

Rethinking “Local” Shakespeare: The case of *The Merchant of Santa Fe*

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The Merchant of Santa Fe, a radical adaptation of Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, was written and staged in 1993 amidst a surge of scholarly and popular interest in New Mexico’s “hidden Jews,” or early modern *Judeoconvertos*, who continued to practice, albeit secretly, their ancestral faith.¹ This interest was not and is not limited to the state’s colonial past: it is also about modern-day New Mexico. Descendants of early modern *Judeoconvertos*, some of whom continue to observe Jewish customs with no or partial knowledge of their significance, have mixed reactions to these revelations. In addition, the emergence of Jewish ancestry has complicated issues related to identity politics and resource allocation among New Mexico’s Native, Anglo, and Hispano communities.² In its engagement with New Mexico’s complex histories of ethnicity and economics, *Santa Fe* represents an outstanding example of “local” Shakespeare. As I argue, however, the play is also bound up with histories of theater and culture that reach beyond the borders of New Mexico.

Santa Fe follows the broad contours of *The Merchant of Venice*—it includes the “merry bond,” test of caskets, and legal trial—but these plotlines are profoundly reshaped by issues specific to the play’s setting in mid-seventeenth-century northern New Spain, including Hispano culture, crypto-Jewry, and Indian violence. Don Antonio believes his *honra*, or honor, to be affronted when Don Saül (the play’s Shylock figure) requires the merchant to sign a contract in order to borrow money to finance Rafael’s (Bassanio’s) expedition to woo the beautiful heiress, Doña Portía. Antonio avenges this insult when Salazar (a character who, in his design to

bring the Inquisition to Santa Fe, combines the vicious mockery of Shakespeare's Salanio and Salarino and the historical conditions of persecution of *Judeoconversos*) reveals to him that Saül is a crypto-Jew. Specifically, the merchant assists Lorenzo in eloping with Saül's daughter, Rebeca (Jessica), which deception Antonio justifies in terms of saving her from the Inquisition. When Saül learns that Antonio aided his daughter's flight and that Indians attacked the merchant's caravans, he seeks to exact the penalty for default—the well-known pound of flesh.

Meanwhile, Rafael solves the riddle of the caskets, weds Portía, then leaves his bride in order to aid his benefactor. Portía assumes the guise of a lawyer in an attempt to save Antonio, and although she speaks many of the same lines as Shakespeare's Portia, it is not Portía's legal knowledge or rhetorical subtlety that saves Antonio, but the merchant's and Saül's recognition of a shared Hispano culture of *honra* and non-denominational desire for life. Indeed, *Santa Fe* does not conclude with Saül's punishment; his Jewishness remains an open secret, and he is not compelled to a second baptism. In addition, Salazar's harassment of Santa Fe's crypto-Jews is brought to an abrupt end when he reluctantly announces that the Inquisition has no intention of leaving the security of Mexico City for the wilderness of the northern territories, where the violence that leads to the Pueblo Revolt of 1680 has begun.

At first blush, the uniquely New Mexican context of *Santa Fe* renders it an unambiguously "local" adaptation. As I begin to argue in this essay, however, the play's investments extend beyond the local to regional, hemispheric, and global networks. Part of a larger project that grapples with the relationship between adaptation and conversion, this essay focuses on the ways *Santa Fe* draws on regional histories of theater and culture.³ I introduce these histories in terms of two interrelated stories: the first concerns the seemingly unique strategies employed in the adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice* for a New Mexican audience; the second introduces the scenes of cross-dressing in *Santa Fe*, which complement Shakespeare's complex representation of gender. These stories are connected by the way they situate *Santa Fe* within the development of Hispano theater in the American Southwest over the past half-century. Moreover, this intersection of local and regional histories speaks to the broader question of

what we mean when we talk about Shakespearean adaptation as "local."

In the only dedicated study to date of *Santa Fe*, Elizabeth Klein and Michael Shapiro describe the intricate local contexts of the play's development from concept paper to final script.⁴ They describe, for example, the three *tertulias* (Spanish versions of salons) at which academics and community members had opportunities to discuss the colonial history and modern-day politics of New Mexican crypto-Jewry. In an instance of capacious collaboration, participants in the *tertulias* also provided feedback on drafts of the script. Although representative of diverse areas of scholarly expertise—including theater arts, social history, and sociology—and faith traditions—Catholic, Jewish, and Native—participants in the *tertulias* were bound together by a common tie of locality; all those named or referenced in Klein and Shapiro's article were native or current residents of New Mexico.

The *tertulias* are among "the strategies adopted to make this play [i.e., *The Merchant of Venice*] relevant in New Mexico," but also "representative of pressures felt far beyond its geographical borders."⁵ What Klein and Shapiro mean here is that *Santa Fe* participates in a global movement in which Shakespearean adaptation is emphatically local. While this observation is certainly accurate, it obscures the way the *tertulias* and other seemingly local aspects of *Santa Fe* have regional origins and reverberations. Specifically, the play draws on the strategies of Hispano theater and brings those strategies into the service of the unique dispositions, language, and collective memories of New Mexico's diverse, if predominantly Hispano, population, including its secret history of crypto-Judaism.

Santa Fe was developed under the auspices of La Compañía de Teatro de Albuquerque. Founded in 1978, La Compañía emerged in part from the same social and intellectual contexts, such as the Chicano movement and post-colonial discourse that spurred the creation of *teatros* throughout the American West in the 1960s. Community involvement in the development of plays, or *actos*, is a hallmark of the *teatros*. However, the *teatros* drew principally from working-class Chicano communities, whereas La Compañía made concerted efforts to include New Mexico's diverse communities in the development of *Santa Fe*. Also like the *teatros*, for the past thirty-

five years La Compañía has used bilingual performance to address issues of social injustice, economic disparity, and judicial abuse. Yet the Spanish-language portions of *Santa Fe* include grammar and vocabulary that are distinct to populations in northern New Mexico and southern Colorado. Likewise, anyone who is not a native of or a well-informed transplant to the state would likely not recognize how the “discovery” of Jewish ancestry among New Mexico’s Hispano population complicated long-standing disputes over land and water.

Another significant way in which this “local” adaptation participates in regional histories is in its representation of women. Critics and practitioners have charged the *teatros*, and El Teatro Campesino in particular, with precluding women from leading roles both onstage and offstage. Men held proprietary control over playwriting, and their plays tended to confine female performers to the secondary and stereotypical roles of whores, virgins, and wives.⁶ Beginning in the 1990s, however, Chicano/a Theater began to amend this trend by featuring the work of female playwrights and offering female performers more complex roles.⁷ *Santa Fe* participates in this development as well. On the most obvious level, the play was co-written by a man and a woman, Ramón Flores and Lynn Butler. More subtly, it depicts women as agents in the complex dynamics of identity transmission.

Santa Fe achieves these effects specifically by adding to and reworking the scenes of cross-dressing in *The Merchant of Venice*. The first instance of cross-dressing in *Santa Fe* has no counterpart in Shakespeare’s play. Doña Portía, mistress of the Manzano estate, enters with Nerisa, her *genizara* servant.⁸ The two women are discussing their efforts to make apple brandy based on instructions left by Portía’s father. Their conversation turns to Portía’s father’s instructions for the selection of a husband for his daughter and then to her ridiculous suitors. When the arrival of another suitor—a “puro castizo,” or Spaniard of pure Christian blood—is announced, Portía disguises herself in a comic precursor to the casket test.⁹ She “smears dirt on her face and messes her hair” and explains to Nerisa that she wants to see if her lineage-conscious suitor will be able to “pick the real mistress of Manzano” (30). The suitor fails this new test (he never attempts the casket test): taking the women’s appearances as indicative of their stations and

ancestry, he begins to woo Nerisa, who is neither of high birth nor Hispano. Only after Nerisa alerts him to his error does the suitor turn to address Portía, who continues to enact a lower-class, possibly Anglo, persona by “affect[ing] a ‘hick’ accent” and expressing an enthusiasm for castrating pigs and “wrassl[ing]” (31).

This scene subtly signals, albeit to only the most intuitive playgoer, that Portía is a hidden Jew. Specifically, her making of apple brandy and then her cross-dressing are indicative of strategies for the concealment of Jewish identity. While observant Jews are forbidden to drink wine that is not kosher, other kinds of alcoholic beverages do not require special preparation. The consumption of apple brandy and other cordials, then, may have been a strategy by which *Judeoconversos* who wished to maintain biblical dietary laws could do so without calling attention to their avoidance of non-kosher wine. However, the connection between Portía’s efforts to follow her father’s recipe and any attempt to maintain Jewish observance is effectively occluded throughout the play. Just as Portía successfully conceals her social status and ethnicity from her *puro castizo* suitor, she keeps secret her Jewishness from her husband and from the theater audience. Only in the final moments of the play, Portía reveals that her ancestors were Portuguese Jews. “Welcome to the family,” Portía says to Rafael; the play ends as “Lights [come] down as Rafael realizes who his children will be” (127).

Through the episode of Portía’s initial cross-dressing, *Santa Fe* enacts the significant role that women throughout the Sephardi Diaspora historically played in the transmission of Jewish identity. After the Inquisition, Jewish communal worship and textual study—the provinces of men—were replaced by more private performances, specifically domestic practices and oral traditions, which tended to be the provinces of women.¹⁰ Portía’s efforts to make apple brandy thus reflect how in crypto-Jewish communities the communication of ancestral faith to the next generation fell increasingly to women. At the same time, they indicate the limits of that transmission. Portía’s father left behind the recipe for apple brandy, but because he failed to make all the ingredients legible, his daughter has succeeded only in turning cider into vinegar.

The play also suggests that Portía may be no more successful than her father at passing on her Jewish heritage. In the trial scene, which replicates Shakespeare's play more than any other scene in *Santa Fe*, Antonio's death is not prevented by the cross-dressed Portía, but by the litigants themselves. This alteration is significant because Portía's arguments are based not in Christian or secular law, but in Jewish law. In a final effort to dissuade Saùl from exacting the pound of flesh from Antonio, she says, "Don Saùl, from what little I know of Jewish law, it is written that 'Even though your enemy has risen up to kill you, when he comes hungry and thirsty to your house, give him food and drink'" (101). Here Portía does not, as far as I have been able to discover, invoke a well-known codification. Instead, she appears to combine precepts from Proverbs and the Talmud (the record of rabbinic commentary on the oral law) that urge charitable treatment of one's enemies, on the one hand, and justify preemptive violence against one's enemies, on the other.¹¹ The effect of Portía's combination of precepts is two-fold: first, like her cross-dressing as an attorney, her attempt at religious exegesis performs a role usually occupied by Jewish men; and second, like her earlier cross-dressing as a "hick," it suggests that beneath her Shakespearean counterpart's lines about mercy and justice, which appear in abbreviated form in *Santa Fe*, is a Jewish attitude toward the law.¹² Yet Portía's exegetical citation of Jewish law fails to move Saùl, who "turns away" from Portía and "approaches Antonio" (101, s.d.). Just as in the apple brandy scene, where she falls short of realizing domestic practices, in the trial scene Portía is unable to deploy effectively her Jewish inheritance. Rather than oversimplifying the roles of women in the concealment and transmission of Jewish identity, then, *Santa Fe* uses scenes of cross-dressing to illustrate the difficulties that women (as well as men) faced in fulfilling these responsibilities.

The complication of gender stereotypes within the representation of New Mexican crypto-Jewry also emerges through Rebeca, Flores and Butler's Jessica-figure. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Jessica's cross-dressing as a page reveals anxieties about the way Jewish gendered and textual bodies challenge masculine, Christian authority—specifically, the resistance of Jewish women to the physical impression of Christian men and the resistance of Jewish scripture to Christian appropriation.¹³ In *Santa Fe*

these anxieties are reworked to celebrate female sexual agency and to explore the limits of transmitting Jewish identity. Rebeca is introduced in stereotypically gendered terms as a prospective bride, beautiful, and skillful in the kitchen. She also participates dutifully in the performance of Jewish Sabbath rituals, including the lighting of candles that is designated for women. When she cross-dresses in order to elope with Lorenzo, however, Rebeca complicates the roles of virginal daughter and Jewish tradent. Emerging from her father's house "dressed as a boy," Rebeca "giggles" and asks Lorenzo, "Do you like my new sex?" (61). Unlike Jessica, who describes her "transform[ation] to a boy" as a cause for "blush[ing],"¹⁴ Rebeca is unashamed of her masculine apparel and actually revels in it as a source of sexual titillation. In addition, before she exits with her Christian beloved, Rebeca says, "Adiòs, mi vida de antes," and then, "Welcome, my new life!" (63). Rebeca's shift from Spanish to English, like her assumption of male apparel, marks her connected conversions from daughter to wife and from Jew to Christian.

These conversions are put under pressure once Rebeca resumes her feminine apparel. For example, when her *genizaro* servant decides to return to the Apache tribe from which he was separated as a child, Rebeca responds, "I can understand wanting a new life. But I hate to see you throw away your old life" (113). For the *genizaro*, "a new life" involves not simply a rejection of his "old life" as *genizaro*, in which he is neither Spanish nor fully Native; it is also a return to his (other) "old life"—that is, his originary tribal life in which he was uniquely and emphatically Apache. Rebeca faces a different choice. She cannot safely occupy an "old life" of open Jewish observance; yet she is reluctant to abandon her "tribe" in favor of a "new," wholly Christian life.¹⁵ Inverting her sentiment from the earlier scene—what was an enthusiastic *adiòs* becomes an anguished "throw[ing] away"—Rebeca, like many modern-day New Mexicans who choose to acknowledge their crypto-Jewish ancestry, seems intent not on supersession, but on synthesis. This desire to conjoin new and old lives reappears at the end of *Santa Fe*, when Rebeca sends a letter to her father in which she asks for his forgiveness. Rebeca is clearly reluctant to sever all ties—or, we might say, bonds—to her Jewish ancestry. Whereas the cross-dressed Portía represents the challenge of

simultaneously concealing and transmitting Jewish identity, the cross-dressed Rebeca represents the ambivalent desire for the recovery and incorporation of Jewish identity into the dominant Hispano identity of New Mexico.

In this essay, I have argued that *Santa Fe* explores the local history of hidden Jewry, but the histories used to perform it are regional theater and culture. This intersection of local and regional histories becomes visible in the play's scenes of cross-dressing, which enact the vital, yet fraught, roles of women in New Mexico's crypto-Jewish past. In so doing, the play also participates in recent developments in Chicano/a Theater, which have closed the gap between the social and political realities of Hispanic women's lives, on the one hand, and their dramatization and performance onstage, on the other. Of course, these scenes are also indebted to Shakespeare, whose plays routinely use cross-dressing to put pressure on ideologies of gender and performance. The way in which *Santa Fe* brings Shakespeare's cross-dressing heroines into the service of both local and regional histories is thus significant for understandings of Shakespearean adaptation as a "local" phenomenon.

The story of transmission and recovery that *Santa Fe* tells through Shakespearean adaptation, especially its cross-dressing heroines, extends beyond New Mexico's borders and throughout the Sephardi Diaspora. Recent studies in the fields of Latin American theater and culture, for example, reveal similar uses of Shakespeare to challenge dominant histories of ethnicity and nationality and to allow "those traditionally excluded and marginalized"—such as Latin American Jewry—"the opportunity to reclaim their agency."¹⁶ However, in my adopted state, in contrast to Latin America and other formerly colonial regions, Shakespeare is not perceived as a hegemonic authority who must be appropriated through cannibalization or grafting.¹⁷ And although at times I have encountered an attitude of hostile indifference ("What is Shakespeare *to us?*"—meaning native Hispanos), just as frequently I have discerned a sense of entitlement. Many New Mexicans identify strongly with their Spanish origins, and it is perhaps ironic that this identification with the "Old World" is strongest in northern New Mexico.¹⁸ Because of its distance from the Inquisitorial offices in Madrid and Mexico City, this area of New

Spain, which includes Santa Fe and its environs, was particularly attractive to conversos intent on continuing to practice Judaism. For these New Mexicans, Shakespeare is part of a European literary, cultural, and intellectual inheritance to which they have as much claim as land and water granted by colonial royal charters. In this sense, *Santa Fe* is a case of “local” Shakespeare because particularly in northern New Mexico, Shakespeare is always and already local.

Notes

1. Ramón Flores and Lynn Butler, *The Merchant of Santa Fe*, unpublished script (1993). I am grateful to Mr. Flores for sharing with me the final draft of *Santa Fe*.

2. I follow Stanly M. Hordes, *To the End of the Earth: A History of the Crypto-Jews of New Mexico* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), in using “Hispanos” to refer to descendants of Spanish colonial settlers in what became New Mexico.

3. In this larger project, I examine *Santa Fe*’s scenes of disguise, including the scenes of cross-dressing discussed here, in terms of the discourses of authenticity and loss that inform debates about both religious conversion and Shakespearean adaptation.

4. Elizabeth Klein and Michael Shapiro, “Shylock as Crypto-Jew: A new [sic] Mexican Adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice*,” in *World-wide Shakespeares: Local Appropriations in Film and Performance*, ed. Sonia Massai (London: Routledge, 2005), 31-39.

5. *Ibid.*, 33.

6. See especially, Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez, *El Teatro Campesino: Theater in the Chicano Movement* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994). For an early example of resistance against this trend, see Laura E. Garcia, Sandra M. Gutierrez, and Felicitas Nuñez, eds., *Teatro Chicana: A Collective Memoir and Selected Plays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008).

7. W. B. Worthen, “Staging America: The Subject of History in Chicano/a Théâtre,” *Theatre Journal* 49, no.2 (1997): 101-20. See also Linda Saborío, *Embodying Difference: Scripting Social Images of the Female Body in Latina Theatre* (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2012).

8. *Genizura/o* is an anachronism for a de-tribalized, non-Pueblo Indian.

9. *The Merchant of Santa Fe*, 30, s.d. (hereafter cited in text). This phrase is another self-conscious anachronism, as the writers note in the glossary appended to the script: “In New Mexico and New Spain, the term *castizo* was not used with this meaning [i.e., ‘pure blood,’ not mixed through marriage with Moors or Jews] in the latter half of the Spanish colonial period. Rather *castizo* described a particular mixture of Spanish and Indian blood. However, *castizo* was used with the ‘pure blood’ meaning in medieval and Renaissance Spain so the writers chose to use [sic] it in this play” (128).

10. David M. Gitlitz, *Secrecy and Deceit: The Religion of the Crypto-Jews* (1996; Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 2002); Janet L. Jacobs, *Hidden Heritage:*

The Legacy of the Crypto-Jews (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Renee Levine Melammed, *Heretics or Daughters of Israel? The Crypto-Jewish Women of Castile* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); and the response in Seth D. Kunin, *Juggling Identities: Identity and Authenticity Among the Crypto-Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), chapter 3.

11. Proverbs 25:21 reads, “If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink,” and Babylonian Talmud *Sanbedrin* 72a, “If someone is coming to kill you, rise early and kill him first.”

12. This ascription is not to deny or efface the importance of mercy and justice in Christian theology or Hispano culture. Rather, without devaluing other religious and cultural traditions and practices, *Santa Fe* responds to the representation of a hard-hearted and unjust Jewishness in *The Merchant of Venice* by aligning the arguments for mercy and justice with Jewish sources, both textual and human.

13. See Michelle Ephraim, *Reading the Jewish Woman on the Elizabethan Stage* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008); Lisa Lampert, *Gender and Jewish Difference from Paul to Shakespeare* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); as well as Janet Adelman, *Blood Relations: Christian and Jew in The Merchant of Venice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

14. William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, David Bevington, ed., 6th ed. (New York: Pearson Longman, 2009), 2.6.38-39.

15. In *The Merchant of Venice*, both Jewish and Christian characters refer to the Jewish community as a “tribe” (1.3.48, 54, 108; 3.1.73).

16. Rick J. Santos, “*Mestizo* Shakespeares: A Study of Cultural Exchange,” in *Latin American Shakespeares*, ed. Bernice W. Kliman and Rick J. Santos (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2005), 12. See also Jeffrey Lesser and Raanan Rein, eds., *Rethinking Jewish-Latin Americans* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2003), chapter 3.

17. For these responses to Shakespeare, see, for example, Santos 11-12 and Pooman Trivedi, “Reading ‘Other Shakespeares,’” in *Remaking Shakespeare: Performance Across Media, Genres and Cultures*, ed. Pascale Aebischer, Edward J. Esche, and Nigel Wheale, Palgrave Shakespeare Studies (Basingstoke, Hampshire, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 56–73.

18. As Gustavo “The Mexican” Arellano, writer of the syndicated column *¡Ask a Mexican!* explains with his characteristic biting humor, “*Santa Fe* is the Mecca of this mixed-up mythology, which allows Las Vegas, Taos and Española Mexicans to believe that they are all descendants of the Spanish royal court”; interview by Joseph Baca, *The Alibi* 19, no. 10 (March 11-17, 2010).