

<https://doi.org/10.18778/2353-6098.7.09>

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O VENICE! By Borys Fynkelshteyn

Keywords: *O Venice!*, Shakespeare, The Merchant of Venice, Jewish history

“O Venice!” Foreword

The Ukrainian author Borys Fynkelshteyn has written a short story that proposes that a key character in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* could have had a real prototype who had a possible meeting with Shakespeare or used Shakespeare’s name in his plays and histories (taking into account the anti-Stratfordian theories in the Shakespearean discourse). The most outstanding feature of this story is the suggestion that the eponymous merchant of Shakespeare’s play was based on a very old relative of Fynkelshteyn’s. To try and prove this, Fynkelshteyn spent months in the Venice library researching documents from the time the play was written. In fact, such an outlook makes this author’s strategy close to the discourse of new historicism as in this paradigm one document can completely change the traditional view on the story and its context.

The magnitude of Shakespeare’s plays lies not simply in their rich poetic language and phrasal genius but also in the fact that they addressed the fundamental issues of human existence and from the very beginning contained many secrets and gave rise to countless versions, hypotheses and assumptions. Love and hate, courage and cowardice, loyalty and betrayal, stinginess and wastefulness, honesty and deceit, as well as other shades of good and evil – all these eternal issues worried people, regardless of time, era, and other historical and cultural circumstances of human existence.

The readers’ of this short story are invited to consider Fynkelshteyn’s original interpretation. Although the author does not attempt to look for analogues in world literature, the plot of *The Merchant of Venice* is clearly visible through the outline of the narrative. True, there is an assumption that the original version of the play was based on an Italian novel of an earlier period, rooted in the 14th century. After all, all this is only speculation. You are about to read now only one possible version re-imagined by the author according to archival documents he unearthed in old Venetian libraries.

The author claims that his version is based on real facts, more than 400 years old. Besides, it cannot be denied that most of the “eternal” Shakespearean themes were repeated many times in every generation. The writer builds a narrative on facts but has every right to comprehend them in his own way, from the point of view of his contemporary reader. In this regard, the author’s belonging to an ancient Sephardic family and some features of his biography made it possible to present the plot in a completely new light, and this will certainly enrich our understanding of the essence of Shakespeare’s work in the context of Jewish issues (of the Sephardic version).



Received: 10.03.2022. Revised: 10.04.2022. Accepted: 11.04.2022.

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Translated by Michael Pursglove

*O Venice! Town of romance,
For joy in the world you live!
Love for the young you enhance,
To all lovers you happiness give!*From the 1976 TV musical film
*Truffaldino from Bergamo***Author's Preface**

The story "O Venice!" is, at least in part, based on historical facts known to the author. The rest is based on personal experience, starting from the proposition that the behaviour of unscrupulous borrowers does not much depend on time but more on the personal qualities of the person, such as honesty, probity, scrupulousness and duty. Please do not seek the well-known analogues in world literature, insofar as every prose writer, poet, playwright, as well as graphic artists and composers, have full rights to create their own world in art. And this world is completely real not only for him but also for You, my dear readers. And, perhaps, it is generally real...

Yours,
Borys Fynkelshteyn
January 2022**1**

In the early morning of 15 July 1616 Shlomo was sitting in an armchair in the doorway of his Amsterdam house. It was Friday – lots of time before the Sabbath: a whole summer's day.

Shlomo was old in years – about eighty. He was frail in health and rarely got out of his chair, and so a dedicated servant saw to his needs, bringing him drinks, made sure the sun did not shine in his face, conveyed oral messages from the large household which inhabited the vast building. And from staff already at work in the office situated in the annex. Despite his age he forgot nothing and continued to run the house and businesses, gradually involving his grandsons, great-grandsons and nephews in this. Moreover, the whole family were long-lived.

A hundred and twenty-four years earlier his great-grandfather, Baruch Halevi, was forced to leave Spain for Provence, and then for Venice, which gave rise to a new European branch of the

family and also to a widely dispersed network of international trade. Baruch lived to be ninety-two, and at the age of fifty-four, already in exile, he had a son, also called Baruch, the future father of Shlomo. Shlomo was a third son. According to ancient tradition only eldest sons took the name Baruch. But now it was Shlomo who had become the eldest in the family.

It had pleased Fate to let him outlive his whole generation.

Shlomo worked in trade, headed a banking house and was a major shareholder in the Dutch East India Company, founded in 1602, which traded with the countries of South Asia and South-East Asia. Together with a group of likeminded people, among whom there were not only Jews, for two years he had been working on the creation of a West Indian Company which would trade with the countries of the American continent and Africa. The young republic of seven united provinces, which had only become independent in 1581, presented such opportunities. The Jewish community of Amsterdam traditionally supported the ruling House of Orange and took an active part in social, financial and political life. Religious tolerance and cooperation on the part of different faiths had a beneficial effect on the economy of the country, in which industrial and economic development overcame the constraints of mediaeval practice. It is not surprising that Shlomo's thoughts on that fine summer morning centred on business affairs.

However, unexpected movement on the road attracted the attention of the venerable old man.

A carriage and two drove up to his house and halted before the gates. The coachman let down the footstep and a very elderly man with a long grey beard got down with difficulty, leaning on the arm of a young man and made his way to Shlomo. When he got closer Shlomo recognised him as his old friend Tevye from Venice.

Shlomo had once lived and worked there, but twenty years previously had been forced to leave and go first to Dalmatia and then to Amsterdam. They had been friends for forty years, but for the last twenty had merely exchanged business letters which were passed on by trading agents. Tevye had come together with his heir, his eldest grandson, in order to discuss questions of capital investment in a future trading company. A servant placed another armchair and set up a canvas baldachin above them to protect them from a sun which was beginning to scorch; he brought cold drinks and the old men began to talk. Having exchanged the latest news, they turned to past events and Shlomo found himself unexpectedly talkative.

2

July in Venice is the hottest time of the year, but 1596 was unusually hot.

Twenty years ago Shlomo was still strong; he lived and worked in the Jewish area of Venice, Cannareggio (known locally as Ghetto Nuovo – New Ghetto), but all his colleagues and clients treated him as an elder statesman. He was formidably serious and thorough.

Shlomo conducted his trade and financial affairs through a banking house in which he and several substantial members of the Jewish community had invested in conditions of total financial accountability.

The Most Serene Republic of Venice protected the rights of merchants and bankers, and his affairs went well. But in 1595, the 88th Venetian Doge, Pasquale Cicogna died; Shlomo had had an excellent business relationship with him. Pasquale had ruled the Republic since 1585 and enjoyed great authority among the people. He was a skillful and bold politician. The main thing was that he was assiduous in maintaining the law and protecting trade routes and privileges.

The next Doge, the 89th, Marino Trimani, was elected with great difficulty after seventy ballots and had already been in power for almost a year. He was heavily dependent on the Senate

and his executive organ – the Committee of Ten. As it turned out, such arrangements did not mean business was properly run.

This story began on a splendid July morning, when a young man called Angelo, a scion of an impoverished aristocratic family, turned to Shlomo and requested 3,000 ducats credit for one month in order to pursue a trading business. As security he offered an ancient palazzo on the Grand Canal. This was usual in business; all the papers concerning the security were in order; only the character of the borrower gave rise for concern – he was famous for his drinking bouts and dissolute behaviour. Angelo came to the meeting accompanied by his friends Bartolomeo and Luigi, who had similar reputations in society to Angelo, and by Roger, a young English aristocrat who was studying at Padua University, and who had a keen interest in the details of Venetian legislation and trading rules.

Shlomo made inquiries. Angelo was indeed in trade; three of his ships were at sea and were due to arrive with their cargoes in the near future. Admittedly, one piquant detail became clear: all three were gay but, when all was said and done, that was their personal affair and did not bear directly on the loan.

Shlomo decided that risk was inseparable from banking, and Angelo was granted credit. As became clear later, Shlomo gravely underestimated this trio of tricksters.

They had a second plan, within which was a third; none of them meant an honourable conduct of their affairs.

3

Throughout history there was no better way of ruining relationships than borrowing money.

As has been the case from time immemorial, the borrower takes another's money on credit for a fixed time, but has to hand over his assets forever. At least, so it seemed to him. The group of educated young men, linked by sexual ties and joint debauchery, having overspent considerably, decided to solve their financial problems in unorthodox ways.

This was the plan: 1) Bartolomeo would assume the role of a carefree man and marry a rich heiress from the mainland of the Venetian Republic and would use her dowry to extinguish the numerous debts owed by the dissolute young men to other notable Venetian families. 2) Angelo would get the money needed for this enterprise on credit from a Jewish banking house, he being the only one of them who had material assets to offer as security, but without any intention of paying off the debt or handing over the pledged property. 3) To this end they intended to deploy in the court an ancient and long-unused law on the impossibility of alienating the homes of Venetian nobility at the behest of a single proprietor, even a legal proprietor. It was understood that to do this, the agreement of all adult members of the family was needed. 4) Luigi was entrusted with seducing Deborah, the unmarried sixteen-year-old daughter of Shlomo, his only heir, and with using her inheritance to help out his bosom friends. This part of the plan began to be implemented through a suborned servant even before the application for credit, taking advantage of the young girl's inexperience in worldly matters. 5) Shlomo himself was to be killed, using hired killers and the money lent by him.

Deborah believed Luigi's passionate talk and ran away with him, disguised as a boy and taking with her the family valuables of her late mother.

The suborned servant, fearful of revenge, came into service with Angelo but then decided to add to his earnings by selling all he knew to Shlomo. This was set out in court, although it did not change the court's decision. Bartolomeo successfully married a rich heiress and their subsequent fate is not known. But as for the murder of Shlomo, a problem arose.

4

The moon had risen and the stars had begun to shine in the velvet-black Italian sky when Shlomo left his office and set off home. Despite the warm summer, the canals exuded damp and cold, so he put on a dark cloak – a cape with a hood.

The street was unlit and deserted; he almost merged with the dark soot-smearred walls. At a crossroads two figures emerged from the darkness...

“Are you the Jew Shlomo?” one of them stepped forward and asked.

Shlomo put his back to the wall and with his left hand undid his cloak button at his chest. His questioner swore obscenely, executed a quick movement, and a naked blade flashed in the pale moonlight.

Then he attacked.

Shlomo quickly furled the cloak, wrapped it round his left arm and with it parried the sword thrust. With his right hand he drew a stiletto from behind his back and, taking a step forward, drove it into the stomach of his assailant. Then he swiftly pulled it out and retreated to the wall.

His attacker pitched forward onto his head; the sword fell from his unclenched hand and clattered onto the paved road.

Shlomo picked it up, threw off his cloak, transferred the stiletto to his left hand and stood in readiness.

In his time his father had insisted he take lessons from a well-known fencing master. On business trips all sorts of things happened and he had a certain amount of experience. Now it paid off.

Not expecting such resistance from an elderly Jew, the second assailant turned and ran, disappearing into the darkness, while Shlomo picked up his cloak and went on his way, taking the sword with him. At home he examined it and discovered a monogram – W – on the hilt. From that moment he only went out in the evenings when accompanied by an armed servant.

At home he had also discovered the disappearance of Deborah and the family valuables. Full of doubt, he had a sleepless night.

In the morning things had become somewhat clearer, but this afforded him no peace. He could demand the return of his daughter and the punishment of her seducer, but in these circumstances he could not prevent her desire to adopt Christianity and to be joined with her lover according to the rituals of the Church.

After two days the credit deadline passed. The money had not been returned and, moreover, it was rumoured that Angelo’s ships had foundered as a result of a violent storm.

Shlomo immediately applied to the court for the reinstatement of losses relating to the pledge. Angelo and his friends hired a lawyer and began to blackmail the Doge, the president of the court. “To give away my home to a Jew is the same as cutting out a pound of my flesh, together with my heart,” Angelo told the court.

The court was adjourned to the following day, but that evening an emissary of the Doge brought Shlomo to a meeting with him.

“Shlomo,” said Marino Trimani, “of course, this is skulduggery, but the judgment will go against you. I won’t be able to do anything for you. If it does not, they will cause civil disturbances and that will have implications for your co-religionists. Go away for a time, until this business is forgotten. Then you can come back.”

“No,” replied Shlomo, “I will not come back. But once the Republic has ceased to uphold the law in financial matters, you will have to forget about credit you expected from the Jews for expanding the Arsenal. In such circumstances no one will give you money.”

When he got home, he found Deborah weeping and standing by the door. Luigi had robbed her and thrown her out. She had nowhere to go.

Shlomo opened the door and let her into the house. He said nothing more to her about this matter. The next day they left for Dalmatia. Shlomo bought a house and re-established his old trading links. For some time they lived peacefully. Six months later they were visited by Fernando, a great nephew from a Marrano family, newly Christianized, a stately, handsome young man of twenty-five.

He had already served as a soldier in the colonies and was now looking to civilian life to further his activities. Fernando had liked Deborah since childhood. Luigi had not touched her – he had no interest in women and merely robbed them; however, at his insistence, Deborah had become a Christian. She told Fernando everything, but this did not faze him, and after two months he asked Shlomo for her hand, saying that his heart belonged to her.

Shlomo made no objection and they were betrothed.

At table Shlomo once told Fernando about the unsuccessful attempt on his life. And gave him the monogrammed sword. The wedding was fixed for six months later. Meanwhile, Fernando went away with an old and trusted family servant, saying they had important trading business and would soon be back.

5

Darkness was falling when two horsemen approached a tavern in Domini di Terrafirma, the continental part of Northern Italy, controlled by the Venetian Republic.

It was the end of November and fairly cold. This tavern was known along the coast as a wild place: gambling, love for sale, dubious deals, thieves and bandits. Care was needed there.

The older horseman stayed with the horses, holding them by the bridle; the younger one went in. Inside it was noisy, dirty and cheerful. There was a big gambling game going on at a separate table. The newcomer joined the gamblers and placed a bet. The dice were being thrown by a well-dressed young man in a short cloak, with a sword slung by his side. He threw the dice from a silver goblet and again won. Unexpectedly the new player grabbed the dice from the table, weighed them in his hand and, in a loud voice which drowned out the general noise, shouted: “The dice are rigged. The swine.”

Then he turned round and gave the banker a resounding slap in the face. The banker reached for his weapon.

“Into the street! Into the street!” yelled the landlord from behind the bar and the whole crowd of gamblers, along with curious onlookers, spilled out and formed a circle.

There was a clatter of steel and the opponents drew their swords from their scabbards.

The offended party made the first attack. He was relying on the cuirass which he wore under his cloak and was therefore unconcerned by the first blow.

The new arrival disarmed his opponent, sank forward onto one knee and, with a twist of the wrist, thrust his sword through the lower slit in the cuirass. It went in easily, practically the whole length of it, until it reached his opponent’s neck.

This was a manoeuvre practised by Spanish infantry against heavily armed cuirassiers during a running battle. His opponent died almost instantly. An unspoken question was written on his frozen features. The young man bent down, quietly whispered something into his ear and then spat on the cooling body. Then he got up, leaving the sword still embedded in the body, quickly pushed his way through the stunned crowd, leapt onto his horse and only the rattle of the two horses’ hooves on the frozen ground resounded in the icy air.

6

As they spoke, the sun rose almost to its zenith.

It was getting hot and the old men went into the house and continued their conversation over dinner.

“So then, Shlomo, Luigi was killed in a duel with Fernando. But do you know anything of the fate of the other participants in these events of twenty years ago?” asked Tevye.

“I only know Fernando and Deborah’s side,” Shlomo replied. “They married, and have lived happily, in love and harmony, ever since. They already have six children; Fernando is our company representative for the Dalmatian shore. My eldest grandson is eighteen; he’s here and will, I hope, replace me in time. By the way, when Fernando returned, he told me everything. I would not have approved had I known in advance.”

“Why’s that?” Tevye asked. “Don’t they say: an eye for an eye? And abuse of a defenceless girl should be punished twice over.”

“That is so,” replied Shlomo. “But you must understand that, with age, you can only get back what you’ve given. I didn’t give life to that bastard, and I can’t take it away. An unpopular thought in these cruel times of ours, but forgive me...”

“How so?” replied Tevye. “The Lord has settled accounts for you with the other participants in this skulduggery. Six months later the ship, with Angelo on board, was attacked, seized and scuttled by Algerian pirates. Angelo was enslaved and, by all accounts, made to row a pirate galley. Sometime later a ransom demand was received. The sum demanded was very high. In order to pay it, his relatives had to sell the very palazzo that was part of the pledge, because no one gave them any credit. The money was paid, but Angelo did not return. He died in captivity of unknown causes. So, how was it you put it? Whoever gave, took back.”

It was a totally different story with the young English aristocrat. In that same autumn of 1596, in the immediate wake of events, he wrote a play in which he described, in extremely distorted form, these events. Incidentally, he put himself in the play as one of the characters. At the beginning of 1597 Roger returned to England, and in 1598 the play was put on in a popular London theatre.

He wrote a great deal, being an extremely talented man, but all of it under a pseudonym, which echoed his college nickname: Shake spear. He took part in the rebellion of the Earl of Essex, was exiled, then pardoned, after the death of Queen Elizabeth, by the new king, James I. He died in 1612 at the age of thirty-five, apparently from the “French disease,” syphilis, and his twenty-six-year-old wife took her own life a week after his death.

“Yes,” replied Shlomo. “I’d heard this from our trading partners. Once they gave me a letter from this aristocrat, in which he expressed regret for the mistakes of his youth.”

“So ‘Judge not, lest ye be judged’. People are all different.” And they went to dinner. Then came the Sabbath and their souls found consolation in their memories.

Author’s Afterword

Dear readers,

You have read my version of events which took place more than four hundred years ago. It is no better, and no worse, than any other version, because it is based on individual facts and a good deal of speculation, as is often the case with historical events after a prolonged lapse of time. All the heroes of my story genuinely existed.

We are all part of the human community, everyone, from Adam and Eve, but for many of my literary heroes I am a direct descendant, having inherited some of their genetic characteristics, and I therefore have a better understanding of their motives, the sources of their emotions and their behaviour. You may be interested in the subsequent fate of my heroes, their families and their relatives.

I am relating what I have succeeded in establishing, more or less accurately: the Dutch branch of the Halevi clan flourished, went into business and participated in social and religious life for many years. It was almost entirely wiped out by the Holocaust. In the eighteenth century part of the family migrated to Austria where, by decree of Emperor Joseph II, they were obliged to adopt a German surname. Then they moved to Germany, then Poland, then the Russian Empire, settling in Ukraine.

The author is a scion of that branch of the Halevi clan. The Christian Dalmatian branch lived peacefully until the Turkish attack on Dalmatia in 1645, and then moved to the city-state of Dubrovnik, where they intermarried with local merchant families. Their descendants, apparently, still live in the Republic of Croatia.