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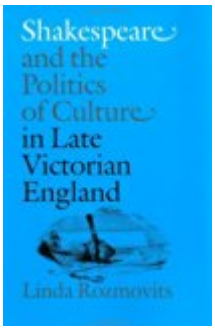

Linda Rozmovits. *Shakespeare and the Politics of Culture in Late Victorian England.* Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998. xi + 166 pp. $29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8018-5836-9.

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Published on H-Judaic (November, 1999)

Shakespeare and the Politics of Culture in Late Victorian England examines the popular responses to *The Merchant of Venice* in late Victorian society and identifies the ways in which these responses both reflect and constitute the social discourses on the status of women and Jews in that society. Rozmovits' analysis is built on a foundation of two demonstrable facts: the Victorian exaltation of Shakespeare as the codifier and teacher of morality and "Englishness," and the immense popularity of *The Mercahnt of Venice* in late Victorian England. Rozmovits asks how this popularity is related to the play's depiction of themes that might be considered problematic for the general ethos of Victorian society, namely the unfeminine independence of Portia and the political influence of Shylock. Her analysis of these questions treats the characters of Shakespeare's play as loci of the struggle of Victorian society to define and defend its integrity when faced with threats from women's rights and from the encroachment of Jews on English society.

Although Rozmovits enters Victorian culture through a fairly narrow window -- the popular and critical reception of one Shakespeare play -- her analysis of the politics of Victorian culture speaks at a general level. Unlike other studies of the literary representation of Victorian Jews, such as Cheyette's *Constructions of "The Jew" in English Literature and Society* and Naman's *The Jew in the Victorian Novel*, Rozmovits' study seeks out the broadest strokes of the social discourse tied to the representations of Jews. It should be noted, however, that although her analysis concerns the Victorian answers to very broad questions about the status of women and Jews, this analysis is built on her command of obscure and highly localised primary sources, including thirty-six study guides and editions of *Merchant* and more than ninety magazine articles, reviews, lectures, and sermons. Another difference between Rozmovits and other scholars is that she focuses exclusively on the popular reception of the artistic depiction of Jews and not at all on the work of art itself. There is no discussion of *The Merchant of Venice* except as it was discussed by others in Victorian England. Her delimitation of her topic thus excludes textual interpretation and she works only within the understandings of the play evident in

Victorian performances and commentaries. Another methodological point of interest is her deliberate neglect of any Jewish participation in the social discourses that surrounded the Victorian Merchant. In the chapters of her book that deal with the Victorian view of Shylock, her concern is "the ways in which Shakespeare's play became important in the lives of people not because they were Jewish but because they were not" (8).

The chapter "Portia: The White Woman's Burden" takes as its starting point the frequent use of Portia among respondents to a contest sponsored by the *Girl's Own Paper* in which readers were asked to write essays on "my favourite heroine from Shakespeare." Of particular interest is the editors' concern over the few "unworthy" essays that used Portia as a vehicle for a discussion of women's rights. The suitability of Portia to such discussions is evident both in her status as an independent and independently wealthy woman and in her assumption of the role of a judge at Shylock's trial. Rozmovits argues that this problematisation of Victorian femininity was answered by the production of thousands of typologies that exalted Portia as the very model of devotion, ingenuity, and civic maternalism. That the majority of submissions to the *Girl's Own Paper* viewed her similarly testifies to the success of these typologies in "limiting the range of acceptable behaviours for women at a time when the restrictions on female social mobility were being seriously challenged" (37). That a small number of essays escaped the mold of the typologies is evidence that some young Victorian women were still ignorant of what it meant to be what was called a "Shakespeare woman." Most of this chapter is given to a demonstration of the moral ideals that the typologists tried to convey through their accounts of Portia. Rozmovits also offers a revealing analysis of the ways in which typologists necessarily do violence to a text when they highlight what is consistent with extratextual moral strategies and dismiss or contort elements of the text that do not fit into the moral lesson. Although she does not make this point herself, her analysis helps explain why so much post-Victorian British Shakespeare commentary elides the dramatic quality of Shakespeare's work and instead treats the plays as proof-texts for arguments that are not relevant to the stories told in the plays.

Two chapters in ***Shakespeare and the Politics of Culture in Late Victorian England*** address Victorian audiences' reception of ambiguities in the character of Shylock, especially as he was depicted in the production of *Merchant* by Henry Irving at the Lyceum Theatre in 1879-80. This production enjoyed unprecedented success: it ran for seven months, in which an estimated 330,000 people attended performances, and for the next twenty-five years appeared in nearly every tour managed by Irving. In her first chapter on the Victorian reception of Shylock, Rozmovits questions how Irving achieved such fabulous success with a production that redefined Shylock to the point that "in all but the most literal of senses, [he] wins the trial" (62). Irving played Shylock for sympathy, giving his character a dignity usually denied him and suggesting that the trial scene is an act of persecution. Rozmovits argues that it was precisely this redefinition of Shylock that brought Irving's production such popular success. Audiences saw in Irving's Shylock a great tragic hero and their sympathies were won by what was depicted as his tragic plight and his suffering at the hands of oppressors.

Rozmovits identifies two political cultural responses to the popularity of Irving's *Merchant* and his redefinition of Shylock's character. One was the predictable outcry of theatre traditionalists, who complained that, in the words of one critic, Irving "'foster[ed] the delusion that the play is a tragedy'" (63). Another response was the fear that Irving was right in his portrayal of Shylock and that "the bard of Avon might indeed have written the play as a plea for toleration toward the Jews" (79). Rozmovits offers an interesting and persuasive argument that this destabilising fear

was answered by the efforts of Victorian Shakespeareans to evoke the figure of the Marrano as the prototype of Shylock. The application of Marranism to Irving's Shylock was intended to explain both why Shylock was apparently respectable and why he still deserved the continued suspicion of the audience. The association of Shylock with Marranism was accomplished through ostensibly historical scholarship arguing that Shakespeare based Shylock on Ruy Lopez, a Jewish Portuguese emigrant who became Queen Elizabeth's personal physician and was executed in 1594 for conspiring against her life. The trial of Lopez, who had converted to Christianity, exemplified the use of the Marranism discourse as a way of circumscribing the public lives of successful Jews. The thin evidence against Lopez was surely supplemented by a popular conviction that the success and conformity of Jews, converted or not, were always signs of secret intentions and schemes. Rozmovits demonstrates that the arguments linking Lopez with Shylock also rely on the readiness of the public to associate secrecy and concealed evil with Jews. For example, Sidney Lee's "The Original of Shylock" (1880), offers virtually no evidence that Shakespeare used Lopez as a source, but rather implies that "the perception of a significant relation between the two figures is, effectively, inevitable" and that "the connections [Lee] was arguing for were, in some imaginative sense, already in place" (92, 93). By locating Shylock's source in a well-known Marrano, Lee effectively reminded audiences that what united all Jews was their deceitfulness and evil intentions; even the apparently dignified and tragic Shylock of Irving's *Merchant* could not be trusted, given that evil had lain concealed in a man apparently dignified enough to serve Queen Elizabeth. Rozmovits' greatest accomplishment in this chapter is demonstrating that the system of signs used to identify Marrano Jews survived in Victorian England and was used to justify suspicion of Jews even when, as in the case of Irving's Shylock, they did not fit the Victorian mold of the Jew.

The second chapter on the Victorian reception of Shylock takes its title from the question asked by Portia when she enters the trial scene: "Which is the merchant here, and which the Jew?" (4.1.172). This chapter examines the strategies used to distinguish Antonio from Shylock, stage-Christian from stage-Jew. The puzzle with which Rozmovits begins her analysis is the presence of competing accounts of the Christian/Jew distinction, especially as that distinction is explained in retellings of *Merchant* for children. One children's version of the story explains that Jews "'crucified our Saviour'" and hence the Venetians "'would not treat them like fellow countrymen, but rather like slaves'," while another places Jews within a liberal order as subjects of "'unjust persecution'" by Christians who "'showed as little of their Master's spirit as did the Jews, who denied Him'" (98,99). Rozmovits argues that the difference between these two accounts points to a conflict within the self-understanding of imperial Britain. The liberal order of society that allowed some equality between Jews and Christians, the perspective from which the second children's version speaks, is not easily reconcilable with a vision of empire in which prosperity was built on the regular and reliable subjugation of aliens. The crisis evident in this conflict was heightened by the increasingly plutocratic nature of Victorian society, in which even those who were definitively outsiders could, by reason of their wealth, gain inside access to the highest levels of the Victorian establishment.

In identifying these political crises as referents of *Merchant's* significance, Rozmovits moves easily between the cultural and political elements of Victorian society in such a way that her work can be placed alongside similarly historical-minded literary analyses such as Rosenberg's *From Shylock to Svengali* and Gross' *Shylock*, the text that has set the standard for analyses of the interaction between *Merchant* and the cultures in which it is performed. Rozmovits is distinguished from her predecessors by the attention she pays to the complexity of this interaction and the mul-

ti-layered quality of social discourse. An example of this is her argument that the ambiguities of the Christian/Jew relation in a liberal and plutocratic society are reflected in the anxiety felt by Victorian audiences over the fact that Shylock was able to get as far as he did in his claim against Antonio in a society that should have insulated the Christian against any such threat from a Jew. Does the rule of law on which liberal society is based necessarily result in such instability? Is there no way formally to protect Christians from those Jews who may be wealthy enough to acquire political influence? Some resolution of these problems was found, according to Rozmovits, in the efforts of Victorian commentators to describe Shylock's claim and defeat using the language of the nineteenth-century debates on usury. She provides a brief but detailed history of these debates, ending with the Money-Lenders Act of 1900. The salient point of this Act "is the way in which it signaled a shift away from the attempt to deal with usury by determining a legal rate of interest, toward an emphasis on identifying and defining what came to be known as 'the unconscionable bargain'" (113). The most significant effect of the Money-Lenders Act was that it left the decision of who was a usurer in the hands of those who would make particular judgments in individual cases by measuring the intentions of the parties involved. Usurers were motivated by profit, while "the good capitalist was easy to spot because he was the one not in it for the money," no matter what rate of interest he charged (116). Such interior measures were easily applicable to the case of Shylock and Antonio. Rozmovits documents the reflexive relationship between the language used to distinguish usurers from good capitalists in Victorian politics and that used to distinguish Shylock from Antonio in commentaries and study guides. Since Shylock and Antonio are both wealthy and industrious, there is no way to distinguish between them in quantitative or economic terms. What distinguishes them is the difference between their hearts. Like the good capitalist in Victorian society, Antonio is indifferent to his great wealth. Like the usurer, Shylock is treacherous and greedy. There is a suggestion in the commentaries that true knowledge of this difference is possible only for those who, unlike Jews, live according to the higher, interior, spiritual measure themselves.

What is perhaps more interesting is the way in which Victorian commentators used a similar interior measure to describe why Shylock loses the trial. Commentators cast Shylock's claim as a demand to see the letter of the law fulfilled and Portia's judgment as an expression of the spirit of the law. The implication is that just as Jews must be restrained in their money-lending by interior measures not naturally known to them, so must they remain subject to the spirit of the law, beyond the letter that is known even to them. If ***The Merchant of Venice*** occasioned a crisis in Victorian England over the possibility that the rule of law in a liberal society might not guarantee the right relation between Christian and Jew, that crisis was resolved somewhat in commentaries such as Stanley Wood's 1891 Supplement to "The Merchant of Venice": Portia's judgment reminds Shylock that "'a proper social system must be based not upon human laws and right alone, but upon right and law interpreted by Christian conciliatory love, and tempered by a mediating mercy'" (127). While Portia's judgment has been interpreted by many commentators in many societies as the Christian answer to a supposedly Jewish sense of justice, Rozmovits' argument is noteworthy because of her discovery of a link between this literary interpretation and a positive, historical law that applied the same standard to Jews.

The connection drawn by Rozmovits between the interior measure evoked in the usury laws and the Victorian understanding of why Shylock loses the trial is indicative of the type of subtle links that make up this book's account of the politics of culture in Victorian England. Her work is different than standard histories of Victorian Jews because she takes as her topic the public response

to art that deals with Jews. ***Shakespeare and the Politics of Culture in Late Victorian England*** is more in the tradition of Cowen and Cowen's ***Victorian Jews through British Eyes***. Whereas the Cowens provide, with some commentary, a broad collection of primary sources of the Victorian view of English Jews, Rozmovits offers a theoretical and synthetic account of a highly focused selection of such sources. Although her focus is narrow, she persuasively demonstrates that ***The Merchant of Venice*** was the locus of debates that addressed the most basic and general components of the Victorian attitudes toward Jews. Historians of Victorian society and Victorian Jewry in particular will benefit from this account of the ways in which England's national poet was put to work resolving new nationalist problems occasioned by the changing roles of Jews in English society.

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Citation: Jeffrey Tessier. Review of Rozmovits, Linda. ***Shakespeare and the Politics of Culture in Late Victorian England.*** H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. November, 1999.

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