campo di Ghetto Nuovo. It's like a large kind of like square, and already there were houses built around the island that almost served as a kind of wall. It was like an annex to the original foundry, but it was the first part of what became the Jewish mandatory quarter in Venice. The idea that Jews were going to be, like, totally restricted in space meant that it would become quite congested and overcrowded and that the population would likely grow beyond the amount of territory allotted to it. Jews had to wear a special kind of, like, beret, that marked them as Jews. It started as a yellow beret, eventually it became a red beret. The idea of Jews in these, like, distinguishing signs or badges — you know, the ghetto seemed to kind of go hand in hand with that kind of stigmatizing of the Jew.

Actor 2: *"...it is completely senseless and inappropriate to be in a situation where Christian piety allows the Jews (whose guilt — all of their own doing — has condemned them to eternal slavery) access to our society and even to live among us; indeed, they are without gratitude to Christians, as, instead of thanks for gracious*

treatment, they return invective, and among themselves, instead of the slavery, which they deserve, they manage to claim superiority."
– Pope Paul IV, from his bull, Cum nimis absurdum, released July 14, 1555

Daniel: So *The Merchant of Venice*, in spite of the fact that it is situated in Venice — it was written in the late 16th century, it appears set in the late 16th century. But nevertheless, the play makes no reference to the ghetto, in spite of the fact that Jews by that point had been living there for close to 85 years. There's no even kind of allusion to the idea of a ghetto; some kind of, like, mandatory enclosure. That doesn't really figure prominently. Or at all, really. So the question is, why does Shakespeare, you know, never mention the ghetto? And I think the answer is is that he really just did not know much about Venetian Jewish life whatsoever. He really didn't know much about Jewish life, period. The Jews are expelled from England in 1290, okay? So by the time Shakespeare's writing this, there has been no open official Jewish community in England for over 300 years. Now, there were small populations of *conversos*. When I use this term, converso, I'm referring to, like, Sephardic Jews, Iberian Jews, who had kind of converted to Catholicism, typically under some degree of duress, over the course of the 15th century.
And so you begin to see in different parts of Western Europe, the reemergence — in places where Jews have been expelled — pockets of new Christians or *conversos*, some of whom had a kind of crypto Jewish identity. There were various Jewish beliefs, or practices, that they conducted in secret. That might be one thing that Shakespeare knew about. But, you know, it doesn't really explain anything about the circumstances in Venice, per se. I don't know why he set it in Venice. I mean, it may have to do with the fact that this is a play that is all about commerce, contracts, trade, money lending, a kind of diversity. And he may have known that, you know, Venice was this major entrepôt and port city at the time.

Actor 3: *He*
hath an argosy bound to Tripolis, another to
the Indies. I understand, moreover, upon the Rialto,
he hath a third at Mexico, a fourth for England, and
other ventures he hath squandered abroad. But
ships are but boards, sailors but men; there be
land rats and water rats, water thieves and land
thieves —I mean pirates—and then there is the
peril of waters, winds, and rocks. The man is,
notwithstanding, sufficient. Three thousand ducats.
I think I may take his bond.
–Shylock, The Merchant of Venice, Act 1, Scene 3

Daniel: He doesn't mention the ghetto. In fact, the word ghetto is only mentioned for the first time in English in a 1611 travel log, written by a man named Thomas Coryat; a book that was called *Crudities*. And in this book, Coryat describes his travels to various European cities, including to Venice, and while in Venice, he visits the ghetto and describes his observations and impressions.

Actor 2: *"Outside the synagogue, but still within the compressed space of the ghetto, the demographic density could only accentuate the characteristic noisiness."*
— Thomas Coryat, from Coryat's Crudities, published in 1611

Daniel: So this is the very first time the word ghetto even appears in English. So Shakespeare probably was completely unfamiliar with this term and may have been completely unfamiliar with the fact that Jews lived under any kind of segregation. And in fact, there are other examples about how little Shakespeare really knew about the circumstances of Venetian Jewish life. If you think about Shylock, and how he has this non-Jewish servant, Lancelet Gobbo. That would have been illegal.

Actor 4: *Certainly my conscience will serve me to*
run from this Jew my master. The fiend is at mine
elbow and tempts me, saying to me, "Gobbo,
Lancelet Gobbo, good Lancelet," or "good Gobbo,"
or "good Lancelet Gobbo, use your legs, take
the start, run away."
— Lancelet Gobbo, The Merchant of Venice, Act 2, Scene 2

Daniel: Sometimes there would be like a Shabbos goy, like someone who would come and heat up the house, or the — more likely, this little miniature apartment, on the Sabbaths, so that people wouldn't freeze. But Jews were not allowed to have non-Jewish servants.

Actor 4: *To be ruled by my conscience, I should stay with*
the Jew my master, who (God bless the mark) is a kind
of devil; and to run away from the Jew, I should be
ruled by the fiend, who (saving your reverence) is
the devil himself.
— Lancelet Gobbo, The Merchant of Venice, Act 2, Scene 2

Daniel: There seems to be no notion that the Jews live under some kind of curfew, where they have to return to the ghetto, even though they're allowed to leave the

ghetto by day to conduct business. But there's no kind of sense that they have to return to the ghetto at night, that there's some kind of curfew; and, in fact, you know, at one point, Shylock leaves to go out at night and tells Jessica, his daughter, to lock herself in, so that she won't hear any of this merry music.

Actor 3: *Hear you me, Jessica,*
Lock up my doors, and when you hear the drum
And the vile squealing of the wry-necked fife,
Clamber not you up to the casements then,
Nor thrust your head into the public street
To gaze on Christian fools with varnished faces,
But stop my house's ears (I mean my casements).
— Shylock, The Merchant of Venice, Act 2, Scene 5

Daniel: It kind of suggests Shylock has kind of imprisoned his daughter, almost like locking Jessica in. Not that Shakespeare knew of the ghetto, but some kind of sense of confinement there.

Actor 3: *Well, Jessica, go in. Perhaps I will return immediately.*
Do as I bid you. Shut doors after you. Fast bind, fast find—
A proverb never stale in thrifty mind.
— Shylock, The Merchant of Venice, Act 2, Scene 5

Daniel: The ghetto had relatively limited range of reference in the early modern period. First of all, it was a term that was pretty much restricted to Italian. Typically, there were equivalent terms for the idea of ghetto, even if it's not always quite the same thing in other languages. So, if you looked at a German-Italian dictionary from the 18th century, you might find something like ghetto. And they would translate it as *judengasse*. It really means literally, like, "Jewish street". Frankfurt am Mine, which actually residentially segregated Jews prior to Venice, actually created this mandatory, enclosed *judengasse* in 1462. In French, there was this term *juiverie*. Ghetto — this was, like, a term in Italian, not like today where it's used in multiple languages. It was — it was an Italian term that for the most part designated a particular kind of Jewish quarter. There's an interesting phrase that existed already by the 18th century — interesting also, I think, in terms of *The Merchant* — which was like *fare un ghetto*, or "to make a ghetto," and what did that mean? It meant creating a kind of cacophony where everybody's talking over each other and it's all like this kind of grating, ugly sound.

Actor 2: *"Fare un ghetto is said when many together want to say their piece, whence arises a tumult similar to that of the Jews when they sing in their synagogues."*
— Alberti di Villanuova, Universal Critical-Encyclopedical Dictionary of the Italian Language, Volume 3, published in 1798

Daniel: When you think about the issue of music in *The Merchant*, and a kind of almost Jewish tone deafness to this kind of cosmic music, you know, of the heavens, you already have an idea of Jews as like grating to listen to.

Actor 5: *I am never merry when I hear sweet music.*
— Jessica, The Merchant of Venice, Act 5, Scene 1

Daniel: In the 19th century — the late 18th, 19th century — the term ghetto becomes more of a conceptual metaphor, I would call it. And that has to be understood against the backdrop of Jewish emancipation; how Jews became citizens of the modern state. This is something that can be traced over the course of centuries, but in terms of Jews achieving a kind of legal equality, this is something that really only begins in the late 18th century. I mean, you see it in the French Revolution, in the debate over Jewish legal status in the National Assembly that was composing a constitution. Very famously during the Napoleonic Wars, Napoleon's forces — or sometimes the Italian satellites — created these whole spectacles where they would raise the ghetto walls and hold these festive ceremonies, to kind of declare the age of the ghetto over and done. Emancipation represents modernity, mobility, leaving the ghetto, right? The ghetto becomes a kind of signifier of, you know, the old Jewish world, traditional Jewish society, the conditions under which Jews lived under medieval and early modern Christendom. It becomes like the primary symbol of that.

Actor 2: *"Nevertheless, the ghetto is everywhere where an authentic pious Jew settles, and where the Torah thrusts its invisible, but insurmountable walls between him and the rest of the world."*
— Leopold Von Sacher-Masoch, from his story, "Moses Goldfarb's House", published in 1878

Daniel: What happens in the late 19th— 20th century is that you increasingly see this term apply to specific places. So, for example, these immigrant enclaves that Jews tended to form — not just Jews, other minority groups — but when Jews increasingly are emigrating out of Eastern Europe, moving to cities in Western Europe, but also to United States, the quarters in which they live and cluster come to be referred to as ghettos. This in spite of the fact that they were not legally mandatory. Living in the ghetto might not have been totally elective. There were reasons that one might, you

know, live there. You don't know English, in the case of the United States, so you move to a place where the language that's spoken on the street is more familiar. You move to a place where there are other Jews who can help give you entrée into the business world. I think about the role that the Jews play in the garment industry. Maybe also just social pressures. I mean, not to mention, certain institutions that were meant to kind of keep Jews — at least certain kinds of Jews — out. Just to give you an example, the Lower East Side — you know, the most famous Jewish ethnic quarter in the United States — one of its original names was the New York Ghetto.

Actor 2: *"...known as the New York Ghetto, a quarter of the city inhabited almost exclusively by Russo-Polish Jews and resembling in many respects the old judengasse of Frankfurt. It lies in the lower part of town, east of the Bowery, and takes in part of Allen, Ludlow, Baxter, Chrystie, Henry and Clinton Streets, East Broadway and Chatham Street."*
— from the feature, "New Year in the Ghetto," New York Herald, September 1878

Daniel: And then obviously the term comes to refer to the Nazi ghettos. Now we know today that there were many ghettos during the Holocaust, and that they were not all cookie cutter versions of one another. But nevertheless, the idea of the ghetto was to segregate Jews, in a much more extreme way than had ever been the purpose of the initial ghetto.

Actor 2: *"The Saturday the Ghetto was introduced (16th of November) was terrible. People in the street didn't know it was to be a closed Ghetto, so it came like a thunderbolt. Details of German, Polish, and Jewish guards stood at every street corner searching passers-by to decide whether or not they had the right to pass."*
— from Emanuel Ringelblum's journal, "Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto," entry dated November 19, 1940

Daniel: What has *The Merchant* come to mean today in a post-Holocaust world? You know, where we kind of live in the aftermath, not only of this massive genocide of the Jews, but also the knowledge that the ghetto was revived as this site of mandatory confinement. I guess I would approach that through different lenses. When I look at it as a historian, per se, I think it's important to understand the ghetto of the early modern period, of early modern Italy, of Venice, for example, and the ghetto of the Holocaust — despite the shared nature of the term and despite certain commonalities — that these are quite different institutions with a kind of different functional significance. The ghetto of Venice was a site, as I said, of mandatory enclosure. It was imposed, there was a degree of oppression, but nevertheless, there was also this idea of Jews having a space of their own.

Actor 3: *I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you, and so following; but I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you.*
— Shylock, The Merchant of Venice, Act 1, Scene 3

Daniel: Again, we have to understand the ghetto is where Jews have to live and Christians are not allowed to live. There is a curfew, and yet Jews are allowed to leave the ghetto by day. They may have to get certain passes, but they can travel to different cities. If the city has a ghetto, they have to stay there, but it may not have a ghetto. The ghetto of the Holocaust is much more of an enclosed space. And that's not to say that the ghettos were initially created with the idea that these were going to be cogs in order to facilitate extermination or deportation. It seems like, initially, there were kind of various ideas of what purpose the ghetto was supposed to serve. It was seen as probably temporary. But when the first ghettos are established, it's not clear that the Nazis have yet settled on an idea, you know, of mass murder of the Jews. But nevertheless, they became crucial conduits to it because when they make that turn toward genocide, these are places from which Jews are deported. So again, I think it's important to see the distinctions from a historical perspective. But when we think in terms of art or we think in terms of memory, right, people, you know, often view the past through later iterations of it. And it's kind of natural that when one sees The Merchant of Venice today, that the Holocaust looms over it to some extent. Sometimes the play is reset in fascist Italy or even Nazi Germany. So the figure of Shylock is seen much more as a kind of sympathetic figure because the Gentiles are that much more oppressive.

Actor 3: *You call me misbeliever, cutthroat dog,*
And spet upon my Jewish gaberdine,
And all for use of that which is mine own.
— Shylock, The Merchant of Venice, Act 1, Scene 3

Daniel: I think seven years ago now, in the 500th anniversary of the creation of the Venetian Ghetto in 1516, there were all sorts of events and commemorations, and part of it was they actually staged The Merchant in the Venetian Ghetto, in this Campo di Ghetto Nuovo, the square of the Ghetto Nuovo, for the very first time. In the ghetto, you have various monuments created, I think, by a Lithuanian artist — sculptor, I should say — commemorating the Holocaust. Against that backdrop, it certainly figures as well. Even talking about this film of Merchant from 2004, it's interesting that one of the very first shots in the film is of the burning of Jewish texts. Now, this may refer to the

fact that the Talmud is burnt in public in Rome in 1553. That fact is probably unknown to most people who watch the film. What they may be more familiar with is the famous burning of Jewish books, books authored by Jews in Nazi Germany in 1933. So again, an allusion, I think; something that's meant to connect past and present.

Actor 3: *If you deny me, fie upon your law:*
There is no force in the decrees of Venice.
I stand for judgment: answer, shall I have it?
— Shylock, The Merchant of Venice, Act 4, Scene 1

Daniel: And then you have this decisive transfer of the term. To say transfer, I don't mean to say, you know, it totally flies the coop, but you do see a situation where the term ghetto comes to be associated more with African Americans than Jews. I've taught classes on the history of the ghetto before, and people often have little familiarity with any kind of, like, Jewish history of the term. They may be familiar with the Holocaust to some extent, but they think of the ghetto primarily as these kind of poor Black neighborhoods. I really had thought, initially, that this was almost an exclusively post-World War II phenomenon. And in the course of my research, looking at African American newspapers and journals from the early 20th century, what I found is that already, African American thinkers, journalists figures, are using this term.

Actor 2: *"Do you really want a Negro ghetto established here in the Capital of the Nation? — a ghetto like that already established a few miles away in Baltimore?"*
— from a letter in The Washington Bee, November 1913

Daniel: It really begins to kind of gain steam starting in the forties and fifties. And I absolutely think that the Holocaust ghetto was a major frame of reference.

Actor 2: *"The result of these three visits, and particularly of my view of the Warsaw ghetto, was not so much a clearer understanding of the Jewish problem in the world as it was a real and more complete understanding of the Negro problem."*
— W.E.B. Du Bois, from his address, "The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto," delivered at a 1952 commemoration of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising

Daniel: One of the things that I am interested in is that at all these stages, the question of whether this is a ghetto is debated. So already, starting with these immigrant ghettos, you have people who push back against the use of the term. They say, basically, Jews aren't being forced to live there, and they kind of are almost defending the idea that Jews are clustering, like all these other ethnic groups who are moving to the United States and settling, you know, in New York. You have all these different

ethnic religious quarters. The Nazi case is very interesting in that the Nazis — and while they did not take a kind of uniform policy on this, very often they prohibited the use of the term ghetto to refer to these areas. So, in Warsaw, for example, the Nazis refer to it as the *Jüdischer Wohnbezirk*, which means kind of like, "Jewish living district". As if they were trying to shun the pejorative associations of the term ghetto — treat this as almost like a kind of, like, natural habitat, in spite of the fact that, as I mentioned before, these were far more segregated, enclosed structures than even the early modern ghettos were. And then there's this whole controversy attending its use increasingly to refer to Black enclaves. There are thinkers who basically rebut the use of the term. Thinkers like Ralph Ellison, or a lesser known, but really a very interesting and important Black intellectual named Albert Murray, who said, these are not ghettos. Almost like saying that the Jewish term doesn't quite work here.

Actor 2: *"Harlem contains a vast network of slum areas which are an ambitious social worker's absolute delight, but Harlem is no ghetto at all. No matter how rotten with racial bigotry the New York housing situation is, it is grossly misleading to imply in any way that the daily involvements, interests, and aspirations of negroes are thereby restricted to the so-called black community."*
— Albert Murray, from his book The Omni-Americans: New Perspectives on Black Experience and American Culture, published in 1970

Daniel: And in some ways they were trying to defend what they saw as kind of some of the community neighborhood qualities of these areas that they thought were obscured by simply describing these areas as ghettos. And this controversy exists to this day. I mean, I was very interested last year to discover that the National Archives had issued new policies regarding the use of the word ghetto. They basically instructed archivists to avoid the use of the term because of its negative connotations, and to refer more euphemistically to, let's say, the inner city. And even, they said, when you're actually citing the documents themselves, you should put the term in, like, quotation marks. There's still — there's a kind of stigma associated with the term. And you can see ways in which a national institution like the National Archives is instructing its archivists to avoid use of the term. Now, I actually personally object to that. I acknowledge that the term can be resented for its stigmatizing power, and yet, to use these terms — inner city — overlooks the fact that these aren't simply areas of, like, de facto segregation. There's a long history of U.S. laws and policy and zoning practices and creation of public housing and creation of the highway system — like, many things that have contributed to make these areas difficult to get out of, if not impossible. And so when we say we're going to just like avoid the term, I think we lose sight of the fact that — it's not to say that everyone may live in this area simply under duress, but there is a

degree of, I would say, state policy over the past century, that led to the creation and maintenance of the Black ghetto.

Actor 2: *"The ghetto of Warsaw helped me to emerge from a certain social provincialism into a broader conception of what the fight against race segregation, religious discrimination, and the oppression by wealth had to become if civilization was going to triumph and broaden in the world."*
— W.E.B. Du Bois, from his 1952 address, "The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto"

Daniel: Today, we think of residential segregation as a problem; as something that runs counter to liberal democratic values — the idea of people being treated as less than full citizens, despite the widespread nature of this reality. I mean, it's interesting, like I talked before, about how the ghetto comes to be seen as this antithesis par excellence to modernity, and yet somehow, within modernity, we keep recreating ghettos.

Actor 3: *You come to me and you say*
"Shylock, we would have moneys"—you say so,
You, that did void your rheum upon my beard,
And foot me as you spurn a stranger cur
Over your threshold. Moneys is your suit.
What should I say to you? Should I not say
"Hath a dog money? Is it possible
A cur can lend three thousand ducats?"
— Shylock, The Merchant of Venice, Act 1, Scene 3

Daniel: I've read *The Merchant*, more than any other play in Shakespeare's repertoire. I've seen it more than any other play in Shakespeare's repertoire, and I just always find it both so fascinating and troubling and complex. I do believe that there is a strong anti-Jewish strain that runs through the play. Shylock is constantly referred to as a dog. And Jews are referred to as dogs, as dogs, as curs, and yet you have this iconic speech by Shylock. "Hath not a Jew eyes?" Again, I think it adds, you know, to the complexity. I mean, that speech is about his very humanity, a shared humanity. Those lines exist and you can't just kind of like wash them away.

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Aaron: Thank you for listening to this episode of The Dybbukast, "The Merchant of Venice: Ghetto." Actors featured in this episode were Joe Jordan, Adam Lebowitz-Lockard, Julie Lockhart, Inger Tudor, and Jonathan CK Williams. Thank you to Dr. Daniel Schwartz for sharing his insights. Our theme music was composed by Michael

Skloff and produced by Sam K.S. Story editing was led by Julie Lockhart with support from me, Aaron Henne. This episode was edited by Mark McClain Wilson. Please visit us at theatredybbuk.org, where you will find links to a wide variety of materials which expand upon the episode's explorations. And if you want to know more about theatre dybbuk's work in general, please sign up for our mailing list on that same website.

This is the first in our three-episode series that intersects with theatre dybbuk's production, *The Merchant of Venice (Annotated), or In Sooth I Know Not Why I am So Sad*. This episode was presented in collaboration with The Department of History at George Washington University. This season of *The Dybbukast* is generously supported by a grant from Lippman Kanfer Foundation for Living Torah. *The Dybbukast* is produced by theatre dybbuk.

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Actor 3: 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?
— Shylock, The Merchant of Venice, Act 3, Scene 1