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### Connecting the Unfamiliar with Familiar

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## Connecting the Unfamiliar with Familiar

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Vengour Than

I admit it. I had never read Shakespeare until last month. I was afraid of his work; I heard it was difficult. Finally, as a sophomore who recently declared his major in English, I read *The Merchant of Venice*. It is common that students, especially in America, have read at least one Shakespeare play in high school. In fact, all of my peers in class read Shakespeare in high school. *The Merchant of Venice*, as agreed upon by the class, is an anti-Semitic play with explicit discrimination, violence, and injustice toward the Jewish citizens. The sensitive theme gives my peers the chance to reflect on their high school self and ask whether students at that level should read the play. A Shakespeare scholar, Ayanna Thompson, in an interview staunchly says, “No.” Well, I am Khmer, a 19-year-old boy who grew up in Cambodia. My high school experience is not at all the same as my peers. I studied at a project-based learning school called Liger Leadership Academy. There, teachers are called “facilitators.” The students are encouraged to engage global issues within their classrooms to understand themselves and the community in which they live. So, I ask a different question than my peers. Should students at Liger read *Merchant*? How is the play relevant to my school in a country where English is not the first language? Without further ado, I state my position: Yes, Liger students should read the play, however with a pedagogy that helps with contextualization. From this perspective, I re-discover the play in connection to Cambodia’s tragedy with the Khmer Rouge genocide in 1975 to 1979.

Anti-Semitism is a sensitive topic. You would think that it is challenging for high school students to comprehend, but I believe it is crucial for teenage learners to see that violence and discrimination still exist today. *The Merchant of Venice* is a Comedy set in 16th-century Venice, with a villain named Shylock whose Jewishness leads to his ostracism. A pound of flesh is the

revenge the audience witnesses when reading the play. Shylock desires to cut Antonio's flesh as the merchant fails to owe the money agreed in their bond. CC Bennett, my classmate, wrote, "Due to the subject matters that encompass this play and the lack of understanding that most high school students have on these topics, I do not think that *The Merchant of Venice* should be read at the high school level" (Personal communications 29 March, 2022). In her response, Bennett worries that students' maturity level is not capable of carrying the play's complex issues in a conversation such as xenophobia and racism. Although I agree with her concern about students' "lack of understanding" towards anti-Semitism, I would not prevent students from reading the play.

Yes, I see that in the entire play, Shylock is always referred to as "the Jew" by every character. Shylock fumes to Antonio, "You call me misbeliever, cutthroat dog, / And spit upon my Jewish gabardine, / And all for use of that which is mine own" (I.iii.108-110). Antonio's statements and action are undoubtedly anti-Semitic and heavy in the dehumanization. I had a conversation with Caroline Bell, my school principal and former English facilitator at Liger, about high school students' maturity. She states: "let's talk about these things [anti-Semitism, racism, and discrimination] and maybe kids won't be such bullies because they will be reckoning with these themes in a classroom space" (Personal interview, 31 March, 2022). She also emphasizes that there are many texts about anti-Semitism, sexism, racism: "those are things people are going to face, why not read about it. Reading about someone who is anti-Semitic isn't going to make you anti-Semitic if you're thinking about it critically and processing it." Therefore, reading *Merchant* within the context of contemporary issues eventually sharpens the students' consciousness about anti-Semitism and their capability to have conversations about the heavy topic after high school.

As I critically read and process the play, I respond to Ayanna Thompson's "no." Her disagreement is self-contradicting. She stakes her argument by asking educators how well-

prepared and “comfortable are you dealing with this long history with anti-Semitism or racism, misogyny?” However, she wrote a book called *Teaching Shakespeare with Purpose: A Student-Centered Approach*, assisting educators with non-conventional pedagogy for 21st century learners. She encourages educators to eliminate the “congealed interpretation” of Shakespeare and to ensure that the playwright’s works and their meanings connect with the reality today (Thompson 17 and 4). Thompson wrote the book that fundamentally prepares the kinds of teachers she thinks the play demands. Reading *Merchant* with context of the play’s historical setting and the context of contemporary problems ignites students’ awareness as responsible and mature individuals.

At this point I would like to raise another objection inspired by the skeptic in me. He feels that I have not been answering another question. Why should Liger students read Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* to learn about anti-Semitism instead of other plays or texts by other authors who also address the theme? After many conversations with my Khmer friends from Liger, I am touched to see the play’s specific speeches reflect my country’s experience of genocide and ethnic discrimination. Shylock’s famous line “Hath not a Jew eyes?” (III.i.55-56) speaks of the victims’ vulnerability and agony, echoing the sentiments felt by the Khmer community—my parents, relatives, teachers, etc.—as they experienced the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge genocide. Furthermore, Portia’s speech on mercy illustrates the survival of the victims, redefining the genocide’s devastating legacy in the nation.

Being ill-treated, Shylock holds on to the agony that I see shared with the genocide survivors. In the 1970s, in Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge—a group of radical Communists—took over the country. They wanted to eliminate all forms of elite culture. Khmer citizens suffered and were forced to endure family separations, backbreaking labor, torture, and malnutrition. A third of the population died. Khmer children and adolescents were indoctrinated and trained to be soldiers

for *Angkar* or the organization (the Khmer Rouge leaders). They were taught to hate the Vietnamese, dehumanizing them as cockroaches for taking Cambodia's territories. *Ma* lost both her parents and brothers at the age of two. *Pa* lost his father. As a Khmer classical dancer, I was told by my dance teacher that 90% of Khmer dance artists died. Looking back at *Merchant* with the tragedy, I can see *Ma*, *Pa*, and my dance teachers as Shylock who can literally hold a knife or an ax to take "a pound of flesh" from the Khmer Rouge soldier whom they caught. An eye for an eye, as my peers and I said in class about Shylock.

Last year, I was a part of a dance performance called *A Bend in the River* that speaks about revenge. The choreographer Sophiline Cheam Shapiro said to Khmer Times, "I remember one time when we were just rescued from the Pol Pot [Khmer Rouge] regime. People in my village executed Khmer Rouge soldiers out of their anger and frustration. I asked myself whether I should do the same thing because those soldiers killed our loved ones. I, myself, lost my father and my two brothers" (Thyna). As Shylock painfully emphasized, "And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?" (III.i.63). My parents and dance teachers' laments mirror Shylock's experience, with the same impulse toward revenge. How do you feel when someone kills your loved ones?

At the same time, in Act IV, I find myself in agreement with the message in Portia's speech about mercy, attempting to convince Shylock to forsake the bond. She asks Shylock to accept mercy, not justice. Of course, many will probably disagree with me because Shylock, as a Jew, is deeply affected by the Christians' anti-Semitism. "An eye for an eye" will do Shylock justice, but as we know an eye for an eye makes the whole world blind. I feel ashamed to disappoint Shylock here, though I am in full support and sympathy for him, but my allegiance with the victim only goes so far. I now understand my parents. Instead of killing the Khmer Rouge soldiers, just like what was done to them, they choose forgiveness, to continue to live. I now understand my

choreographer Ms. Shapiro. She “came to learn about turning revenge into a positive attitude from her dance teachers” (Thyna). Khmer dance masters revive Khmer classical dance from ashes of the genocide--one student, one gesture at a time. As an English professor at Harvard, Stephen Greenblatt, eloquently expressed in “Shakespeare’s Cure for Xenophobia,” “What you inherit, what you receive from a world that you did not fashion but that will do its best to fashion you, is at once beautiful and repellent. You somehow have to come to terms with what is ugly as well as what is precious.” In other words, he believes that victims of discrimination and injustice possess the power to investigate their experiences as both traumatic and resilient. The genocide is ugly, but what is precious is the future and hope, stolen by the Khmer Rouge, that my parents and Khmer dance artists want to build.

Violence is twice cursed. Ms. Bell explains, “If someone violently you and you back them, you are both losing because you make yourself violent and now someone is weaker for it. You are weaker for their violence, and they are weaker of your violence. You both are perpetrators of violence.” This could be Shylock’s—my parents and teachers’—consequence for taking a pound of flesh. And as for mercy, Portia claims, “it is twice blest” (IV.i.185). You and the other person both receive it. I am proud to say that my siblings and I are the blessing *Ma* and *Pa* receive. Their children value the tragic event and learn to be better people so that history does not repeat itself.

My classmates suggest that Portia is a racist character. She is referring to a black suitor, “A gentle riddance. Draw the curtains, go. / Let all of his complexion choose me so” (II.vii.78-79). In other words, “no one of that color will ever win my heart,” says Thompson. Therefore, for what reason do we take her words about mercy when she is racist and punishes men who wished to marry her? The reality is that I do agree with this objection. There is nothing we can say to justify her racism, but my question is: are we here only to see Portia as a one-sided person? Are the

soldiers who killed many people during the Khmer Rouge murderers forever? We live in a complicated world with mixed confusion, but that is the beauty. The questions above interrogate Shylock's character, too, even as he is sympathized with by readers. Imagine he ends up taking Antonio's flesh: he will become a murderer. Here is where the complication arises. Are we still in the position to protect or sympathize with him? "I think people have more than one side to them. We are all two things at the same time. To say that anybody is just one thing, it is just not true," Ms. Bell protests. I agree, and it makes me think that Portia can be merciful in one way and unpleasant in another.

I think about the case of the prisoner-actors in the podcast *Act V*. The prisoners were convicted murders, but in performing a murderous play, *Hamlet*, they were granted a chance to reflect on their own cases. A prisoner, James Word, who played as Laertes, admits that, "To put a gun in somebody's face, that's an unfair advantage. You know, and that's a cowardly act. That's what criminals are. We're cowards" (Hitt). His confessions add more perspective to my understanding of violence. Ultimately, the host, Jack Hitt, asks an important question, "Are we forever the prisoner of our actions?" My parents and victims of the genocide must have been living their lives by pondering the question before deciding to choose mercy. I sincerely applaud for their continued act of positivity and resistance, which is to forgive and live.

Reading *Merchant* through the lense of my country's tragedy, I see the complexity of the play. As Greenblatt puts it, Shakespeare's work "offers the possibility of an escape from the mental ghettos most of us inhabit." He means that what Shakespeare provided us as a reader is the opportunity to reassess the complication of being a human from coexisting and conflicting point of views. The majority of Cambodians are Buddhist; forgiveness and mercy are the philosophy we adhere to. To move forward from the genocide and the trauma, showing love and compassion and

dropping the desire of a pound of flesh are the way. As the Buddha guides, “Violence is destroyed through detaching ourselves from violence.”

I am beyond intrigued and grateful to read the play that nurtures a never-imagined understanding of my identity and the history I grew up knowing. Reading Shakespeare for the first time in my life, I connect the unfamiliar with familiar: the genocide. From that, I realize that at the place we are afraid to explore, there can be an answer to what happened to us.

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