Once Upon a Time in Venice: Three Hundred Years of Narrative Adaptations of *The Merchant* for Children

Laura Tosi

Lewis Carroll was, among other things, an enthusiastic theatre-goer. He would often take his child friends to see plays in London, including Shakespeare's plays. In a letter to his friend Ellen Terry he asked her to do something to try and amend some lines in *The Merchant of Venice* which he found quite unbearable. Some "hard words". This is what he wrote to the famous actress in 1882:

> ... you gave me a treat on Saturday such as I have seldom had in my life. You must be weary by this time of hearing your own praises, so I will only say that Portia was all I could have imagined, and more. And Shylock is superb – especially in the trial scene. Now I am going to be very bold, and make a suggestion, which I do hope you will think well enough of to lay it before Mr. Irving. I want to see that clause omitted –
>
> *That, for this favour, He presently become a Christian;*

It is a sentiment that is entirely horrible and revolting to the feelings of all who believe in the Gospel of Love. Why should our ears be shocked by such words merely because they are Shakespeare's? [...] We have despised Shylock for his avarice, and we rejoice to see him lose his wealth: we have abhorred him for his bloodthirsty cruelty, and we rejoice to see him baffled. And now, in the very fullness of our joy at the triumph of right over wrong, we are suddenly called on to see in him the victim of a cruelty a thousand times worse than his own, and to honour him as a martyr. This, I am sure, Shakespeare never meant.

This was at the time in which Lewis Carroll was himself considering the possibility of preparing an edition of Shakespeare for girls. In a letter he writes: "I have begun on *Tempest*, but done very little as yet … the method I propose to myself is to erase ruthlessly every word in the play that is in any degree profane, or coarse, or in any sense unsuited for a girl of from 10 to 15; and then make the best I can of what is left." Unfortunately Carroll never completed this project. But the worry of providing unsuitable material to the young, or the desire to erase coarse (or hard) words, has always been a major concern of those authors who have rewritten Shakespeare for an audience of children.

The Merchant of Venice is not the most adapted play in the children's Shakespeare canon - it is obviously more complicated to retell than *the Tempest* or *Midsummer-Night's Dream*, the usual favourites for children's adaptations.

The history of adaptations of Shakespeare's plays for young audiences is very much a tale of drama turned into narrative: the transposition from dramatic mode to narrative mode has an enormous impact on plot, time-place coordinates, character/setting presentation, and perspective. Charles and Mary Lamb, in *Tales from Shakespeare* (1807), were the first of many generations of adapters to cut substantial portions of the plot (especially subplots), single characters, as well as bawdy talk and double-entendres. Precisely what Carroll wanted to do, a few decades after the Lambs. The Lambs' "formula" is still used in many retellings today – they introduced an omniscient narrator who often appropriates the characters' words as his own and intrudes with comments and interpretations. The *Tales* also tend to separate characters into good and bad according to the logic of the fairy tale and each character is introduced through a label which immediately clarifies his or her moral traits. The Lambs used this strategy extensively, but it has been used by other later authors as well.

Another crucial issue is – of course – the relationship between dramatic language and prose narrative, specifically the degree of linguistic simplification to which the plays should be subjected. What kind of language should the

authors choose? Translations into a modern idiom? Paraphrasis? For an example of translation into the modern idiom, this is the beginning of Marchette Chute's *Merchant* (in *Stories from Shakespeare*, 1976): "*The Merchant of Venice* is a romantic comedy, but of a most unusual kind. For the theme is money, and the climax tells of an attempted murder" (48). Faced with the question of whether or not Shakespeare's work should be "translated" into modern English, Leon Garfield declared: "I have found it perfectly possible to write within Shakespeare's vocabulary without being in the least archaic."

Another issue that is essential to raise when we discuss narrative adaptation for children is *relevance*. In what way have adaptors tried to make Shakespeare relevant to the child reader and his experience? In what way can these retellings prove educationally useful so that Shakespeare is still the child's contemporary across times? And across languages, we may add? With what kind of instructions, if any, do authors provide their child readers so that they can respond appropriately to the problematic elements of the play? A play which speaks of usury, discrimination, mercenary marriages to a degree, inter-religious marriages, forced conversion, possibly homosexual attraction, and cuckoldry. In Mary Lamb's version, we have hardly any access to Shylock's side of the story: the "Hath not a Jew eyes" speech is omitted, Antonio's cruelty towards the Jew is underplayed, and Shylock is given a negative label almost every time he is introduced (as you can see). The strategy of disparaging Shylock runs parallel to the "glorification" of Antonio.

The *Tales from Shakespeare* were reprinted many times in the decades that followed and new collections in the Lambs' tradition were published. In the second half of the nineteenth century, knowledge of Shakespeare's plays became a subject for examination in England (first in 1855, for the Indian Civil Service), and then part of the curriculum when schooling became compulsory in 1870. This is probably one of the reasons why most collections of tales taken from Shakespeare were at the peak of their popularity in the late Victorian and Edwardian periods.

In Victorian and Edwardian times Shylock is generally portrayed negatively, in the tradition of the Lambs. Mary Seymour's *Shakespeare Stories Simply Told* (1880), for example, starts with Shylock (rearrangement of plot sequences in these retellings is very common – rarely does a retelling start with Antonio's sadness)

> In the beautiful Italian city of Venice, there dwelt in former times a Jew, by name Shylock, who had grown rich by lending money at high interest to Christian merchants. No-one liked Shylock, he was so hard and so cruel in his dealings.

Spenser Hoffmann in *The Children's Shakespeare* (1911) offers another bad Shylock:

> …the Jews' wealth was built out of the misery and ruin of their fellow-men, and you may be sure that such a means of getting their living made its mark upon their characters, crushing out of them all love, and pity, and mercy.

But there are a couple of exceptions: Carter's (1910) and Townsend's (1899) versions do not omit Antonio's or the Venetians' ill treatment of the Jew so Shylock's cruelty is motivated if not justified.

The nineteenth was most famously the century of character criticism, and this had an impact on the representation of female characters as well. We know that in the second half of the nineteenth century women studied and popularized Shakespeare's plays through children's and adults' editions, actresses' memoirs, critical articles in journals, and the establishment of reading groups for women. Portia was a Victorian favourite, possibly because she combined the New Woman's capacity to speak up in the public sphere with the readiness to give it all up for love as a true romantic heroine. In 1887 when a girl's magazine, "The Girl's Own Paper" set up an essay contest on the subject "My Favourite Heroine from Shakespeare" the most popular was Portia, who inspired more than one third of the entries. She was the favourite of many other female authors of the age, such as M. Leigh-Noel (*Shakespeare's Garden of Girls*, 1885) and Abbey Sage Richardson. In Carter's Edwardian retelling of

The Merchant of Venice (1910) Portia 'had been taught by the best of masters [...] she was brave and ready, quick-witted and clever' (Carter: 3). An interesting exception to this panorama of intellectual excellency is provided by Fay Adams Britton's representation of Portia in *Shakespearean Fairy Tales* (1907) where it is a fairy-godmother that whispers in her ears what to say at the trial – the scene is reminiscent of Cinderella at a loss before the ball. It is always the warning voice of the fairy that directs Portia: an interesting example of drastic disempowering of the character, reduced to little more than a puppet.

But the most interesting author who retold Portia's story was Mary Cowden Clarke, with *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines* (1850-1852), a collection of 15 novellas that "reconstruct" the childhood and teenage years of a number of Shakespeare's female characters. Every novella is a prequel, a creative retelling of the character's past, one which supplies motivations according to the conventions of the realist novel. In Cowden Clarke we find the female protagonists coming to terms with serious childhood traumas caused by bereavement, parental neglect or dysfunctional families. When in "Portia, the Heiress of Belmont" Bellario, who has taken up Portia's education after the mysterious disappearance of her father Guido, is "playfully" asked by his gifted niece, "Might not we women make good advocates, then?" he replies:

> Your sex would make but poor lawyers, carina. Besides, women, through shrewd and quick judging, are apt to jump too rapidly at conclusions, and mar the power of their understanding by its too vivacious action.[…] Your intellectual accomplishments will draw the accusation of pedantry and unfeminine pre-eminence

The irony of the situation cannot escape a well-informed reader (which may have included older readers and adults as these tales were suitable for family reading). The novella concentrates on the relationship between Portia and the patriarchal world of her uncle, who instructs her in the secluded domesticity of Belmont, and her impetuous and shallow father. What is most noticeable about Clarke's endeavor is her attempt to provide *motivation*. We are given answers to unexpressed questions that the behavior of this heroine can raise, such as "How can a Venetian lady become so knowledgeable about the law?" or "Why did a father come up with such a peculiar plan to find his daughter a husband?" The inconsistencies of the Shakespearian plots are explained in realistic terms and the readers are offered psychological explanations that are based on events "occurring" before and outside the plays but which connect very effectively with the heroines' behaviour and words in the space of Shakespeare's drama. Of course creating an extra-textual past which precedes and explains the character's behaviour in the play is still what many Shakespearian actors do, in order to make sense of their character's choices. The back story.

To recap. I think that we can identify roughly two kinds of narrative retellings:

1) those by the Lambs, their Victorian followers, Garfield and other contemporary authors which rely on the structure of the short story collection. They include very little creative material and can be considered primarily as reductions or abridgements, and

2) those by Cowden Clarke and a number YA novelists which expand Shakespeare's plots by providing extra information, are highly creative, and rework the original plays by adding prequels, sequels, new characters etc.

In this second category *Shylock's Daughter*, by Miriam Pressler (1999), written originally in German, and Grace Tiffany's *The turquoise Ring* (2005) concentrate on Jessica, rather than Portia. Jessica, the disobedient daughter, was not a general favourite in the nineteenth century – she was generally perceived as the negative foil of Portia: where Portia is obedient, noble and generous, Jessica is defiant duplicitous and unruly. Jessica had obviously failed in her duty as a daughter. *Shylock's Daughter* is built on the alternation of third-person narration and the voice of a character who is not present in Shakespeare's play, the ugly and motherless Dalilah. The question of

female identity is pivotal in this novel which plays with Shakespeare's favourite device of cross-dressing. As in a lot of YA novels, identity is at the centre: Jessica often thinks of her cultural and religious identity as something that can be played as a role and discarded at will.

The Turquoise Ring also revisits *The Merchant of Venice* – this is definitely a crossover novel which may be enjoyed by an adult audience as well as a teenage one. Jessica here must share the spotlight with four other female characters, two of whom (Leah and the pregnant moorish servant) are just mentioned in Shakespeare. In this novel Jessica seems condemned to repeat the unhappy marital fate of other women in her family: like her grandmother, she rejects her Jewish identity for marriage, but unlike her mother, she doesn't inspire true love in a husband.

If we now consider retellings in the Lambs' tradition in our own time, attitudes to Shylock appear to be more nuanced than the Victorian authors. For example, Ian Serrailler, in 1964, tries to give an explanation to Shylock's behaviour – which causes the narrator to become more sympathetic:

As a Jew, Shylock belonged to an outcast race, despised and ill-treated and forced to wear special clothes and to live in ghettoes away from the Christian community. No wonder that he hated Christians, especially Antonio, who had always treated him with brutal scorn.

In Leon Garfield's 1985 adaptation the depiction of Shylock is ambivalent. The story reports in full the "Hath not a Jew eyes" speech and perceptively underscores the reciprocity of hate between Antonio and Shylock: "For these reasons the dark Jew hated the bright Christians of Venice; and strongest of all, he hated them because they hated him. Hate breeds hate as fast as summer flies." However, Shylock is also systematically portrayed rubbing his hands in the attitude of a stage villain.

Other contemporary versions appear to provide more simplified language and rather stereotypical images of the Jew, like the Andrew Matthews/Tony Ross illustrated version.

There are several examples of illustrated Shakespeare: Marcia Williams is very popular, with the rather subversive comments by the spectators in the theatrical frame, the Animated Shakespeare, with Garfield's scripts, or the Manga Shakespeare series. In the BBC 4 series called *Shakespeare Retold*. *The Merchant* is one of the most interesting retellings. It is told from the point of view of a boy slave, Tomas, who works for Antonio:

> I am Tomas, a slave. People don't notice me - no more than a dog, or a goat. I may be just a slave boy, but I'm human: I see, hear, speak, touch, smell. And when I get together with other household slaves, I listen to their gossip.

Shylocks mentions slaves during the Trial to denounce the Venetians' hypocrisy and these words evoke the "hath not a Jew eyes" speech. But Tomas, like an omniscient narrator, comments on dangerous choices of the adults of the play.The ending raises some very interesting questions:

> Later, I wondered...will Jew and Christian ever be friends? And would I - and slaves like me - ever be free?

Despite their different styles and formats, however, all the adaptations share a belief that Shakespeare must be part of the child's experience, albeit in a mediated – or sanitized – form. Today we would say that Shakespeare has become cultural capital that children can accumulate for their future education. Ken Ludwig, in his *How to Teach Your Children Shakespeare* (2012), makes the claim that "To know some Shakespeare provides a head start in life". That Shakespeare must be part of an English-speaking child's experience, in whatever form this may take, seems an undeniable fact – It is interesting that we are talking here about an English-speaking child's experience, as in Italy, for example, where I grew up and live, only recently has there been an interest in thinking about the

presence of (adapted, retold) Shakespeare in the Italian child's experience. At the Bologna Children's Book Fair, last year in March, there was a panel in which we discussed why adaptations of Shakespeare for Italian children are so scarce. After all the Lambs wrote in their Preface that

it is the writers' wish that the true Plays of Shakespeare may prove to them in older years—enrichers of the fancy, strengtheners of virtue, a lesson of all sweet and honorable thoughts and actions, to teach courtesy, benignity, generosity, humanity.

If this still holds true, why should Italian children be deprived of the experience of reading stories based on Shakespeare' plots?

So I shall finish by talking a little about my own translation and adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice* (Roma, Lapis, 2015). I'll start with the things that were not difficult for an Italian audience – of course I did not have to explain at length what Venice was like although a description of the Venice of 500 years ago was necessary. And of course the Italian names would be familiar to my audience. But this is the end of the easy things.

Now, the difficulties. First of all, the structure. The play alternates between two locations, Venice and Belmont, and in my first draft I did exactly the same. I thought it would give my narrative some "movement". This was a huge problem for the illustrator, as she was going to do a big illustration on two pages, so she needed the plot to be divided into bigger sequences. My solution was to forget the alternation of places and think of a theme, a setting, or a character, to be explored in the space of 2 pages. This allowed me to start with Antonio, as in the play, and his worry. So the play is rearranged as a list of minichapters entitled Shylock, The Contract, Portia, Bassanio and the Three Caskets, Jessica's flight, Shylock's revenge, Sailing from Belmont, Antonio, Balthazar, The ring, and Antonio to finish. So a theme and a character that would be developed in a double page. I was instructed to "think in images" by my editor which was a little complicated at times. I think it worked better at the beginning, because it was easy to interpolate metaphors from the text into my narrative, so my narrator appropriated Salerio and Solanio's attempts to find a reason for Antonio's melancholia.

> *Anche Antonio, il mercante della nostra storia, non poteva fare a meno di pensare alle sue navi, qualsiasi cosa stesse facendo: quando guardava una clessidra gli venivano in mente i banchi di sabbia su cui le navi si potevano arenare, quando soffiava sul brodo troppo caldo della cena immaginava l'effetto del vento e delle tempeste sulle loro vele, quando toccava del marmo o della pietra si ricordava degli scogli su cui potevano incagliarsi, perdendo nel mare i loro preziosi carichi di stoffe, spezie, gioielli.*
>
> Antonio, the merchant of our story, couldn't help being reminded of his ships wherever he went and whatever he did. When he saw an hour-glass, he would picture the sand banks and shallows on which his ships could be wrecked; when he felt the summer breeze cooling his broth, he would imagine the harm that great winds and storms may do at sea; when he sat on a stone bench to catch his breath, huge dangerous rocks would come to mind, breaking his vessels' planks and causing them to capsize, scattering their caskets of jewels, colourful silks and fragrant spices into the ocean.

I tried to avoid the patronizing narrator. But I am afraid that this is an external narrator who asks questions, often rhetorical ones, and then answers them himself. At least he delivers very few judgements, although I couldn't help giving Bassanio the label "spendaccione", a spendthrift. Otherwise I preferred to describe actions and what characters thought – more indirectly.

The other problem was how or if to explain usury and whether to introduce the ghetto – which is not originally in the play. I decided to explain what it means to be a usurer in Venice – it was one of the few jobs that the Jews

were allowed to do – while Antonio and Bassanio were heading towards the Ghetto. This description builds the illusion of time passing – at the end of the explanation they are ready to meet Shylock. I had lots of interesting conversations with my editor about what to do with Shylock – I wanted to keep the ambiguity, while she was inviting me to make up my mind. I decided to keep the two speeches that establish that Shylock is discriminated in Venice by Antonio – the "many a time and oft In the Rialto you have rated me" and of course the "hath not a Jew eyes". There are some retellings that assume that Shylock asks Antonio to sign the contract because he is hoping to kill him, so he is evil from the beginning. I didn't make that assumption – what we know about Shylock's motives is what he tells us, but I couldn't resist making a connection between the way he was treated and his cruelty, so after the "hath not a Jew eyes" the narrator explains:

> Now Shylock, turned nasty from all the sad things that had happened to him, was ready to become the ferocious man that Antonio had always thought he was.

I kept the forced conversion:

> Shylock, now a poor man, without the support of his religion and without his only daughter, had been defeated.

There is an awkward moment in the book in which words and illustrations go different ways. It is the night of Jessica's flight – which I decided to set during Carnival – it seemed to make sense as in the text they talk about masks. In the Italian text costumes and masks are described as colourful

> *approfittando del fatto che era carnevale e i giovani veneziani, indossando maschere e costumi colorati, ballavano e cantavano rincorrendosi nelle calli della città*

while in the illustration they are dark and somewhat scary. It is a dangerous night – people hide, escape, and steal. This darkness is very unusual as in all the other pictures Desideria Guicciardini, the illustrator, has imagined a very colourful Venice, with a lot of pink and orange. In the English translation that was used for the Storytelling season at the Globe in 2016 I corrected this discrepancy, and the young Venetians just wear masks and costumes.

A word about the ending. I just wanted to emphasize Antonio's loneliness rather that the couples' celebrations. Antonio is the title role – the play starts with his sadness, and – I felt – it should end with the recovery of his argosies and his reputation. But he is alone, like the solitary heron in the lagoon in the morning light that appears in the last illustration. What is he doing in Belmont? It is time to go home.

> *Era ormai l'alba.*
>
> *Uno stuolo di gabbiani volava sulla laguna azzurrina nella luce del mattino.*
>
> *Antonio guardò Bassanio e Porzia, abbracciati, che parlavano fitto: le spiegazioni di tutte queste felici conclusioni li avrebbero occupati per ore.*
>
> *Per un attimo Antonio si sentì completamente solo.*
>
> *Ma grazie a Bassanio e Porzia era salvo, e salvo due volte: Porzia gli aveva mostrato infatti un'altra lettera, in cui si informava il mercante che tre delle sue navi avevano raggiunto felicemente il porto di Venezia.*
>
> *Antonio era di nuovo un uomo ricco!*
>
> *Poteva tornare a casa con la sua reputazione e il suo patrimonio intatti.*

> *Volse lo sguardo verso il mare e pensò alle sue navi, finalmente di ritorno a Venezia da terre lontane, cariche di gemme e tessuti preziosi.*
>
> *Era il momento di lasciare Belmonte e tornare a casa ad accoglierle.*

To conclude. Obviously, if every performance is an interpretation, every narrative adaptation of Shakespeare for children equally takes a major interpretative effort to produce meaning – this is achieved through clarification, explanation and (often quite explicit) judgement. Narrators tend be omniscient, telling rather than showing, appropriating comments and conclusions that are expressed by the characters in the play or describing not only what the characters do but also their thoughts and motivations. Ambiguity is acceptable only to an extent, although there are contemporary authors, like Garfield, who use restrictive focalization.

Cognitive studies have taught us that humans live in landscapes of make-believe and stories help us navigate life's complex problems. In Jonathan Gottschall's words "Nature designed us to enjoy stories so we would get the benefit of practice. Fiction is an ancient virtual reality technology that specializes in simulating human problems" (59). And what is more human and complicated and horrific than the story of a generally unpleasant man who almost dies because he can't pay his debt? Retelling *The Merchant*, and making sense of its complicated early modern family and societal dynamics and fragility, is, like all human storytelling activities, a competition between conflicting interpretations. Just as in a legal trial, or even in Shylock's, opposing voices construct narratives of guilt and innocence and establish degrees of responsibility – wrangling over who is the real protagonist. All this is offered to child readers as a story – a safe narrative which allows them a low-cost vicarious experience of the intense complications of life.

Laura Tosi is Associate professor of English Literature at the University Ca' Foscari in Venice. Her research spans the areas of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama and children's literature. Her latest monograph is on adaptations of Shakespeare's plays for children: *Raccontare Shakespeare ai bambini* (2015).