

TANYA POLLARD



Left: Danaya Esperanza (*Jessica*) in Theatre for a New Audience's production of *The Merchant of Venice*, directed by Arin Arbus.

Right: John Douglas Thompson (*Shylock*).

Photos by Gerry Goodstein.



What does blood demand, and must it be paid? *The Merchant of Venice* puts these questions onstage, and on trial. When Shylock's daughter Jessica leaves her Jewish home for a Christian lover, she rejects the claims of blood. "Alack," she reflects, "what heinous sin is it in me / To be ashamed to be my father's child! / But though I am a daughter to his blood, / I am not to his manners." In choosing manners, or behaviors, over blood, Jessica suggests that blood is only skin-deep, and can be disowned. "Farewell," she later addresses her father in soliloquy, "and if my fortune be not crossed, / I have a father, you a daughter, lost."

For some of the play's characters, Jessica's apparent ability to cast off her parentage and religion raises

the question of whether she was ever really Shylock's daughter, and Jewish, to begin with. "If a Christian did not play the knave and get thee," Launcelot tells her, "I am much deceived." When Shylock insists, "my daughter is my flesh and blood," Salarino counters, "There is more difference between thy flesh and hers than between jet and ivory; more between your bloods than there is between red wine and Rhenish." Similarly, Lorenzo and his friends repeatedly refer to "fair Jessica" and her "fair hand," highlighting her pale skin to further whitewash her foreign roots. Echoing those who see Jessica as intrinsically separate from her Jewish father, Lorenzo calls her "a Gentile and no Jew," implicitly echoing his ongoing references to "gentle Jessica." The words gentile and gentle (from the Latin *gens*,

## BONDS OF BLOOD IN *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE*

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the root of genetics, genus, and generation) are embedded in ideas of birth and race. If family serves as a microcosm for the larger religious and racial communities that the play links with blood, Jessica abandons not only her father, but also her race.

It's not clear, however, whether she succeeds. Many of the play's characters echo Shylock in defining Jessica by her blood. Despite wondering if she has a Christian father, Launcelot continues to address her as "Most beautiful pagan, most sweet Jew!" When Jessica arrives in Belmont, Gratiano refers to "Lorenzo and his infidel," and asks Nerissa to "cheer yon stranger," starkly labeling her foreign in contrast to his "friends and countrymen," Lorenzo and Salerio. Even after her apparent conversion, Launcelot warns, "truly I think you are damned," unless "you are not the Jew's daughter." In attributing Jessica's Judaism to her blood rather than

her beliefs or behaviors, Launcelot echoes Shylock, who refers to other Jews as "our countrymen" and "our sacred nation" (from Latin *natus*, having been born). Has Jessica really become a Christian, or is she merely passing as one? In the world of this play, is it possible to break the bonds of blood?

Jessica is not the play's only daughter who wants to shake off her parentage. Early in Portia's first scene, she voices her frustration at the constraints imposed by her father. "Oh me," she laments, "... I may neither choose whom I would nor refuse whom I dislike; so is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father." While Portia does not defy her father outright, she arguably does so indirectly when she calls for music to frame Bassanio's choice of casket. "Tell me where is fancy bred?," an ensuing song asks, "Or in the heart, or in the head? / How begot, how nourished?" Bassanio

Isabel Arraiza (*Portia*), Sanjit De Silva (*Bassanio*), Jeff Biehl (*Balthazar*), and Shirine Babb (*Nerissa*). Photo by Henry Grossman.



echoes these emphatic rhymes, referring to “the dowry of a second head, / The skull that bred,” just before correctly choosing the lead casket. The play doesn’t say who sings these lyrics, but singing was a specialty of boy actors, such as the one playing Portia. Whether Portia sings these lines or instructs a servant to sing them, her conspicuous support for Bassanio suggests a betrayal of her father’s law. And while Portia does not change religion, race, or nation, she also joins Jessica in presenting herself as different from the identity to which she was born. In passing as a young male legal scholar to rule on Shylock’s bond, Portia casts aside the constraints of blood to become someone new.

Jessica and Portia’s transformations have consequences, but neither is complete. After carrying out her legal intervention, Portia switches back, removing her male clothes and returning to her role as lady of the house. Jessica’s status at the end of the play is less clear. Her banter with Lorenzo is haunted by references to classical female figures linked with tragic abandonment – Cressida, Thisbe, Dido, and Medea – implicitly raising questions about her past and future. Her ambivalent

relationship to her blood hovers behind Shylock’s own unresolved ending. When Shylock first agrees to lend Antonio money for no interest, Antonio replies, “The Hebrew will turn Christian: he grows kind.” This claim is ironic in the light of Shylock’s vindictiveness, but after Shylock is indicted for contriving against Christian blood, Antonio’s words become prescient. Commanded to convert, Shylock enters the same uncertain status as Jessica. Whether or not he could ever inwardly identify as Christian, the play’s Venetians seem likely to continue seeing his blood as distinct from theirs.

What does blood demand, and must it be paid? Macbeth warns that “blood will have blood,” and *The Merchant of Venice* suggests a similarly fatalist pattern. Shylock’s “alien” blood draws abuse from the Venetians, prompting a cycle of revenge, while obligations of blood give way to daughters’ carnal longings. Ultimately it’s not blood itself, but the stories told about blood that spur cruelty and restrict freedoms in the play. Still, there are costs, and not everyone pays equally. By imagining a racially diverse Venice, with different prejudices compounding each other, this production does more than bring the play into twenty-first century conversations about race. It also defamiliarizes a play that many of us think we know, making us look at it with new eyes. The play’s preoccupations with blood show that responses to racial identities have always been at its heart. Foregrounding these responses in a world that looks like our own brings the play back to life, and invites us to reflect on the ways its bonds of blood continue to resonate today.●

Isabel Arraiza (*Portia*). Photo by Henry Grossman.



TANYA POLLARD (Chair, TFANA Council of Scholars) is Professor of English at Brooklyn College and the CUNY Graduate Center. Her books include *Greek Tragic Women on Shakespearean Stages* (2017), *Drugs and Theater in Early Modern England* (2005), *Shakespeare’s Theater: A Sourcebook* (2003), and four co-edited collections of essays on early modern drama, emotions, bodies, and responses to Greek plays. She appeared in *Shakespeare Uncovered: Macbeth* (PBS, 2013) with Ethan Hawke and in *Shakespeare Uncovered: King Lear* (PBS, 2015) with Christopher Plummer. Beyond her involvement with TFANA, she has worked with artists and audiences at theaters including the Red Bull, the Public, the Classic Stage Company, and the Roundabout. A former Rhodes Scholar, she has received fellowships from the NEH, Whiting, and Mellon foundations.