

On Queer Nature Within William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*

By Cooper Segura

James “Cooper” Segura is currently a Senior English undergraduate student, and they are anticipated to graduate in Fall 2024. Cooper has been thinking about gender identity and sexuality since they began college in 2019 at Amarillo College, but it was not until arriving at West Texas A&M that they could delve deeper into queer theory. Coupled with this long-term interest, this adaptation project started as a short Shakespeare essay one semester and grew into a semester-long creative writing project the next. After graduation, Cooper hopes to take a year off from university, then they plan on pursuing their master's degree in English. Eventually, they want to teach English at the university level.

“On Queer Nature Within *The Merchant of Venice*” endeavors to explore the asymmetry found within *The Merchant of Venice* through an alternative lens—gender identity and sexuality rather than religion—and join the conversation regarding the survival of queer people within hostile sociopolitical spheres. This article first close reads Act 1, Scene 3 of *The Merchant of Venice*, then provides an adaptation of the scene where gender and sexuality act as the crux of conflict between Antonio and Shylock (named Antony and Shylah). A justification for the adaptation is included, and Judith Butler's methodology from their work *Gender Trouble* serves as the theoretical backbone of this research.

William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* focuses heavily on the asymmetry between Jewish people and Christian people within Venetian society and law, and we can first see this through Shylock's aside: “How like a fawning publican [Antonio] looks. / I hate him for he is a Christian; / But more,... / He lends out money gratis and brings down / the rate of usance here with us in Venice” (1.3.38-42). While Shakespeare's Shylock despises Antonio for being Christian, he focuses more on Antonio being bad for business. Shylock has a clear allegiance to his faith and his people, and he also looks at things from a business perspective: Antonio is bad for business because he gifts out money rather than lending. These initial impressions of Shylock and Antonio had an impact on my own iterations of Shylock and Antonio,

but I move their main point of conflict out of religion and into romance. My Shylah holds animosity towards my Antony because they were once in a long-term relationship, and because of Antony's reckless free-spending habits; My Antony, however, has mixed feelings towards Shylah because of their now-squandered love. This aspect is only one of the conflicts that I outline, and I took this further by highlighting the symmetry and asymmetry that they have with one another.

My main goal was to highlight the symmetry and asymmetry that Shylock and Antonio have with one another. First, I made a shortlist of the symmetries and asymmetries that these characters have. Their symmetries are that both men are in positions of power, and we can see them as a physical embodiment of the religions they represent. Shylock embodies the characteristics of the "stage Jew" on the page, and he holds a lot of the stereotypical characteristics of a Jewish person. In a similar sense, Shakespeare uses Antonio as a model of Christian values—especially generosity—and Shakespeare pits these characters against one another throughout the play.

Albert R. Braunmuller outlines this aspect in his introduction to the Pelican version of *The Merchant of Venice*. He writes that "the famous 'trial scene' is of course not a trial, and it is a setup that turns on a technicality (flesh, no

blood) and then spitefully turns back on Shylock a legal rigidity he had been duped into demanding" (xlvi). Braunmuller shows how their religions act as a point of asymmetry, especially within the "nonbiased" laws of Venice. Shylock used the law to his advantage up until he went to take his claim from Antonio, then the asymmetry of religion allows Antonio and company to flip the table on Shylock and sweep the "victory" out from under him. Braunmuller describes this as "The Biter Bit," where one seemingly in command of a given situation becomes the victim through the exact same means they once used, and the means in which Shylock demanded the trial (a broken bond necessitating the extraction of a pound of Antonio's flesh) holds biblical precedent, even giving rise to many Judeo-Christian practices (xlvi).

Shakespeare does well to highlight this asymmetry, and I wanted to do something similar with gender identity in modern climates. Unlike Shakespeare, I did not want to demonize Shylah like *The Merchant of Venice* did. Shylock deserved to be a more complex character, and my Shylah embodies that by outwardly fighting for more symmetry for himself through his gender identity and not being villainized because of it. By making him someone affected by these harmful bills, and by making him a character that has been fighting for communities to

accept his identity, I keep the severity of Shakespeare's original conflict while changing the scope from religion. The 2023 special issue of *Borrowers and Lenders: The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation* "Trans As Method: The Sociality of Gender and Shakespeare," edited by Alexa Alice Joubin focuses on how "contemporary performance proposes 'trans' as method and as a social practice rather than an immutable identity category" (3). Joubin's introduction provides a genealogy of transgender and Shakespeare studies and the other scholars represent the range of approaches for incorporating 'trans' into Shakespeare studies.

In a similar vein, I wanted to explore this idea that despite perpetuating an overarching homophobia, Antony can still be "saved" like Jessica in *The Merchant of Venice*. Unlike Jessica, this isn't discussing how one religion is more virtuous than the other, but discussing the importance of living the most honest version of one's life despite the obstacles that emerge with that. To think about identity, whether sexuality or gender identity, I look towards Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*. Butler writes that if identities were no longer entrenched in political syllogism, new cultural configurations of sex and gender would rise and confound the old system of binary sex, exposing how unnatural that is (203). In this sense, the importance would be placed on living

honestly, allowing for characters like Shakespeare's Jessica and my Antony to be saved through being allowed to perform the most honest identity for themselves. In the case of both characters, it is the current political syllogisms that force a choice upon them; while new configurations of gender and sex would not completely remove the choices they need to make—Jessica becoming estranged from her father Shylock; Antony becoming estranged from his new, well-paying job—the choices would become more flexible, and that is what I want to highlight with my scene adaptation.

A Shakespeare adaptation I read before creating my own was Lynn Butler Knight and Ramon A. Flores's *The Merchant of Santa Fe* (1993). In their retelling, the religious conflict is fleshed out in a way that reveals more than just a simple binary of sides. The conflict within *The Merchant of Santa Fe* exists, but it's more complex than just two sides. This religious conflict is multifaceted, and it is moved between several different levels: personal, familial, community, state government, and federal government. Marissa Greenberg describes this multifaceted conflict specifically through Rebeca, who deals more with traditional gender stereotypes in politics and religion: "When she cross-dresses in order to elope with Lorenzo, however, Rebeca complicates the roles of virginal daughter and Jewish

tradent.... [She] is unashamed of her masculine apparel and actually revels in it as a source of sexual titillation” (21). To Greenberg, this shift from feminine to masculine also signifies her shift from Spanish to English and Jewish to Christian, complexifying religious conflict from a simple binary to multiple levels of change that fluctuate between nationality, gender, and religion.

I wanted to accomplish a somewhat different goal with Shylah—a transgender man who went from living in relative safety to finding himself threatened by harmful anti-trans bills—and Antony—who finds himself struggling with whether he should make the choice to keep his job and completely cut ties with his queer self or to own his queer identity and lose his job, but regain Shylah in the process. The difference in my adaptation stems from these characters being former lovers existing within a system of homophobia, transphobia, and politics. I wanted these characters to have an intimate personal connection with each other while being on opposing sides of a political structure that perpetuates homophobia and transphobia. With that conflict in place, I could explore the tension between personal connection and perceived cultural structures. When the two interact with, and against, each other, the stark differences between traditional norms compared to modern performances of gender identity

become clear. To revisit Judith Butler’s analysis: the removal of identity from political would allow for new cultural constructions of identity to form, and they also discuss the dependence performative gender identities have on an audience. They write, “Gender is also a norm that can never be fully internalized; ‘the internal’ is a surface signification, and gender norms are finally phantasmic, impossible to embody” (192). The internal gender surfaces to the audience, leaving it nearly impossible to embody the gender without any kind of audience, and for Shylah and Antony, their audience is the greater state of Texas and the politics that lie within the state. They can perform their identities alone, but the conflict arises when they have to interact with the traditional cultural and political structures in place, making it difficult for my Antony to consolidate both sides of himself.

Ultimately, my adaptation of Act I, Scene 3 seeks to challenge the religious asymmetry presented by Shakespeare. I remove religion from the asymmetry to see how that changes the tensions that emerge between personal connection and political/cultural structure, and I explore the act of “saving” a character despite their inability to perform the identity that truly represents them.

Works Cited

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The following adaptation first came about as a final writing assignment for Dr. Matthew Harrison's Spring 2023 Shakespeare course. I wanted to keep in mind the simultaneous symmetry and asymmetry that Shylock and Antonio have with one another. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock is made to be an unsympathetic character because of the asymmetry of Jewish people and Christian people, and this asymmetry lends itself to bias against him in a court of law. I wanted to keep that asymmetry, but for this adaptation to address the sense of asymmetry present in current social issues. As a queer scholar, I often find myself wanting to write about gender, sexuality, and identity, and I enjoyed challenging myself by shifting from the religious commentary present in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* to consider what this scene might look like by changing the bias to something akin to the anti-trans bills recently presented in several state legislatures. I started by analyzing the characters in this scene and deciding on what new characteristics to focus on; for Shylah (my Shylock) I put him in the shoes of a gay, transgender businessman. Doing this allowed me to narrow in on the asymmetry that comes from being openly queer in a homophobic, conservative state. In that same sense, my Antonio, Antony's asymmetry comes from being a closeted gay man that finds himself supporting anti-LGBTQ laws thanks to his profitable position at a lobbying group. Antony gets caught in a choice: to be himself and lose his only means of income, or to continue supporting these bills and continue profiting, fracturing himself and his relationships in the process.

Characters

- Antonio – Antony D’aureville (he/him – gay): A prolific businessman that works alongside a large lobbying group that recently pushed for a new bill containing anti-transgender policies. He was largely unaware of the contents of said bill due to his focus on helping his friend Barclay court Portia. Antony attended the same university as Shylah, and the two became fast friends and would enter a relationship with one another. This relationship would end in a terrible fall-out over Antony’s lack of frugality with his finances, and the two would not see each other for a year. Antony is somewhat closeted due to the beliefs of the lobbying group he works with; simply put, they’re most of the phobics, but they’re the only people that would hire him.
 - Shylock – Shylah Jasper Celtradat (he/him/they – gay): A successful loan officer that has built his own loan firm since graduating with his MSF. He staunchly opposes any anti-LGBTQ organizations and has been protesting the anti-trans bill while it makes its rounds. Despite their falling out, Shylah still deeply cares for Antony, so seeing Antony’s face alongside a lobbying group known for being extremely transphobic and learning of his supposed support of the newest anti-trans bill broke his heart all over again. Shylah has been out as both gay and transgender for several years, and Antony was the first person Shylah came out to as trans. This inner conflict would come to a boiling point after he reads over a loan request by one Barclay Sanders, who has Antony D’aureville listed as a cosigner.
 - Bassanio – Barclay Sanders (he/him): Barclay is Antony’s friend from the lobbying group. While he doesn’t necessarily believe the hateful rhetoric that the lobbying group spouts, he doesn’t openly oppose it either. He’s young and somewhat naïve when it comes to money, so he gladly accepts Antony’s help when it’s offered to him. He has yet to realize that Antony has no “h” in it and continues to call him “Anthony.”
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Scene Adaptation: Act 1, Scene 3

Enter Shylah's office. Shylah sits at his desk and is intently reading something on his desktop monitor. As he reads, his brow furrows in anger before a knock at the door interrupts his train of thought.

Shylah: Yes? Come in.

Barclay: Mr. Celtradat, right? I'm Barclay Sanders.

Shylah: Sanders, right; I was just reading over your loan application. You're in fair standing credit-wise, but I would like to discuss the terms of the loan itself. You're looking to receive five thousand dollars?

Barclay: Yes, and I've agreed to the three-month payment plan.

Shylah: Three months indeed – and Antony D'aureville is listed as your cosigner?

Barclay: Well? Everything looks good, right? Anthony has to have great credit as a businessman.

Shylah: [*With a false smile*] Antony is a good man.

Barclay: Have you heard anything that proves otherwise?

Shylah: Oh, not anything other than public news. I mean that Antony has well enough credit, and despite his sordid past with his finances, he will serve as a sufficient cosigner. Should you, Barclay Sanders, default on the loan, the responsibility falls upon Antony's head. Five thousand dollars, a three-month repayment window, and Antony takes responsibility should you default.

Barclay: That's great news! Where do I sign?

He signs the piece of paper in front of him. Shylah halts him before he can sign anything else.

Shylah: Don't get carried away, Mr. Sanders. Since Antony will cosign this loan, we must wait for his arrival and his own *signature*.

Barclay: Oh, that makes sense. He should be here any second now.

The two are interrupted by a knock at the door.

Shylah: And that must be the man of the hour.

Barclay strides toward the door and opens it, revealing Antony D'aureville.

Barclay: Anthony! Good to see you; we were just talking about you. Mr. Celtradat, this is Anthony D'aureville.

Shylah [*Aside*]: Yes, I'm all too familiar with *Antony D'aureville*. I can't stand the way my heart skips a beat even now, a year later. I still love him, but I can't help but hate him too. He's broken my heart twice: once through his refusal to accept any help from me, and another through his support of the state government's latest anti-trans bill. He has to know that if that bill gets legalized, it will kill me to medically detransition.

Barclay: Mr. Celtradat, you okay?

Shylah: My apologies, I had to take a second to mentally organize my current benefactors. Once Antony signs, the funds will not be available to you until tomorrow morning. [*To Antony*] Hello, Antony. It has been some time, hasn't it?

Antony: Shylah. You're looking well. I apologize for doing this; if I had any other financial avenue to pursue, I would not be bothering you.

A phone alarm sounds: Barclay looks at his phone, then gasps in shock.

Barclay: Shoot! I forgot about my suit fitting. Anthony, I have to go. I think I've signed everything, so can I leave this in your hands?

Antony: Of course, I'll take care of everything. Don't be late to your appointment; you're going to need a stunning suit for this event.

Barclay hurriedly exits. The atmosphere in the room ices over as the two are left by themselves. Shylah's friendly smile turns into a sneer.

Shylah: So. Now my money's good enough for you, Antony?

Antony: Please, let's not fight about this. Do you think I'm thrilled to be here, prostrating myself in front of you because I can't lend Barclay the money myself? Just show me where to sign, and we'll go back to our lives.

Shylah: No, see that's not how this works. By being here, by attaching yourself to the hip of your new boy, you've ensured that we will *not* be going back to our lives. At least, not for three months, assuming your boy doesn't default. That's another thing; I cannot believe you're so willing to accept even more debt.

Antony: Excuse you! I fully expect Barclay to be able to pay back his debt in due time. Five thousand dollars in three months will be nothing assuming all goes well. And he is not my boy. He's just a friend of mine. Besides, even if he does default, I'm more than capable of paying back the loan plus interest.

Shylah: Hah. That's funny because I remember hearing you say those exact words not but a year ago. And yet I recall letter after letter, phone call after phone call, and in three months you had more than tripled the original loan you had taken out. Please, Antony. Look me in the eyes and tell me you're not going to do the exact same thing again.

Antony: I don't do that anymore. With Barclay's help, I've got my spending under control, and I have a new job that pays rather well. Thanks to them, I have yet to miss a repayment, and I have a rainy-day fund for occasions like this.

Shylah: Oh yes, your new job seems to do a lot of things rather well, Antony. Especially when it comes to lobbying in new legislation for the state government.

Antony: Shylah, let me explain-

Shylah: No. *No, you don't get to say shit to me Antony.* Why is it that when reading up on the newest batch of anti-queer bills, I find your face and your approval written all over this one?

Shylah spins his monitor around, showing open tabs regarding an anti-trans bill that would force transgender individuals to medically detransition regardless of age. Among these tabs is an update post from Antony's workplace that shows clear approval of the bill from all members.

Antony: Shylah, I can genuinely explain that. Believe you me, this lobbying group would not be my first choice for a job, but like I said they're one of the only reasons I'm on track with my life now. And it's not like they're all bad; Barclay's good people.

Shylah: But how does that explain you -a gay man who dated a trans man- advocating for this bill that could literally kill me. *Kill me*, Antony. You remember how I was before I started transitioning, and you remember how I hated life itself when I was stuck in a body that fought me every day of my life.

Antony: I know and trust me I wouldn't have given them any support if I had known that's what we were lobbying for.

Shylah: How did you not know? Antony, I know you've never closely kept up with politics, but this is something that I figured would have been closer to home for you.

Antony: I've been busy helping Barclay with this intricate proposal. He wants to marry his girlfriend, but her father had set up some kind of trial of courtship to prove the worthiness of whoever she marries. We've been stuck doing research on courtship traditions, setting aside money for the wedding itself, and I don't even want to talk about the ring shopping fiasco.

Shylah: So you've been funding this whole thing?

Antony: More or less. I said I have a rainy-day fund, but it's already allocated towards something. I feel like I have to help him, though. He reminds me too much of myself.

Shylah: He's also horrible with money? How the hell did he help you get things on track for yourself? Wait, let me guess: do as I say and not as I do?

Antony: Yeah, something like that.

The tension in the room settles, and Shylah's shoulders sag.

Shylah: [*He sighs*] I don't like fighting with you, Antony. It feels like we both lose when we do fight.

Antony: I know, and I'm sorry. I didn't want this to start a fight, and I swear to you Shylah I would have never given them my support. This is close to my heart, and so are you. Even now.

Shylah: [*Stunned, then changes the subject*] Anyways, the loan. Antony, if he defaults on this loan, I don't want you to pay me back.

Antony: Shylah, I can't do that, I-

Shylah: I'll change the terms. [*He writes, speaking out loud*] If Barclay defaults on the loan, Antony D'aureville must rescind his support for the Bill Regarding Medically Detransitioning Transgender individuals, regardless of personal consequence.

Antony: I'm- I'm not certain I can do that, Shylah. People already suspect that I'm lying to them about my sexuality. If I do that, not only will I lose my job, but they'll demonize me among every business in a statewide radius. I'll never work

again. Are you certain you don't want to be paid back? That I can do given enough time.

Shylah: Ant, be serious. Do you really think this bill won't harm you too? You may not be trans, but if they pass this, they'll only go further down the line. Are you fully prepared to sell your soul for a group that perpetuates genocide –a group that would burn *me* at the stake because of my gender identity if they thought they could get away with it?

Antony: It's not that simple, Shy. This isn't a black-and-white decision, and I don't have enough capital to fall back on. If I could afford to not work for a year to find a job market that won't lambast me for being queer, I would.

Shylah's jaw clenches; his knuckles whiten as he grips the corners of his desk, leaning towards Antony.

Shylah: I won't go back on this, Ant. But I want to be clear; this isn't a choice between me and them, it's a choice between who you want to be. I've overlooked your unwillingness to get into fights in the past, but you cannot avoid this one.

Antony: [*He sighs*] Alright, fine. I'll sign the bond. Just, please, I can't be outed right now. You're right, these bills are going to affect me; these bills already affect me, but I don't want to be back on the streets.

Shylah silently glares at Antony.

Antony: Don't look at me like that. I already said I'll do it. Really though, are you certain I can't just pay you back if Barclay defaults? I hate being in debt to you.

Shylah: You won't be in debt to me; I would've given you the world, Ant. Surely, I can handle giving you five thousand dollars? [*He smirks*] Now, let's get this to the notary and officiate everything. Your boy will have his money by tomorrow morning.

Antony: [*Reflexively*] He's not my boy. Anyways, thank you, Shylah. [*He meets Shylah's smirk with a grin, extending his hand*] Shall we?

Shylah: [*He hesitates for a moment before taking Antony's hand*] We shall.

End Scene.