

A Shylock

Prologue

It is the court scene from The Merchant of Venice. In the background is the Hotel Shakespeare, where Scene One occurs. The DUKE is addressing SHYLOCK, while ANTONIO and BASSANIO stand witness. They are in tableau. JACOB wanders in, reading a copy of The Merchant of Venice. He takes a seat at his desk, half reading aloud the lines preceding the scene. The tableau comes to life (it is based on descriptions of Merchant productions in Nazi Germany). SHYLOCK has bright, unkempt red hair and a beard, and he displays a grossly elongated nose. He wears a greasy caftan with a yellow prayer shawl slung round. His foot stamps with rage, he gestures claw-like with his hands, and his voice alternates between bawling and muttering. His movements are like those of a caged animal. He is filled with a horrifying, vindictive glee. Overall, he is the most unpleasant possible stereotype of a Jew, pushed to absurd extremes.

DUKE: We all expect a gentle answer, Jew.

SHYLOCK: I have possess'd your grace of what I purpose,

And by our holy Sabbath I have sworn
To have the due and forfeit of my bond,
If you deny it, let the danger light
Upon your charter and your city's freedom!
You'll ask me why I rather choose to have
A weight of carrion flesh, than to receive
Three thousand ducats: I'll not answer that!
But to say it is my humor — is it answer'd?
(SHYLOCK cackles.)

What if my house be troubled with a rat,

And I be pleas'd to give ten thousand ducats
To have it ban'd? What, are you answer'd yet?
Some men there are that love not a gaping pig!
Some that are mad when they behold a cat!
And others when the bagpipe sings i'th'nose,
Cannot contain their urine – for affection,
Master of passion, sways it to the mood
Of what it likes or loathes, – now for your answer:
As there is no firm reason to be rend'red
Why he cannot abide a gaping pig,
Why he a harmless necessary cat,
Why he a wauling bagpipe, but of force
Must yield to such inevitable shame,
As to offend himself being offended:
So can I give no reason, nor I will not,
More than a lodg'd hate, and a certain loathing
I bear Antonio, that I follow thus
A losing suit against him! – are you answered?
(They freeze. Blackout.)

Scene One

A hotel lobby. A sign says "Hotel Shakespeare – Venice." JACOB is talking to the CLERK.

- JACOB: Buon giorno. Sa dirmi dove Shylock?
CLERK: Scusi, non parlo italiano. Only ingeles.
JACOB: I'm sorry, I thought that – never mind. I'm looking for Shylock. Is he registered here?
CLERK: Is Shylock his family name or his Christian name?
JACOB: I don't know – I think it's his only name.
CLERK: I see. *(She checks.)* No, I don't see anyone registered under that name. Isn't he a Jew?
JACOB: Yes, I believe so.
CLERK: That explains it. We don't allow Jews in this establishment. You'll have to look somewhere else.
JACOB: Oh, I see. Well, can I check in, first? I believe I have a reservation. The name is Jacob...Levy.
(The CLERK checks.)
CLERK: Oh, yes, Dr. Levy. It's a pleasure to have a professor of your status here. One moment, our bellboy will lead you to your room.
(The CLERK rings bell. LAUNCELOT enters.)
Launcelot, please take care of Dr. Levy.
(The CLERK exits.)
JACOB: Launcelot? I don't suppose your full name is Launcelot Gobbo?
LAUNCELOT: That's right. You've heard of me, then? Well, don't believe it. It's all an invention, they're just trying to retract from my character. *(Pause)* What have you heard?
JACOB: That you were once the servant to Shylock.
LAUNCELOT: Nothing about the way I tricked Lorenzo out of fifty ducats and three bottles of his best wine?
JACOB: Is it true?
LAUNCELOT: Well, I don't admit to anything, but Lorenzo –

JACOB: I meant about Shylock.

LAUNCELOT: Oh, that. (*LAUNCELOT looks around furtively.*)

It's best not to speak of that.

JACOB: But I'm sure that—

LAUNCELOT: Please don't mention it anymore.

JACOB: You are the same Launcelot Gobbo who later became servant to Bassanio?

LAUNCELOT: Please. You never know who's listening.

(A GUARD enters, escorting a JEW. The GUARD spits in the direction of JACOB and LAUNCELOT. The JEW is played by the same actor and dressed in the same way as SHYLOCK was in the prologue. He also wears an armband with a yellow Jewish star. The JEW growls and struggles with the GUARD.)

JACOB: Is that—?

LAUNCELOT: Be quiet. (*In a loud voice*) It's the Jews who are the rumination of Venice, I tell you. Oh, hello sir. I don't suppose you could spare—

(The GUARD throws him a few coins. The JEW leaps for them and the GUARD has to cuff him back. He and the JEW exit while LAUNCELOT picks up the coins.)

Thank you, sir, thank you. (*To JACOB*) They're always suckers for that.

JACOB: Was that Shylock?

LAUNCELOT: The Jew? No. But he does have the same look of the devil about him, I must admit.

JACOB: Then you did know Shylock.

LAUNCELOT: We had better head over to your room, Dr. Levy.

JACOB: I'll double your tip if you answer me truthfully.

LAUNCELOT: You'll make a Jew of me yet.

JACOB: It looked like you were halfway there, a minute ago, when you were scrambling after those coins.

LAUNCELOT: Well, I couldn't refuse his Christian charity.

(JACOB hands him money.)

JACOB: Tell me about Shylock.

LAUNCELOT: Well, I'll tell you, sir, these Jews may all be devils, but Shylock was the very picture of Lucifer himself, a close relative of the man from Malta who poisoned wells at night. "I have plucked my hair from the inferno's fires," he told me once, "and I have stolen my eyes from its dying ambers." It was true, for his breath smelled of rhinestone, and he would scorch my eyebrows when he muttered the incantations that kept me in his power. And for all his money, it was more than he could afford to keep me in the most tattered of rags and feed me the leanest of meats. Half of his rooms were full, from floor to ceiling, with his ill-gotten wealth, and, though you may have heard, sir, that he only asked for flesh from that merchant Antonio, I tell you that one night he whispered to me that "all my gold is nothing else but transformed Christian blood and bone." It is well that his kind is being separated from polite society nowadays, because he had a most fell influence on me, turning me into a liar and a thief. And though I admit I was once devoted to his daughter, now that I think of it, it may well be that she had too much of his accursed blood, as well. It was she who tempted me into some of my worst offenses.

JACOB: Such as?

LAUNCELOT: I helped mix the blood of Jew and Christian.

(The GUARD walks by again, this time with a JEWESS, who is wearing the same red wig, long nose and yellow armband that the last Jew wore. The GUARD spits towards LAUNCELOT and JACOB. The JEWESS bites at the GUARD, who pushes her to the ground. JACOB rushes to help her up.)

GUARD: Don't touch her.

JACOB: I was just trying to—

GUARD: Don't touch her.

(The GUARD pushes JACOB away, grabs the JEWESS and pulls her up.)

LAUNCELOT: Damn Jews. They ought to all be clustered away.

(The GUARD ignores him. He and the JEWESS exit.)

Are you crazy? You could have had us both killed.

JACOB: How could you have just stood there?

LAUNCELOT: She was just a Jew. What are you so concerned about?

JACOB: You could have helped her.

LAUNCELOT: Like you did?

(Pause)

JACOB: Listen, I need to find Shylock. Where does he live? Can you lead me to him?

LAUNCELOT: Not me. I wouldn't be caught dead. You apparently have no such worries. Listen, if you really want a guide, I'm not the one to ask. This is the only quarter of the city I've ever lived in. You need someone who knows something about the city as a whole.

JACOB: I take it you know someone of that sort.

LAUNCELOT: I'm speaking of Hamlet.

JACOB: The Dane?

LAUNCELOT: The Dame.

(HAMLET enters, Yorick skull in hand. She is a woman.)

JACOB: Good day, sweet prince-ess. Excuse me, I was under the impression that you were a man.

HAMLET: So was I. Apparently, I am merely a woman forced by an oppressive society into thinking she's as a man.

LAUNCELOT: Imagine her surprise when she was changing costumes.

JACOB: What are you doing in Venice?

HAMLET: I've been placed in Paris, Beijing, New Dehli, ancient Rome and a futuristic Manhattan, just to name a few places. Being a woman in Venice is merely my latest incarnation.

JACOB: Can you help me find Shylock?

HAMLET: As I was just explaining, it's all a matter of interpretation.

LAUNCELOT: Of course she can. As you can hear, they've had similar histories. Except for the Jew thing, of course.

HAMLET: What is it that interests you so much about that old Shylock?

JACOB: I received a letter.

(JACOB takes out letter and shows it to HAMLET.)

LAUNCELOT: What does it say?

HAMLET: Words, words, words.

JACOB: I got it a few months ago. It says that Shylock is dying, and that he wishes to leave me some sort of inheritance.

LAUNCELOT: I thought that was only the sort of letter you got after someone dies.

JACOB: So did I. Apparently, there's some sort of legal catch, though...

LAUNCELOT: I thought his daughter was supposed to inherit everything after he dies.

JACOB: Yes, that's it. It seems they've had a falling out.

LAUNCELOT: I would say so, yes.

JACOB: Had you heard he was dying?

HAMLET: With that tribe, I've started to assume it.

JACOB: Anyway, I thought I might try to find out a little about him, before I met him, I mean. I feel a little awkward about it. He is a relative, after all.

LAUNCELOT: A relative?

JACOB: Yes, of course. Why else would I inherit anything from him?

LAUNCELOT: I thought you were related to Antonio or something. I hadn't realized—

(The GUARD enters, heading towards JACOB and LAUNCELOT.)

My advice is, don't struggle.

(The GUARD grabs LAUNCELOT and starts to drag him away.)

What are you doing? I'm no Jew.

GUARD: You fucking gypsies are just as bad.

(They exit.)

JACOB: What happened?

HAMLET: He fell victim to dramatic irony. Trust me. I recognize the symptoms. We ought to leave. Once one goes, the rest start falling pretty quickly.

JACOB: Do you know where Shylock lives?

HAMLET: I know where his daughter lives. I think she may be able to help you out.

JACOB: Then lead the way.

(They exit.)