

**Shocked Shylock:  
Neoliberalism, Postcommunism, and 21<sup>st</sup>-century Shakespeare**

**Marcela Kostihova**

**Abstract:** This essay analyzes a rare Czech postcommunist production of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, which opened in repertory Theater Komedie in Prague (under direction of Michal Dočekal) in 1997 to a run of 120 performances over the following four years. Only the third Czech *Merchant* since the end of World War II, and the first after the fall of communism in 1989, the production harnessed the play's complexities—namely the play's culturally infamous ethnic tensions and its thorough consideration of the materiality of human existence—to explore contemporary tensions surrounding redefinitions of postcommunist subjectivity stemming from the transitional process from Moscow-controlled totalitarianism to nominally-free Western democracy. It highlights the ways in which the production appropriates the cultural capital of Shakespeare as the purported paragon of universal humanity to challenge the postcommunist transitional process, particularly the neoliberal “structural” adjustments implemented on forceful recommendations of the West.



My focus on Dočekal's staging of Shakespeare's *Merchant* serves as a vehicle for a larger examination of how the convergence of politics and art represent, consider, and negotiate broader cultural configurations of individual and collective subjectivity. In this context, I explore the production's contemplation of postcommunist citizenship, forefronting and confronting the materialistic dimensions of variously articulated masculine identities as they compete for existential viability. The production's radical reversal of the conventional portrayal of the play's oppositional ethnicities—so that Shylock and his Jewish community represent traditional, established, grounded, heteronormative humanity, while the mafia-like Venetians resort to questionable business, interpersonal, and sexual practices in the name of unbridled consumerism and instant gratification—poses serious questions about the social and cultural trends resulting from the Czech reorientation toward West-implemented free-trade capitalism. While the production giddily explores a wide range of alternative lifestyles newly made possible by the postcommunist transition, it foregrounds the fallacy of the neoliberal belief that freedom of the market—and of material pursuits—equal greater freedom for the populace. On the contrary, by accentuating the devastating effects of replacing traditional frameworks of identification of *Merchant's* central characters—such as familial, religious, or ethical structures—with a new system governed solely by pursuit and consumption of material wealth, the production harnesses Shakespeare's cultural capital to underscore the disenfranchising properties of nominally free and liberating West-oriented market capitalism.

Since I contend that postcommunist theater is tightly nestled in its cultural context and that, in particular, Dočekal's production of *Merchant* engages current tensions about cultural trends resulting from West-dominated economic and social policies, I find it crucial first to sketch out basic postcommunist economic, social, and cultural developments that the production grasps as its departing point.<sup>1</sup> In the wake of the peaceful

revolutions in 1989, Czechoslovakia (later the Czech Republic) together with its Central and East-European (CEE) neighbors, scrambled to overcome the economic handicap of dysfunctional communism to embark on a transitional course toward economically sustainable democracy. In the intense competition of possible choices constituted by the surprising variety and gradations of capitalist models offered by the “first world,” CEE countries tended to turn to the perceived opposite of totalitarian communism. According to Jerzy Szacki, ongoing knee-jerk resistance to communist totalitarianism meant that “dogmatic Marxism [was] replaced by dogmatic liberalism.”<sup>2</sup> This binary partitioning of friend from foe readily labeled all dissenters to communism as “liberals” whose arguments were inevitably rooted in the rhetoric of freedom and who were widely expected to provide the blueprints for the future liberated society: “it sufficed to be dissatisfied with the status quo and pine for some, even the most vaguely defined, liberty, or ‘greater liberty.’”<sup>3</sup> Such vaguely defined “liberty” and commitment to broadly-defined freedom readily resonated with the neoliberal rhetoric touted by Western experts dispatched by their governments to assist with the postcommunist transitional process. Nominally organized around the concepts of individual freedom, democracy, deregulated economic enterprise, and minimalization of state interference in private affairs, neoliberalism seemed to offer common sense steps to realignment of CEE countries with the “free” Western world. Indeed, the greatest promise neoliberal experts dangled in the air was to transform CEE postcommunist nations into “normal countries,” that is, socio-economic systems similar to the developed Western Europe.<sup>4</sup> This promise was hard to resist, as the results of the first wave of CEE free election bore out, ushering in a generation of new administrations bent on following the provided structural adjustment. In the Czech and Slovak Federal Republics (emerging temporarily from Socialist Czechoslovakia before the division into two independent states in 1991), the first euphoric election did not only bring to presidency the world-renown playwright humanist Václav Havel (the closest equivalent to Shakespeare the Czechs

have produced to date), but also a landslide victory of the conservative party ODS led by the charismatic reformist Václav Klaus, who enthusiastically led his constituency down the path of liberalization, privatization, and giddy collective belt-tightening.

These early euphoric stages of the postcommunist transitional process were permeated by curative metaphors of medicine, bitter pills, and surgery, introduced by Western economic experts. These metaphors were to approximate the nominally briefly unpleasant –but ultimately fabulously enriching and thoroughly necessary-- structural adjustments within CEE. Banking on the disaster-like conditions created by the precipitous fall of communist regimes in CEE, these “adjustments” consisted of drastic structural changes grounded in the central pillars of privatization of state and collective industries (including social services), down-sizing and deregulation of the labor force, and stark deregulation of the market.<sup>5</sup> Blinded by the promise of immense long-term gains that were to follow short-term pains, CEE governments (each to a different degree) embarked on a general restructuring of their economic systems, hoping to stabilize economies and secure a feasible, productive future within a European community of developed countries. Despite the rhetoric of generous assistance coming from the established Western world, which did not pause before rapturously celebrating the “end of history” as communism fell, little assistance materialized outside the already-mentioned army of neoliberal adjustments experts, who preached austerity measures as the cornerstone of successful postcommunist economies.<sup>6</sup> This “technical assistance” in the form of “transition industry,” consisted mainly of academics, motivational speakers, and representatives from the IMF and World Fund. Despite Western rhetoric of a “second Marshall Plan” that would enable a sustainable restructuring of CEE socio-economic systems, CEE countries received –as Jeanine Wedel bitterly observed, the “Marshall Plan of Advice.”<sup>7</sup> Most of the finances that did make it into the region shortly made an elegant U-turn back into the pockets of Western investors

in the form of debt service or fees paid for the offered neoliberal shock-therapy advisers.

The actual results of this neoliberal “shock-therapy,” which I have thoroughly mapped elsewhere, did not in the least resemble the optimistic predictions generated by the transition industry, creating a vast disjoint between expectations and reality that was quickly reflected in contemporary cultural production, including Dočekal’s *Merchant*.<sup>8</sup> Instead of a rapid revitalization of the region’s economy, CEE countries plummeted into a depression that quickly outstripped the devastating experience of the 1930s.<sup>9</sup> These unfavorable economic developments, with skyrocketing unemployment (reaching 12-15% in the region on average by 1994) and decreasing real wages at the forefront, were accompanied by a drastic cut in available social services, and devastating side-effects like poverty, mortality, suicide rates, lower birth-rate, alcoholism, violence, and growing gap between social classes.<sup>10</sup>

As the production of *Merchant* thoroughly illustrates, the unraveling material dimensions of everyday life had a profound effect on the social identity structures. As a salient example, the economic downturn exacerbated existing gender tensions and contributed to well-documented psychological crisis in the male population now largely devoid of employment, compensation, and the material means to perform expected social roles as providers. This in turn contributed to widespread tensions that manifested themselves as inter-generation strife, domestic violence, racist outbursts, and a general rise in crime. Furthermore, neoliberalism’s very fabric –its insistence on individual freedoms necessary for the fragmentation of the worker-force- further splintered the ties that held society together. As Jürgen Habermas has pointed out, the positive rhetoric of freedom put forward by neoliberalism hides some of its more destructive influences:

[T]he “flexibilization” of career paths hides a deregulated labor market and a heightened risk of unemployment; the

“individualization” of life projects conceals a sort of compulsory mobility that is hard to reconcile with durable personal bonds; the “pluralization” of life forms also reflects the danger of a fragmented society and the loss of social cohesion.<sup>11</sup>

The social disintegration pushed by the entering neoliberal structures merely buttressed the crumbling of existing economic and social structures, aggravating the weak points within the social fabric.

Even as Dočekal’s production of *Merchant* was taking shape, the Czech government was not only negotiating the aftermath of the first decade of postcommunist transition that failed to deliver the Westernizing “normalization” initially promised by proponents of neoliberal structural adjustments, but it was also exploring the parameters for early admittance to the EU. Most relevantly to this project, it was considering a set of economic, social, and cultural non-negotiable conditions –the first such conditions ever stipulated-- set by Western European countries for the accession of the first wave of CEE candidates to the EU. While, in economic terms, these pre-accession conditions mitigated some aspects of neoliberalization in the interest of long-term pan-European sustainability, they predominantly extended and solidified the established neoliberal practices in the region, which benefited primarily Western markets and investors, rather than the local people or the economic structures of their livelihoods.<sup>12</sup> Despite rosy rhetoric of a united Europe, the accession negotiations revealed that the existing members were steering the process to include new countries as ready sites of new economic exploitation.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to economic stipulations, EU’s preconditions included social and cultural criteria—clothed in the habit of human right—that asked EU candidates to legislate greater gender, racial, and sexual equality. While undeniably positive in their nominal aim at legislating general equality, the mere fact that they were packaged together with economic stipulations that would result in greater *material inequality* if implemented made them inherently suspect. In the simplest sense, any rhetoric of human

rights, however well-meant, seemed suspect in the face of the material results of EU policies that effectively and systematically *disenfranchised* the majority of citizens. The EU conditions that seamlessly married political, economic, and social issues together inadvertently illustrated not a higher moral principle of the Union (whose members would likely not pass should the same conditions be applied to them), but the intimate economic, political, and social workings of the neoliberal structures.<sup>14</sup> As the above quote from Habermas points out, an exploitive “free” market needs a “flexible” workforce of “individuals” independent of ties that would prevent their movement from where the system needs them. Neoliberalism thrives, Habermas argues, on a “vision of the lifeworlds of individuals and small groups scattering, like discreet nomads, across global, functionally coordinated networks, rather than overlapping in the course of social integration in larger, multidimensional political entities.”<sup>15</sup> The rhetoric of freedom and equality merely masks, as Slavoj Žižek has documented, the fact that the neoliberal capitalist system does not provide for meaningful egalitarianism attended by a “true redistribution of power,” but “the right to divorce, abortion, gay marriage, and so on and so forth—these are all permissions masked as rights.”<sup>16</sup> The insistence on human rights, in other words, without meaningful attendant structure for true democratic distribution of power and resources merely creates structures of appeasement, or, as Žižek terms it, a “permissive society.”<sup>17</sup> In the CEE, the EU economic requirements that called for layoffs in the name of “flexibility” and “efficiency” of the labor force, created inequality in applying EU subsidies for key economic sectors (such as the highly-contested agricultural sector), barred CEE citizens from seeking employment abroad while stipulating free movement for citizens of Western states, and slashed key social security provisions, made requests for redrawing the normative boundaries of human identity – such as sex, gender, and race – highly suspicious.

The systematic attempt to redrawing the boundaries of normative subjectivity (in literally rewriting the legal code that polices individual

behavior in some of the most private recesses of human existence, such as gender in the domestic sphere), was far from foreign to Czechs, who were just recovering from the last attempt to impose gender equality spurred by the communist regime. But where the various shades of communism and socialism, as they had developed and ossified between 1948 and 1989, invariably supported gender ideology with meaningful material structures –such as free equal education, guaranteed employment, two years of guaranteed maternity leave, free healthcare, ready access to childcare and elder-care – the newly emergent postcommunist system dismantled these structures in a feeble attempt to push women into the domestic sphere to fill the vacuum of the disappearing social services. If gender equality did not take hold under communism, where women continued to perform the majority of domestic-related labor in the private sphere, it stood a laughable chance in the midst of material conditions that seemed designed to achieve the opposite of material equality between the sexes.<sup>18</sup> On the contrary, the discourse of gender equality, which had been one of the central pillars of communist social and economic planning, was once again recognized as a politically suspect artificial ideology devised abroad to control the masses of individual domestic subjects. Stated simply, EU's political push toward a greater personal freedom of its prospective new members –here couched in the mantle of gender equality – failed to mesh with the material push toward neoliberal economic and social structures, exposing the fallacy of the neoliberal rhetoric that maintains that the freedom of markets and personal freedom are one and the same. In fact, the diminishing postcommunist standard of living effectively circumscribed most freedoms the Czechs had previously enjoyed.

These significant tensions surrounding the gradual articulation of postcommunist normative subjectivity projected into all areas of social life, surfacing particularly in cultural spaces –such as Shakespeare production – that have been traditionally intimately linked to the symbolic core of Czech cultural and national identity. That Shakespeare could be enlisted in a heated cultural debate about core national issues should come

as no surprise. His powerful cultural capital has not been diminished by the forceful and relentless academic efforts of post-colonial scholars and cultural-materialists world-wide, who have repeatedly pointed out the ways in which the construct of Shakespeare has been routinely employed in numerous nation-building (and nation-bashing) processes around the globe since the eighteenth century. The entity called “Shakespeare,” which has been usually understood as a short-hand for the playwright and his body of works, has also functioned as a site of ideological contest for the presumed repository of Shakespeare’s essential humanity subsequently employed to serve specific ideological agendas. In this context, Shakespeare has frequently been deployed as an extendable arm of exploitive Western practices, ranging from classical colonial regimes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to current neoliberalism.<sup>19</sup>

In the CEE broadly and the Czech Republic specifically, Shakespeare’s cultural capital has been widely recognized and used for political purposes, most notably in opposition to various colonizers since the early 1800s. His works provided a nominally universal cultural capital of “transcendental humanity” not tethered to the intricacies of local politics. The presumed apolitical characteristic of Shakespeare made him a perfect tool for colonial, communist, and military regimes –not to mention generations of nationalistic rebels and dissenters—who competed with each other in distilling Shakespeare’s presumed views on humanity, truth, and social organization. During communism, in particular, this competition intensified. On the one hand, the communist regime claimed Shakespeare as an early Marxist and insisted on interpretations and productions that underscored the ingenuity of the working class striving against its bourgeois oppressors.<sup>20</sup> On the other, dissenters from mainstream Marxism (whether reformers of communism or anti-communists altogether), exploited Shakespeare’s Western cultural capital to explore Shakespeare’s texts for alternatives to official institutional interpretations, suggesting that there might be alternatives to the communist regime as well. The long tradition of Shakespeare embedded in

CEE cultural consciousness and the pervasive use of his cultural capital for political purposes brought an unprecedented intensification of Shakespeare performances in the postcommunist period, when Shakespeare helped bridge the cultural vacuum left by the dismantling of the oppositional framework of artistic production and consumption maintained by the latest ideological framework. More than a temporary plug, Shakespeare came to be actively used in the ongoing and multi-faceted considerations of postcommunist futures, weighing in prominently on burning issues of, not surprisingly, humanity and citizenship. Performances in the 1990s and early 2000s subtly picked up public battles about legislation on domestic abuse (in Prague, for instance, in intensified and wide-ranging interpretations of Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*), homosexuality (*Twelfth Night*, *Sonnets*), and race (*Merchant of Venice*, *Othello*).

As the first postcommunist decade wore on, and the disenchantment with the disastrous shock therapy surfaced together with a clearer understanding of Western neoliberal practices, Czech Shakespeare productions, though widely hailed as apolitical, began exhibiting tendencies to negotiate the onset of neoliberal practices, seeking to evoke "timeless" constructions of humanity that would transcend the temporal requirements of the U.S. and the E.U. that sought, respectively, to dictate both philosophical and material conditions of existence in the Czech Republic through interconnected economic and human rights policy. By the time Dočekal's *Merchant* was produced in the second half of the decade, the Czechs had repeatedly expressed their disenchantment with ongoing reforms by toppling one government after another, listlessly fluctuating between various coalitions of left—and right—leaning political parties, political corruption became rampant, and Euro-skepticism had gained firm cultural hold reflected and refracted in a wide field of cultural production in general and Shakespeare in particular.

In this volatile, intriguing, and somewhat desperate cultural context, Dočekal's *Merchant* takes full advantage of the quandaries about the intersections of identity and material culture offered by Shakespeare's text.

The community-building propensities of comedy cemented through marriage are here haunted by a complex web of material investments into and symbolic power-negotiation within its possible marriages, suggesting that heterosexual love—that supposedly ungovernable expression of universal humanity—is tightly bound and directed by material considerations. It is not merely the case, as Karen Newman observed, that the women in the play are commodified; a careful reading of the text suggests that every character functions in a tightly negotiated structure of material and consumerist exchange.<sup>21</sup> Bassanio's identity as a lover only secondarily relies on his charms and accomplishments; first and foremost, he needs to purchase the trappings of desirable masculinity to woo the "richly left" Portia of Belmont, whom he desires passionately for her wealth before he ever sets eyes on her (1.1.166).<sup>22</sup> Portia herself is locked in an elaborate wooing scheme, in which her suitors are invited to equate her with a treasure chest. Jessica and Lorenzo, whose love supposedly transcends the play's central ethnic conflict between Christians and Jews, similarly depend on the jewels that Jessica appropriates from her father for her considerable dowry that she and Lorenzo immediately begin exchanging for material goods and experiences. The match between Graziano and Nerissa is one of expedient convenience for two characters of equal social degree and proximity to the central lovers, providing little evidence of interpersonal affection. The text's ambivalence about the independence of affection from fortune, of identity from materialistic performance, is stamped further in the play's central infamous bargain wherein the title merchant, Antonio, heartily agrees to "pay" with a pound of his flesh, "nearest to his heart," should he be unable to repay a loan of 3,000 ducats to the Jewish lender Shylock (4.1.237). The resulting court scene, in which the legality of the extraction of Antonio's flesh is negotiated, provides a complex insight into the monetary worth of the merchant's life and social status: the original tender escalates to 30,000 ducats, offered by Bassanio together with his "hands...head...[and]heart" should the original sum paid "ten times over" not suffice (4.1.214-15).

Portia's final offer of 9,000 ducats, "thrice the money" that Shylock is owed, is the result of a process that balances the worth of Antonio's life against his influence on her new husband: she is willing to invest a good sum to win Antonio's dependence, but not spend a fortune on building up a rival for her husband's affections (4.1.230).

Komedie's *Merchant* seemed to revel in exploring the uncomfortable intersections of capital and subjectivity, detailing moments where the former determines the latter. Transposed into an indeterminately eclectic twentieth century, "contemporary" setting (Antonio's world was populated by characters in contemporary 1990's dress, while Portia's decorated her surroundings in Belmont in decided retro-1950's style), the production addressed the difficult aspects of postcommunist identity construction in a cultural context increasingly stripped of recognizable ethical and moral markers. This tension surfaced on multiple axes of the play; it marked the generational conflict between, on the one hand, the middle-aged Antonio and Shylock, and, on the other, the younger Venetians, Jessica, and Portia's household. Through strategic multi-ethnic casting of marginal characters among Antonio's attendants, and frequent if fleeting appearances of non-verbal business deals, it equally haunted the referenced cultural contexts of exploitive trade in and abuse of narcotics, chaotic immigration, and surfacing racism. Ultimately, the production communicated a nebulous anxiety about a society fuelled by fierce materialist consumerism, stripped of abilities to form meaningful familial, communal, or collective ties. Within this broad focus, the production zoomed in especially keenly on the uncomfortable re-articulation of masculine agency within the postcommunist neoliberal framework. Yet, rather than settling for using Shakespeare to reassert cultural commitment to traditional forms of masculinity and citizenship as a bedrock of a viable postcommunist Czech future, Dočekal's production played with a variety of masculine models that vied for symbolic power and efficacy throughout the staged narrative.

In an aggressive reminder of the play's ambivalence about the practices of the Christian community, Dočekal's production represents the quasi-aristocratic Venetians of Shakespeare as a highly-functioning, criminally-active, well-dressed mafia of slick young men. Their – as well as their boss Antonio's – status in society mercilessly depends on the success of their trade in narcotics and violent crime. Within their gang, Salenio, Solario, Graziano, and Bassanio manifestly compete for Antonio's affection, money, and favors that provide the unstable but central organizing principle to the internal hierarchy of their organization. Elevated from the mundane boredom of mainstream society into the shadows of the profitable alternative economy, the Venetians lack aspirations or moral referents outside their immediate material pursuits. Since Portia's household resembles Antonio's in its reliance on shady dealings and paternalism, though it exceeds it by its firm adherence to strict business practices (as Nerissa demonstrates with her ever-present business folio with which she attends on Portia), the production leaves unclear how alternative this society really is. On the one hand, Antonio's and Portia's households might represent a relatively small but powerful growing illegal economy that services the needs of an increasingly lawless and dysfunctional society with a profitable appetite for privatized violence and hard drug consumption. On the other, the two organizations could *represent* the postcommunist society; after all, Shylock's household, the only representative of a recognizable orderly existence, is in a decided –and shrinking– minority.

The fact that Dočekal's production is the first in the Czech stage history of *The Merchant of Venice* to underscore its homoerotic dimensions – thus potentially setting up Antonio as a viable rival to Portia in Bassanio's affections – could be hailed as an important inroad in terms of advocating postcommunist tolerance for non-normative masculinity and sexuality. Broadly, the production could thus be seen as supporting the emerging human-rights legislation, contemporary with the time of production. Yet, while an unapologetic and explicit representation of

homosexuality indeed endorses a broader range of acceptable postcommunist life-projects than the Czechs were heretofore accustomed, it simultaneously distances itself from equating freedom of self-definition from the freedom of the market. On the contrary, it is the deregulated economic context that not only enables but positively encourages the exploitation of intimate ties for material profit. Thus the touchingly and desperately sincere Antonio, who hazards his life for his beloved, is unabashedly and openly exploited by Bassanio, whose explicit aims in associations with Antonio is extraction of material resources. In this context, any possibility of a mutually rewarding homosexual –or even homosocial–connection is sacrificed to Bassanio’s pursuit of material means of identity-building as he strives to capture the fabulously rich Portia. In this world of unbridled consumption, fuelled by neoliberal individualization and economic exploitation, the production seems to suggest that personal relationships are untenable.

The inability of Bassanio and Antonio to create a meaningful mutually-satisfactory interpersonal exchange is mirrored by the interpersonal dysfunction of all other couples on stage, whose personal lives take the back seat to their investment in the unregulated shadow economy. The central relationship between Bassanio and Portia, so often portrayed as a compelling affectionate wooing between two enterprising equals, is here portrayed as coldly calculating on both ends. To Dočekal’s Mafioso Bassanio, the wealthy, experienced, confident, and not-easily ruffled, transsexual (M to F) Portia merely presents a new source of material wealth and power once Antonio’s stock plummets. Portia and Bassanio’s arrangement is purely material, consolidating two previously divergent loci of power. The shock value of Portia’s explicit trans-sexuality (another first in Czech Shakespearean stage history) merely exacerbates the incongruity of the quickly-settled marriage. Even as the production strategically forfeits on the opportunity to make a case for GLBT rights – after all, Portia is a smashing success both as a business-woman in charge of a vast enterprise *and* as a cross-dressed masculine lawyer– in

underscoring the swiftness of marriage negotiations, it points out both partners' utter lack of concern about the personal qualities of their prospective spouse. Instead, both seem focused on parts of the contract that are to buttress their resources in the market. For Portia, an outsider in Venice, a contract with Bassanio will provide access to the emerging Venetian (black) market, where she can reap the exponential benefits of her unregulated, meticulously managed investment in violence and drugs. Conversely, in return for providing access to the "emerging market," Portia provides Bassanio with the material resources and business structures that will catapult him into a position of prominence in the corrupt Venetian world. In this context, Shakespeare's ardent wooing language delivered dispassionately as part of the impending business contract, only underscores the characters' physical indifference toward each other.

Accentuating the odd substitution of a business casket transaction for wooing in the play, Dočekal's production strips complexity from all three marriages, throwing into stark relief their reliance on structures of material wealth. The most prominent wedded couple, Bassanio and Portia, come together in the context of a profitable business merger, rather than passionate interpersonal connection. While the two are scrupulously polite toward each other and respectful of their personal distance, cementing their agreement with signatures of relevant paperwork, they never reveal personal affection beyond the necessary peck on the cheek that resembles the familial greeting of two powerful leaders, rather than the promising beginning of a physically fulfilling marriage. Shadowing the interpersonal coldness of the central marriage, Nerissa's and Graziano's perfunctory nuptials, noted in tandem with the marriage of Portia and Bassanio, serve as a logical consequence to the business merger, uniting the first attendants to the business venture. If Portia and Bassanio kiss on the cheek, Nerissa and Graziano respectfully shake hands once they are given the opportunity to do so.

Despite its different flavor, the supposed love match between Jessica and Lorenzo is similarly one-dimensional and over-determined by material

consumption. While the first two couples resort to polite coldness for the duration of the play, the eloped Jessica and Lorenzo show little interest in anything other than excessive consumption of anything and everything. Their unending shopping spree, punctuated by the infamous monkey purchased with the turquoise ring her deceased mother had given to Shylock, is complemented by constant displays of the physical dimensions of their sexual desire. If the first two couples focus on amassing material resources, the last two partners revel in devouring them and—nearly literally—each other. Jessica’s transformation from a school girl with pig-tails, knee-length uniform, and a touching attachment to her father, to a peroxide-blond copy of tabloid ideas of feminine beauty acquired through strategic investment of her self-administered dowry is particularly revealing of the non-verbal politics of the production. While Jessica is indeed “liberated” from Shylock’s household and free to do as she likes, the dimensions of this freedom are immediately circumscribed within the minuscule cultural space of clichéd femininity that, at the end, provides arguably fewer choices than might have been heretofore offered her.

In this new arrangement, both title stakeholders –Antonio and Shylock—are ultimately bypassed and surpassed by a new societal order unanchored in previously-established codes of morality, humanity, and decency. Gradually sidelined in the action, after they have been milked for all their resources, both have been hung to dry by the end of Act 5. Though formally restored to his wealth and status, the end of the play finds Antonio deflated and beaten, bereft of Bassanio’s attention and his former influence in the Venetian society, as he slinks away in the final celebratory fray. Shylock is even worse off, deprived of his fortune, family, friends, and the ideology that had grounded his existence.

By any contemporary popular measures, Dočekal’s *Merchant* is not a comedy; on the contrary, it succeeds in presenting the play as an Aristotelian tragedy steeped in the currents of contemporary history. At its center stands Shylock, the tragic hero of admirable and recognizable qualities, for whom we feel pity and fear as he suddenly recognizes the

ideological dimensions of the world that he inhabits. Even more than Antonio, who attempts to participate in the new neoliberal society of the young(er) Venetians, Shylock represents the traditional, conscientiously socially compliant masculine citizen. His sober business suit, starched white shirt, intellectual glasses, ever-present yarmulke, gentle demeanor, insistence on polite intercourse and inability to comprehend self-destructive behaviors of the Venetians mark him as a representative of a generation unacquainted with the corruption of his times, temporarily buffered, perhaps, by his quaint insistence on archaic—in the Venetian milieu quite laughable—religious practice. His protective love for his flighty and pubescent daughter Jessica—presented here as cautiously parental, rather than controlling—make him touchingly endearing. As such, he can stand for the uninitiated postcommunist citizen, who is cautiously but generally optimistically engaging with the material dimensions of the postcommunist reality.

Rather than a stipulation of actual interest, Shylock's early proposal of a payment of a "pound of flesh" should Antonio default on his loan might be read in Dočekal's production as an attempt at a joke, a sign of Shylock's willingness to start anew, assuming Antonio's solvency and inevitable positive outcome of their business deal. It is only when the dimensions of the Venetians' business dealings are uncovered, stripping away not only his early naiveté but also his daughter and his fortune, that Dočekal's Shylock turns to law to pursue his unlikely bond. In the subsequent unraveling of the core touchstones of his identity, primarily his ability as a provider in a family unit, Shylock's stubborn insistence on Antonio's pound of flesh is not so much bloodthirstiness as a desperate attempt for the domestic legal system to enforce stipulated legal boundaries. The final loss of his means of survival to Portia's expert and merciless manipulation of the law for the benefit of the wealthy, which follows an unsuccessful attempt to bribe him with manifold monetary return on his initial investment, uncomfortably echoes the gradual dispossession of the Czech citizenry by foreign investors evoking new legal

codes written at the bidding of the EU and assisted by a new generation of self-interested profiteers and/or by the thoughtless consumerism of (as is the case of Jessica) seduced innocents.

The remnants of the comedic structure –the three marriages affirmed in Act 5 that are to approximate the rebirth of a previously disturbed society—are systematically undermined by the explicit dysfunction of every single connection presented on stage. By the end of the play, all but business relationships have been rendered utterly meaningless. All characters’ life-projects have been thoroughly individualized and unanchored from meaningful structures that would provide social cohesion to the rattled community. Yet this freedom comes at an exorbitant price: while the characters are perfectly free to contemplate any and all dimensions of articulating their identity –since the society no longer cares about the normative boundaries of gender, sexuality, or ethnicity—their social participation has been stripped down to the materialist dimensions of competitive consumer capitalism. In the absence of social imperatives other than those of the market, the production seems to suggest, individualized life-projects –no matter how free—become shackled in the repetitive cycles of meaningless material competition and consumerism. This *Merchant* thus addresses the context of postcommunist society unhinged by the application of neoliberal frameworks that promote personal enjoyment over civic responsibility at the expense of overall societal organization.

*Marcela Kostihová is an Associate Professor of English at Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota, where she teaches a range of courses in literary, cultural and film studies. Her research reflects a broad interest in the intersections of politics, culture, and subjectivity formation. Her publications include a scholarly book, Shakespeare in Transition: Political Appropriations in the Post-communist Czech Republic (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), and a critical-theory textbook for teens, How to Analyze Works of Stephenie Meyer (ABDO, 2011).*

---

This essays builds on a passing mention of Dočekal's production of Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* in chapter 5 of *Shakespeare in Transition* (Marcela Kostihova, *Shakespeare in Transition*, New York: Palgrave, 2010: pp. 148-151), where the production's interpretation of Portia as a M-F trans-sexual was foregrounded within the bounds of a discussion about postcommunist Czech appetite for sensational display of non-normative sexuality. This essay dissects Dočekal's *Merchant's* complex universe of postcommunist identity construction.

<sup>1</sup> I have written about the material effects of the postcommunist traditions in further detail in *Shakespeare in Transition: Political Appropriations in the Postcommunist Czech Republic* (Palgrave, 2010), namely in the Introduction and Chapter 1.

<sup>2</sup> Szacki, Jerzy, *Liberalism after Communism* (New York: Central European University Press, 1996), 25.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>4</sup> Katherine Verdery, in *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996) similarly mapped the ways in which anti-communist dissent and the progressive stages of the transitional process were guided by the rhetoric of freedom and 'return to Europe' (104). For thorough analysis of the links between neoliberalism and the rhetoric (but not practice) of democracy, please see: Harvey, David, *The Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), particularly chapters 1-3; Klein, Naomi, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007); Giroux, Henry A., *The Terror of Neoliberalism: Authoritarianism and the Eclipse of Democracy* (Boulder: Paradigm, 2004); or Duggan, Lisa, *The Twilight of Equality: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), particularly chapter 1.

<sup>5</sup> See Klein, *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Or Klein, *Ibid.*, 176 ff.

<sup>7</sup> Wedel, Jeanine, *Collision and Collusion: The Strange Case of Western Aid to Eastern Europe, 1989-1998* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 30; and Swain, Adam, "Soft capitalism and hard industry: virtualism, the 'transition industry' and the restructuring of the Ukrainian coal industry," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, Vol. 31 No 2 (June 2006): 208-223: 208-10.

<sup>8</sup> See Kostihova, *Ibid.*, chapter 1.

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, a 1997 UNICEF report analyzed by Jacek Moskalewicz in "Alcohol in the countries in transition: the Polish experience and the wider context" *Contemporary Drug Problems* 27 (Fall 2000): 561-92, 563.

<sup>10</sup> See Štulhofer, Aleksander and Theo Sandfort, "Introduction: Sexuality and Gender in Times of Transition," in *Sexuality and Gender in Postcommunist Eastern Europe and Russia* (New York: The Haworth Press, 2005), 2; Milanovic, Branko, *Income, Inequality, and Poverty during the Transition from Planned to Market Economy*. (Washington: World Bank, 1998), 26; and Okey, Robin, *The Demise of Communist East Europe: 1989 in Context* (London: Oxford University Press, 2004), 124. Moreover, as Jacqui True has charted [*Gender, Globalization, and Postsocialism: The Czech Republic after Communism*. (New York: Columbia Press, 2003), 71], the economic disempowerment of shrinking real wages, unemployment, rising costs of living, and rapidly decreasing social security networks, "reflected in the rising male suicide and mortality rates, alcohol abuse, and unemployment and crime rates across the region." Though, a small proportion of younger, urban and educated men have been able to benefit from the neoliberal processes that tapped their potential to create a new class of business-oriented supporters, the majority of the male population has remained susceptible to continuing instability that has further exacerbated already escalating frictions, particularly since the newly emerging youthful masculine model was perceived as "often synonymous with embezzlement, materialism, and cynicism" (Štulhofer and Sandfort, "Introduction: Sexuality and Gender in Times of Transition," 4).

<sup>11</sup> Habermas, Jürgen. *The Postnational Constellation: Political Essays* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 87.

<sup>12</sup> The requirements for CEE markets to open to foreign investment and privatization – while Western markets have remained heavily regulated and insulated— have made a paradoxical centerpiece to the conditions for accession. As Heather Grabbe has observed [“Challenges of EU Enlargement,” in *Ambivalent Neighbors: The EU, NATO and Price of Membership* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003), 67-89, 79], on the eve of the first three accessions of Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic to the EU,

There are double standards, and some of the rules are more equal than others. Thus there has to be free movement of goods, services and capital in central and eastern Europe, but the EU is not going to allow free movement of people from east to west immediately (even though free movement of workers is one of the four freedoms of the Single Market). State aid has to be limited according to EU rules, without the laxity that has been allowed to German *Länder* or declining industries throughout the EU. National subsidies to agriculture must be reduced, but east European farmers are not guaranteed access to the major Common Agricultural Policy funds.

Others have documented distinct bias in the East-West trade agreements weighing strongly in favor of the established Western economies (Okey, *The Demise of Communist East Europe: 1989 in Context*, 119, 182).

<sup>13</sup> For more argumentation in this vein, please see a range of contributors to the essay collection *Ambivalent Neighbors: The EU, NATO and Price of Membership* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003), namely: Wallace, William, “Does the EU have an *Ostpolitik*?,” 51; Ozolina, Zaneta, “The EU and the Baltic States,” 214; Bobinski, Christopher, “Polish Illusions and Reality,” 243; Baranovsky, Vladimir, “Russian Views on NATO and the EU,” 271; and Lieven, Anatol, “Conclusions: The Pangs of a Disappointed Love? A Divided West and Its Multiple Peripheries,” 304.

<sup>14</sup> Grabbe, *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>15</sup> Habermas, *The Postnational Constellation: Political Essays*, 88.

<sup>16</sup> Žižek, Slavoj, *First As Tragedy, Then As Farce* (New York: Verso, 2009), 59.

<sup>17</sup> Žižek, *ibid.*, 59.

<sup>18</sup> Katherine Verdery, for instance, provides an astute analysis of the contradictory ways in which the conflicting communist ideology of equality in difference played out. Verdery, *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next?* particularly 64-69.

<sup>19</sup> As salient examples of this vast field please see, for instance, contributions to *Alternative Shakespeares, vol. 2*, ed. Terrence Hawkes, (London: Routledge, 1996). For discussion of the use of Shakespeare for political purposes in the colonial and postcolonial framework please see, for example, Loomba, Ania and Martin Orkin, eds. *Post-Colonial Shakespeares*. (London and New York: Routledge Press, 1998).

<sup>20</sup> For detailed discussion of the communist love affair with Shakespeare see, for instance, Ostrovsky, Arcady, "Shakespeare as a Founding Father of Socialist Realism: The Soviet Affair with Shakespeare," in *Shakespeare in the Worlds of Communism and Socialism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 56-83.

<sup>21</sup> Newman, Karen, "Portia's Ring: Unruly Women and Structures of Exchange in 'The Merchant of Venice'" *Shakespeare Quarterly* 38, no 1 (1987): 19.

<sup>22</sup> Shakespeare, William. "The Merchant of Venice," *The Norton Shakespeare*, eds. Stephen Greenblatt et. al. (New York: Norton, 1997).