

# When Tubal Tells *The Merchant of Venice* as Jessica's Story: Clive Sinclair's "Shylock Must Die"

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## ABSTRACT

Shakespeare's plays have attracted numerous reinterpretations not only on the stage, but also in other genres. Recent retellings of *The Merchant of Venice* by British Jewish authors, such as Arnold Wesker's play *The Merchant* (1976) or Howard Jacobson's novel *Shylock Is My Name* (2016), focus on a complex portrayal of Shylock as the main Jewish character. However, Clive Sinclair's short story "Shylock Must Die" (2014) adopts a different strategy by foregrounding two other Jewish characters, as Shylock's daughter Jessica is described from the point of view of the moneylender Tubal. In Sinclair's version, Tubal is refashioned as a private detective who, despite his experience, can hardly believe how cunning Jessica turns out to be, as she tricks him into participating in her own scheme. While Shakespeare's play assigns a significant amount of agency to Portia, Sinclair's short story takes liberty in shifting the focus to another female character. As the story reports events that followed Jessica's wedding, it may even be considered a sequel to *The Merchant of Venice*, and the story's title itself suggests it has even less to do with comedy than the original. For all these reasons, "Shylock Must Die" presents a radical rewriting of Shakespeare's text.

## KEYWORDS

British Jewish literature, contemporary British short story, Clive Sinclair, "Shylock Must Die," William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*

It is rather a commonplace that Shakespeare's plays have attracted numerous reinterpretations not only on the stage, but also in other genres. For example, as a reminder of the four-hundredth anniversary of Shakespeare's death in 2016, the Hogarth Shakespeare project commissioned seven well-known writers to select and re-imagine the Bard's plays in the form of novels. It is probably not surprising that one of the novels published as part of this project was the British Jewish writer's Howard Jacobson's (\*1942) *Shylock Is My Name* (2016),<sup>1</sup> as Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* is a play that particularly invites modern reinterpretations due to its rather negative portrayal of Shylock, its main Jewish character.<sup>2</sup> While Jacobson's novel is set in contemporary Britain, four decades earlier, the play *The Merchant* (1976) by the British Jewish playwright Arnold Wesker (1932–2016) presented another rewriting of *The Merchant of Venice*, which retains the spatial and temporal setting of the original. Despite the differences between Jacobson's and Wesker's versions of Shakespeare's play, both texts provide a more complex portrayal of Shylock. Wesker even later renamed his play *Shylock* to highlight the focus on this character. The renaming is far from incidental considering the history of Jewish reception of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. As Nina Warnke and Jeffrey Shandler observe, "enacting Jewish 'ownership' of *The Merchant of Venice*

1 The other novels published as part of the project are, in chronological order, Jeanette Winterson's *The Gap of Time: The Winter's Tale Retold* (2015), Anne Tyler's *Vinegar Girl* (2016), based on *The Taming of the Shrew*, Margaret Atwood's *Hag-Seed* (2016), a retelling of *The Tempest*, Edward St Aubyn's *Dunbar* (2017), a retelling of *King Lear*, Tracy Chevalier's *New Boy* (2017), a retelling of *Othello*, and Jo Nesbø's *Macbeth* (2018).

2 Erica Wagner suggests that "of all Shakespeare's plays, *The Merchant of Venice* is, without a doubt, the one that modern audiences find most difficult to accept." See Erica Wagner, "The Merchant of Cheshire," review of *Shylock Is My Name*, by Howard Jacobson, *New Statesman*, February 5, 2016, 47.

can also be seen in the practice of changing the play's title. Starting with the 1899 translation, the play is generally known in Yiddish as *Shylok* (or *Shaylok*).<sup>3</sup> In Wesker's and Jacobson's rewritings of the play, one of the strategies to develop Shylock's character is showing him in an extensive net of relationships rather than portraying him as an isolated miserly figure. Wesker's Shylock is a close friend of Antonio, and Shylock's demand for a pound of flesh is not even meant seriously, although it cannot be retracted. Jacobson's Shylock reappears in early twenty-first century Britain and becomes friends with Simon Strulovitch, a philanthropist living in Cheshire who functions as Shylock's double, as he is also a widower who had to bring up his only daughter on his own.

Considering the Jewish reception of *The Merchant of Venice* as well as the features shared by Wesker's and Jacobson's rewritings of Shakespeare's play, it may appear rather surprising that Clive Sinclair (1948–2018), another British Jewish writer, called his 2014 response to *The Merchant of Venice* "Shylock Must Die."<sup>4</sup> The title of this short story, originally published two years prior to Jacobson's *Shylock Is My Name* in Sinclair's collection *Death & Texas*, suggests the text will voice a rather uncompromising dismissal of Shylock. Rather than Shylock, Sinclair foregrounds the other Jewish characters of Shakespeare's play. In particular, the text focuses on Shylock's daughter Jessica as seen from the point of view of Tubal, a moneylender whom Shylock eventually asks to find Jessica in Genoa. In Sinclair's version, Tubal is refashioned as a private detective.<sup>5</sup> Despite his experience, Tubal can hardly believe how cunning and independent Jessica turns out to be, as she tricks him into participating in her own scheme. While Shakespeare's play assigns a significant amount of agency to Portia, Sinclair's short story takes liberty in shifting the focus to another female character. As the story reports events that followed Jessica's wedding, it may even be considered a sequel to *The Merchant of Venice*, and the story's title itself suggests it has even less to do with comedy than the original. This essay will thus present "Shylock Must Die" as a radical rewriting of *The Merchant of Venice* by paying particular attention to the presentation of Jewishness and gender in the text.

Prior to the analysis itself, it is worth mentioning the story was republished shortly after Sinclair's death, providing the title to a posthumous collection of his short stories. While *Death & Texas* features eight diverse stories set on several continents, *Shylock Must Die* collects seven stories written on various occasions,<sup>6</sup> all of which are connected by Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. However, the title story is the only one in the collection that rewrites the plot of *The Merchant of Venice*, as the others refer, for example, to notable productions of the play.

Despite having been published in two short story collections, the first time before Jacobson's aforementioned novel, "Shylock Must Die" has attracted little critical attention, which

3 Nina Warnke, and Jeffrey Shandler, "Yiddish Shylocks in Theater and Literature," in *Wrestling with Shylock: Jewish Responses to The Merchant of Venice*, eds. Edna Nashon and Michael Shapiro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 90.

4 For a comparison of all the three rewritings of *The Merchant of Venice* by British Jewish writers, see David Brauner, "Representations of Shylock in Arnold Wesker's *The Merchant*, Howard Jacobson's *Shylock Is My Name* and Clive Sinclair's *Shylock Must Die*," *Humanities* 10, no. 2 (2021): 59, accessed May 21, 2021, <<https://doi.org/10.3390/h10020059>>.

5 David Brauner aptly observes that Tubal's occupation recalls that of Joshua Smolinsky, a figure in Sinclair's first two short story collections, published in the late 1970s and early 1980s. See Review of *Shylock Must Die*, *Jewish Renaissance*, July 2018, 45.

6 According to the Acknowledgements, two more stories in the collection were published earlier, as "A Wilderness of Monkeys" was originally written for an anthology inspired by the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Venetian Ghetto, and "Shylock's Ghost" first appeared in *The Reader*.

is symptomatic of rather limited recognition of Sinclair's work in general. For instance, a 1986 review of Jacobson's debut novel *Coming from Behind* (1983) in *Shofar* situated Jacobson alongside Sinclair,<sup>7</sup> who had already published two novels, *Bibliosexuality* (1973) and *Blood Libels* (1985), as well as two short story collections, *Hearts of Gold* (1979) and *Bedbugs* (1982). While Sinclair had by that time received the 1981 Somerset Maugham Award for *Hearts of Gold* and later the 1997 Jewish Quarterly Wingate Prize for *The Lady with the Laptop and Other Stories*, Jacobson became perhaps the most well-known contemporary British Jewish writer after he was awarded the 2010 Man Booker Prize for his eleventh novel *The Finkler Question*, as illustrated by an article published in the *Guardian*, entitled "Is Howard Jacobson the only person writing British Jewish novels?"<sup>8</sup> While Jacobson's fiction consists exclusively of novels, Sinclair admitted to considering himself primarily a short story writer. In a 2012 interview, he even said: "The truth is I've always been a short story writer rather than a novelist. *Bibliosexuality* was originally a collection of short stories about a certain David Drollkind. Margaret Busby [cofounder of Allison & Busby publishing house] said she would publish it, if I could find a way of linking them. That's how it became a novel."<sup>9</sup> In his brief characteristics of Sinclair's writing in the anthology *Contemporary Jewish Writing in Britain and Ireland*, Bryan Cheyette also calls short fiction Sinclair's "true métier."<sup>10</sup> An additional aim of this essay is thus to bring attention to a relatively undervalued British Jewish writer as well as to the contemporary British Jewish short story in general.<sup>11</sup>

"Shylock Must Die" presents a masterful example of a suspenseful short story with an unexpected turning point. It opens with the first person narrator's telling the story of Rabbi Leone Modena,<sup>12</sup> in which the characters of *The Merchant of Venice* have only minor roles. The narrator, who reveals himself to be Tubal, is asked to accompany the Rabbi to his arranged meeting with Antonio and Bassanio, who had taken his thirteen-year-old son, Zebulum, as hostage, as the Rabbi owes them a lot of money. The Rabbi, who admits to being a gambler, borrows money from Shylock to pay off his debt; however, he spends a half of the money before the meeting. When the Rabbi, accompanied by Tubal, tells the kidnapers he only has a half of the money, Bassanio immediately kills the boy so that Tubal has no time to intervene: "[Bassanio] silently slipped a stiletto from its scabbard and sliced open the boy's belly, as if he were a trout. I will not describe the Rabbi's lamentations, which I hope one day to forget."<sup>13</sup> The tragic event he witnesses makes Tubal feel guilty about not having prevented the murder and he learns to carry a dagger with him thereafter.

7 See Joseph Cohen, review of *Coming from Behind*, by Howard Jacobson, *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 4, no. 3 (1986): 44.

8 See Nicholas Lezard, "Is Howard Jacobson the only person writing British Jewish novels?" *Guardian*, October 15, 2010, available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/oct/15/howard-jacobson-british-jewish-novels>>.

9 Matthew Asprey, "El Hombre Valeroso: An Interview with Clive Sinclair," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, December 18, 2012, available at: <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/el-hombre-valeroso-an-interview-with-clive-sinclair/>>.

10 See *Contemporary Jewish Writing in Britain and Ireland: An Anthology*, ed. Bryan Cheyette (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 87. The anthology includes two of Sinclair's short stories, "Wingate Football Club" and "Bedbugs".

11 For the current discussion of the topic, see e.g. Axel Stähler, "Between or Beyond? Jewish British Short Stories in English since the 1970s," *Humanities* 9, no. 3 (2020): 110, accessed May 21, 2021, <<https://doi.org/10.3390/h9030110>>.

12 The character is based on the sixteenth-century scholar, as Elizabeth Lowry points out in her review of Sinclair's short story collection. See Elizabeth Lowry, "It Was His Humour: Final Stories of a Comic Master," review of *Shylock Must Die*, by Clive Sinclair, *TLS*, August 22, 2018, available at: <<https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/it-was-his-humour/>>.

13 Clive Sinclair, *Shylock Must Die* (London: Halban, 2018), 7.

After Shylock hears about the tragedy, he writes off the money he had advanced to the Rabbi, who then becomes a wanderer. As the Rabbi had characterized Shylock as a *mensch*,<sup>14</sup> a person of integrity and honour, Shylock seems a rather positive character; however, in this episode, he only directs his compassion towards a fellow Jew, one who used to be of high stature in the Jewish community.<sup>15</sup> By portraying the Rabbi as far from a model character, the story does not idealize the Jewish community; still, it primarily highlights Antonio's and Bassanio's cruelty. Having the story told from Tubal's point of view appears a convenient narrative strategy; as Tubal is rather an observer than a major participant in the events he describes, he gradually enables the reader to make sense of them, while keeping the story's suspense.

The main part of the story takes place several years later and presents a concise retelling of selected events of *The Merchant of Venice*, sometimes even quoting the characters' speeches from Shakespeare's play. By this time, Shylock's wife Leah has died, and Tubal has married and had an unspecified number of sons, for which he thanks God, while mentioning that Shylock "was blessed with only one child, a daughter."<sup>16</sup> The retelling of *The Merchant of Venice* starts with Shylock's request to borrow three thousand ducats from Tubal so that he can lend the money to Antonio who needs it for Bassanio to marry Portia. Shylock mentions the bond that determines Antonio has to give him a pound of his own flesh if he is unable to pay off the loan. Shylock justifies the bond by his attempting to "finally extract justice for Zebulum," thereby considering himself "the agent of divine justice."<sup>17</sup> While in Shakespeare's play, Shylock cries against antisemitism in general and hates Antonio for spitting on him, Sinclair's short story provides a particularly harsh example of the Christians' cruelty towards Jews by means of the brutal murder of Zebulum. David Brauner thus aptly observes that "Sinclair contextualises, but does not attempt to soften, Shylock's intentions."<sup>18</sup>

A few days later, Jessica disappears while Shylock is out of the house due to a dinner invitation by Bassanio. First, Shylock is afraid that the invitation was part of a scheme, enabling Antonio to take Jessica as hostage so that he can ask Shylock to pay three thousand ducats for her if needs be. However, when confronted by Tubal, Shylock's servant Launcelot admits he had acted as a go-between for Jessica and a knave named Lorenzo, as the two eloped to Genoa together. Tubal travels to Genoa to find Jessica there and bring her back to Shylock. When arriving in the city, Tubal imagines Jessica as "perhaps a captive, more likely a willing convert,"<sup>19</sup> highlighting he still considers she may be willing to return out of her own free will. Unlike in *The Merchant of Venice*, Tubal tracks Jessica down, seeing her arm-in-arm with Lorenzo in a casino, and he observes that her "gown was cut low, after the fashion of gentile courtesans."<sup>20</sup> Jessica, who seems to be unthinkingly showing off her attractive body, thus does not want to leave Lorenzo and return to her father.

14 See Sinclair, *Shylock Must Die*, 6.

15 W. Moelwyn Merchant finds a similar illustration of the Jews' solidarity in *The Merchant of Venice*, as Tubal "could help [Shylock] out in a crisis, presumably without the usury which Shylock could demand of his Gentile debtors." See William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. W. Moelwyn Merchant (London: Penguin Books, 1967), 13–14.

16 Sinclair, *Shylock Must Die*, 8.

17 Sinclair, *Shylock Must Die*, 10.

18 Brauner, "Representations of Shylock"

19 Sinclair, *Shylock Must Die*, 17.

20 Sinclair, *Shylock Must Die*, 19.

Jessica's love for and trust of Lorenzo do not diminish even a few days later, after Tubal finds her in a group of seventy young women on a ship that is to embark on a journey to America. As Jessica is aware that some of the women are already prostitutes, it follows that Lorenzo wanted to sell her into white slavery. However, when Tubal tries to explain it to her, she refuses to listen. Rather, she concludes Tubal was sent by Shylock to influence her view of Lorenzo. Tubal thus gives up on bringing Jessica back to Shylock and agrees to return her to Lorenzo instead, secretly hoping that Lorenzo's "discomfort" in seeing her "would become apparent even to her."<sup>21</sup> Yet, Lorenzo easily manages to deceive Jessica into believing he is happy to see her and as he threatens to attack Tubal, the detective leaves for Venice on his own. As in *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock is disappointed to learn from Tubal that Jessica had not been found, but glad to hear that Antonio's ships had been lost.

The next section of the story proceeds to the court hearing, with Bassanio's wife, Portia, dressed in the guise of a lawyer's apprentice in order to save Antonio's life as in Shakespeare's play. While Portia calls for mercy, Shylock craves justice. In response, Portia announces the verdict to Shylock, using almost the same phrasing as in Shakespeare's play: "Take then thy bond, take thou thy pound of flesh, but in the cutting it, if thou dost shed one drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods are confiscate."<sup>22</sup> As in *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock ends up deprived of his property. In addition, while Jessica is known to have returned to Venice, she has made no effort to contact Shylock.

The final section of the story functions as a sequel to *The Merchant of Venice*, in which Shylock's role remains as limited as at the end of Shakespeare's play. Yet, while *The Merchant of Venice* closes with an idyllic scene at Belmont, the ending of Sinclair's short story is much darker in tone. One day, Jessica suddenly arrives at Tubal's office, crying and complaining about Lorenzo. Jessica confides in Tubal that she overheard Lorenzo telling Bassanio he had only married a Jewess "to become heir to her father's wealth,"<sup>23</sup> adding that his motivation to marry Jessica was the same as Bassanio's motivation to marry Portia. Jessica thus concludes she is reasonably afraid that Lorenzo may kill first Shylock and then her. Jessica's discovery of the parallels between her own and Portia's marriage contrasts with the traditional interpretation of Portia and Bassanio as more complex and deserving characters than Jessica and Lorenzo.<sup>24</sup> Rather, Sinclair's rendering of the story is in line with some recent criticism of *The Merchant of Venice*. Robin Russin, for example, opens his 2013 article with the claim that the play is "less about the pursuit of love than about the pursuit, possession, and power of money."<sup>25</sup>

Sinclair's short story may be seen as illustrating this statement especially by its final turning point, which shows Jessica becoming a sly manipulator, using her attractive appearance to achieve financial independence. Jessica unexpectedly informs Tubal she found out from Launcelot that

21 Sinclair, *Shylock Must Die*, 29.

22 Sinclair, *Shylock Must Die*, 32. The corresponding passage in *The Merchant of Venice* is 4.1.305–308.

23 Sinclair, *Shylock Must Die*, 34.

24 See e.g. Raymond B. Waddington, "Blind Gods: Fortune, Justice, and Cupid in *The Merchant of Venice*," *English Literary History* 44 (1977): 474–475.

25 Robin Russin, "The Triumph of the Golden Fleece: Women, Money, Religion, and Power in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*," *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 31, no. 3 (2013): 115.

Lorenzo is going to kill Shylock in Calle Vallaresso the next day at midnight. In an effort to save Shylock, Tubal goes there and when he sees Lorenzo “[beginning] to overhaul a steeped figure in a black cloak,”<sup>26</sup> he takes out his dagger and kills Lorenzo immediately. However, to his shock, the person in the cloak turns out to be Jessica rather than Shylock. While Jessica thanks Tubal for saving her life, he cannot help wondering: “What if Jessica not Lorenzo had been the only begetter of Lorenzo’s plot?”<sup>27</sup> As a mistress of disguise and deception, Jessica reminds Tubal of Portia. This part of Jessica’s scheme may still be seen as an extension of the theme of crossdressing in *The Merchant of Venice*, where Jessica dresses as a boy when escaping from her father’s house.

However, while in Shakespeare’s play, Jessica may need to dress as a man to achieve her goal, Sinclair’s story highlights her use of attractive femininity; David Brauner calls her a femme fatale.<sup>28</sup> Tubal finds Jessica very seductive and admits they later copulated on the floor of his office. After the act, Jessica thanks Tubal for opening her mind to Lorenzo’s greed and treachery in Genoa and dissociates herself from Portia by saying: “I am not a second Portia, Tubal. I would never willingly have called [Lorenzo] my lord and my master, and ceded to him all the treasure that my industrious father had accumulated.”<sup>29</sup> Yet, industrious is Shylock’s only positive quality that Jessica acknowledges. Other than that, she considers him greedy and insensitive, quoting Shylock’s speech from *The Merchant of Venice*: “I would my daughter were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear.”<sup>30</sup> While Tubal argues Shylock was overwhelmed by anger when speaking these words, Jessica tells Tubal “we have completed but half the job,” as “Shylock must die,”<sup>31</sup> too. As Jessica’s use of the plural in the quoted sentence implies, the story ends with Tubal’s realization he cannot avoid fulfilling Jessica’s wish, as he had already become involved in her scheme by murdering Lorenzo. Moreover, to assert her power over Tubal, Jessica suggests she could accuse him of raping her.

Jessica’s character development is the more striking given she is the only major female character in Sinclair’s short story. Other than her, women are mentioned only briefly, always in the roles they play in their marital and familial lives. Tubal’s wife is only reported to have packed his bag for the voyage to Genoa, and Tubal’s satisfaction with having sons at the beginning of the story reflects the patriarchal society he lives in. Similarly, the Rabbi’s wife is said to have gone mad after Nebulum’s tragic death, and Tubal thinks that Leah could have had a positive influence on Shylock’s life: “If she had lived she might have saved him from the folly that destroyed his good name.”<sup>32</sup> Women are thus supposed to exist mainly to take care of their family members. Even Portia, whom some critics characterize as the protagonist or heroine of Shakespeare’s play,<sup>33</sup> seems in Sinclair’s version rather comfortable with her limited position and power in society. Like Portia, Jessica is considered a desirable wife by the male characters in the story mainly because of

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26 Sinclair, *Shylock Must Die*, 35.

27 Sinclair, *Shylock Must Die*, 36.

28 See Brauner, Review.

29 Sinclair, *Shylock Must Die*, 38–9.

30 Sinclair, *Shylock Must Die*, 40. The corresponding passage in *The Merchant of Venice* is 3.1.80–81.

31 Sinclair, *Shylock Must Die*, 39–40. Italics mine.

32 Sinclair, *Shylock Must Die*, 8.

33 See e.g. Harold Bloom, “*The Merchant of Venice*,” in *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, by Harold Bloom (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), 172.

being a rich heiress. However, Jessica is the only female character that revolts against patriarchy as the norm in both the Jewish community and the wider Christian society. While antisemitism presents an important motif in the story, its employment does not lead to a particularly sympathetic depiction of the Jewish community.

In conclusion, unlike the other rewritings of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* by British Jewish writers, such as Arnold Wesker or Howard Jacobson, Sinclair's short story "Shylock Must Die" does not seem to aim for a particularly sympathetic portrayal of Shylock and the Jewish community. Rather, the story is groundbreaking regarding the presentation of gender issues, as patriarchy pervades both the Jewish community and the wider Christian society. This social order creates an insurmountable distance between Jessica and Shylock, and even Jessica's elopement with Lorenzo does not lead to her self-realization. While in Shakespeare's play, the major female character is Portia who dressed as a lawyer drives the plot to reach a happy ending for all the non-Jewish characters, by the end of Sinclair's text, Jessica emerges as an independent female character who prefers to get rid of both her husband and father. Tubal functions only as a narrator and observer who realizes rather late that he is unable to avoid participating in Jessica's scheme.

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