

*European Judaism*

*Shakespeare and the Jews*

## **Introduction**

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## **Bio**

Lily Kahn is Reader in Hebrew and Jewish Languages at UCL. Her main research areas are Hebrew in Eastern Europe, Yiddish, and global Shakespeare.

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The relationship between Shakespeare and the Jews is a multifaceted one with an extensive history dating back to the Elizabethan era. Attitudes to Jews in Shakespeare's England comprise a complex topic with religious, racial, and cultural components that has been explored in detail in James Shapiro's seminal monograph *Shakespeare and the Jews*<sup>i</sup>. Jewish elements in the work of Shakespeare and his contemporaries extend far beyond the infamous figure of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, and the history of critical and interpretative approaches to such elements is extremely variegated, including shifting perceptions of Shylock on the page and stage over the centuries, different ways of addressing Jewish themes within the plays in writing and performance, and the representations of Jews and Judaism in translations of Shakespeare into other languages.

Likewise, Shakespeare's reception among the Jews has a dynamic history of its own, including translation, performance, and criticism. Jewish engagement with Shakespeare goes back to the beginning of the Jewish Enlightenment in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when Hebrew authors in Central Europe first began looking to Shakespeare as a literary role model and candidate for translation. The 1870s saw the first Hebrew translations of complete plays with Isaac Salkinson's ground-breaking versions of *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet*<sup>ii</sup>, which paved the way for the eventual emergence of a more extensive body of Hebrew translations in early twentieth-century Palestine and New York. These in turn led to the proliferation of later Hebrew translations by prominent Israeli poets and translators in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries<sup>iii</sup>. Shakespeare was also translated into other Jewish languages in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, chiefly Yiddish but also occasionally Ladino<sup>iv</sup>. Shakespeare has occupied a similarly prominent position on the Jewish stage: his plays have been a key feature of the Hebrew theatre from its beginnings in the early twentieth century until the present day, and have likewise been a staple element of the Yiddish stage in North America<sup>v</sup>, Europe, the Soviet Union, and elsewhere. Moreover, Jews have continued the dialogue with Shakespeare by rewriting and adapting his plays; these endeavours range from Jacob Gordin's 1898 Yiddish-language play *Mirele Efros* ('The Jewish Queen Lear'), to contemporary rewritings by British Jewish playwrights such as Arnold Wesker and Julia Pascal. Similarly, Jewish Shakespeare criticism spans more than two centuries, beginning with early nineteenth-century Jewish Enlightenment writings<sup>vi</sup> and extending to recent Israeli scholarly work, the latter reflected in Avraham Oz's 1998 edited volume *Strands Afar Remote*<sup>vii</sup>.

The present issue of *European Judaism* celebrates this rich and varied legacy by addressing it from a variety of historical and contemporary perspectives. The issue is informed by an interdisciplinary approach, containing articles rooted in literary criticism, translation studies,

history, drama, and cultural studies. It includes eight thematic sections, reflecting the complex story of Shakespeare and the Jews from its beginnings to the twenty-first century.

The first section, 'Shakespeare's England and the Jews', focuses on the role of real and fictional Jews in Elizabethan England. Cynthia Seton-Rogers interrogates the reality behind the commonly held belief that Shakespeare's England was completely lacking in a Jewish presence, presenting a number of case studies of Jews living and working in the country at the time. In a similar vein, José Alberto Rodrigues da Silva Tavim presents a biographic overview of the peripatetic Portuguese Jew Álvaro Mendes, who is known to have spent time in London during Elizabeth's reign and to have had connections with her court. In contrast to these studies of historical Jews, the final two articles in this section consider the ways in which Jews and Jewish subject matter are depicted in the poetry and drama of Shakespeare's contemporaries. Neslihan Ekmekcioğlu presents a biographical sketch of Aemilia Bassano Lanier, who is believed to be of partial Jewish descent, and conducts a close reading of her poem *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, while Adriana Streifer analyses the representation of Jews in Robert Daborne's play *A Christian Turned Turk*.

The second section, 'Critical Approaches to Jewish Themes in Shakespeare', showcases a diverse selection of scholarly perspectives on Jewish elements in *The Merchant of Venice* and other Shakespearean works. Anna Carleton Forrester and Jonathan Elukin employ close reading techniques to evaluate the social and theological context of the characters and plot in *Merchant*, while Roger Wooster explores the ways in which actors and directors can harness changing cultural norms in their interpretation of Shylock. By contrast, Richard H. Weisberg analyses *Merchant*, *King Lear*, *Measure for Measure*, and a number of sonnets from a legal viewpoint.

The third section, 'Shakespeare in Hebrew Translation', sheds light on this fascinating and relatively little-known aspect of the Jewish Shakespeare reception. Eran Tzelgov and Eran Shuali examine Isaac Salkinson's pioneering late nineteenth-century Shakespeare translations and the

social and religious contexts in which they were produced. The remaining three articles in the section, by Atar Hadari, Shiran Avni, and Adriana X. Jacobs, are devoted to the more recent history of Shakespeare in Hebrew, drawing much needed attention to twentieth- and twenty-first-century translations of *Merchant* (by Shimon Halkin and Avraham Oz), *Macbeth* (by Meir Wieseltier), and the sonnets (by Anna Herman) respectively. The articles in this section highlight the strong intertextual link between Hebrew Shakespeare translations and earlier elements of the Hebrew canon, most notably the Bible.

The fourth section, 'Shakespeare and the Jews in the Press', provides insight into nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first-century Jewish-themed critical responses to Shakespeare's work. Gideon Kouts presents two important case studies of Shakespeare reception in the Hebrew press - the first Hebrew review of a Shakespeare performance, and the reviews of the first Hebrew Shakespeare performance respectively - while Maria Clara Versiani Galery assesses responses to Michael Radford's 2004 film adaptation of *Merchant* in the British and American presses.

The fifth section, 'Shakespeare and Jewish Education', draws attention to another intriguing aspect of Jewish engagement with Shakespeare. Rosa Reicher provides a historical perspective with her examination of the centrality of Shakespeare to the cultural identity and worldview of young German Jews in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By contrast, Esther B. Schupak and Rebecca Gillis focus on Shakespeare in modern Israeli universities; Schupak reflects on the problematic nature of teaching *Merchant* in this context, while Gillis discusses her experiences teaching Shakespeare as part of the curriculum of the Hadassah Medical School in Jerusalem.

The sixth section, 'Shylock and the Holocaust', focuses on this most horrific chapter in the story of Shakespeare and the Jews. Alessandra Bassey examines the political and social context of a performance of *Merchant* under the Nazis (Vienna, 1943), a sharp contrast to Edna Nahshon's study of a Hebrew performance of the same play produced in the immediate wake of the Holocaust (New York, 1947). Gad Kaynar-Kissinger discusses an unusual attempt to engage with the

Holocaust's traumatic legacy in the form of a 1995 Israeli-German production of *Merchant* set in Buchenwald.

The seventh section, 'Anglo-Jewish Adaptations of Shakespeare', is dedicated to contemporary British Jewish playwrights' attempts to grapple with Shakespeare's work by rewriting his plays. Jeanette R. Malkin and Eckart Voigts, survey three different recent Anglo-Jewish adaptations, Arnold Wesker's *The Merchant* (1976), Charles Marowitz' *Variations on the Merchant of Venice* (1977), and Julia Pascal's *The Shylock Play* (2008) as ways of appropriating and countering the received portrayal of Jewishness in Shakespeare's *Merchant*. Thomas Luk provides an in-depth analysis of Arnold Wesker's *The Merchant*, while Özlem Özmen explores issues of gender and identity in Julia Pascal's *The Yiddish Queen Lear* (1999), a rewriting of *King Lear* set in the world of the American Yiddish theatre.

The final section, 'Global Perspectives on *The Merchant of Venice*', offers insights into the role of the play in modern and contemporary international society. Xiu Gao explores the cultural context of two early twentieth-century Chinese translations of *Merchant* and the attitudes to Jews reflected therein. Zoltán Imre evaluates the political considerations that shaped the chequered performance history of *Merchant* in mid-to-late twentieth-century Hungary. Michael Shapiro brings the discussion up to the present day with his analysis of a recent production of *Merchant* centred on a Muslim Shylock and his Hindu neighbours living in contemporary Los Angeles.

It is hoped that the diversity of articles in this special issue will draw attention to the vibrancy of the centuries-old, ever-evolving relationship between Shakespeare and the Jews, and will help to shape future avenues of research in the area.

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<sup>i</sup> James Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

<sup>ii</sup> See Lily Kahn, *The First Hebrew Shakespeare Translations: Isaac Edward Salkinson's Ithiel the Cushite of Venice and Ram and Jael, A Bilingual Edition and Commentary* (London: UCL Press, 2017).

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<sup>iii</sup> See Harai Golomb, 'Shakespearean Re-Generations in Hebrew: A Study in Historical Poetics', in *Strands Afar Remote: Israeli Perspectives on Shakespeare*, ed. Avraham Oz (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 1998), 255-275.

<sup>iv</sup> See Leonard Prager, 'Shakespeare in Yiddish', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (1968), 149-158; Olga Borovaya, *Modern Ladino Culture: Press, Belles Lettres, and Theater in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012).

<sup>v</sup> See Joel Berkowitz, *Shakespeare on the American Yiddish Stage* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002).

<sup>vi</sup> See Dan Almagor. שקספיר בספרות העברית בתקופת ההשכלה ובתקופת התחייה: סקירה ביבליוגראפית וביבליוגראפיה [Shakespeare in Hebrew Literature, 1794–1930: Bibliographical Survey and Bibliography], in ספר היובל לשמעון הלקין: במלאת לו שבעים וחמש שנים [Festschrift for Shimon Halkin], eds. Boaz Shahevitch and Menachem Perry, (Jerusalem: Reuben Mass, 1975), 721–784.

<sup>vii</sup> Avraham Oz, ed., *Strands Afar Remote: Israeli Perspectives on Shakespeare* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 1998).