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Te Reo Shakespeare: Te Tangata Whai Rawa o Weniti / The Maori Merchant of Venice

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Abstract
In 1945, Maori scholar Pei Te Hurinui Jones translated Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice into a classical, formal variant of te reo Maori (the Maori language). The resulting play, Te Tangata Whai Rawa o Weniti / The Maori Merchant of Venice, was made into a film in 2001 by the Maori production company, He Taonga Films. On the basis of these unusual credentials alone, The Maori Merchant of Venice stands as an extraordinary cinematic and linguistic achievement. Employing a large all-Maori cast, it was the first Maori-language feature film ever produced, as well as the first Shakespearean film to be made in Aotearoa-New Zealand. It was directed by Don Selwyn, who developed the work out of a stage production he had directed in Auckland a decade earlier. Selwyn merged two modes of cultural representation, bringing lavish sets and costumes inspired by seventeenth-century Venice together with an array of Maori arts and cultural performances.
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In 1945, Maori scholar Pei Te Hurinui Jones translated Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice into a classical, formal variant of te reo Maori (the Maori language). The resulting play, Te Tangata Whai Rawa o Weniti / The Maori Merchant of Venice, was made into a film in 2001 by the Maori production company, He Taonga Films. On the basis of these unusual credentials alone, The Maori Merchant of Venice stands as an extraordinary cinematic and linguistic achievement. Employing a large all-Maori cast, it was the first Maori-language feature film ever produced, as well as the first Shakespearean film to be made in Aotearoa-New Zealand. It was directed by Don Selwyn, who developed the work out of a stage production he had directed in Auckland a decade earlier. Selwyn merged two modes of cultural representation, bringing lavish sets and costumes inspired by seventeenth-century Venice together with an array of Maori arts and cultural performances.

While the majority of recent ‘indigenised’ productions of Shakespeare in Australasia have been oriented towards cross-cultural communication,1 The Maori Merchant of Venice was aimed primarily (though not exclusively) at Maori audiences. Selwyn holds that the imperative of Maori language recuperation was the film’s central purpose, and one that was directed first and foremost at Maori people (‘The Maori Merchant’ 8). This philosophy was not Selwyn’s alone: The Maori Merchant of Venice was both produced and funded by Maori companies whose explicit function is to further the revitalisation of te reo. This essay examines the importance of The Maori Merchant of Venice as a Maori language cultural project, as well as the various complexities associated with translating Shakespeare into such a project. It also examines the significance of the film’s Maori creative and corporate autonomy. Finally, the ongoing implications of the film will be considered.

Independently of these key contextual issues, The Maori Merchant of Venice’s striking stylistic and performative characteristics constitute a unique study in cross-cultural representation. The film presents a blended aesthetic of historical European and traditional indigenous imagery. The early scenes introduce the busy trading centre of Weniti (Venice), its marketplace a throng of people, animals, and numerous produce and merchandise stalls. This appealingly rustic European-style space is populated by Maori, and is located within a landscape whose foliage (of
ferns, flaxes, and cabbage trees) and frequent birdsong (the bellbird/korimako and tui) are conspicuously native to New Zealand. The effect is to create a dislocating vision of an alternative cultural history, or as Macdonald Jackson expresses it, ‘an imaginary Old New Zealand ... a rich concoction of European and Polynesian’ (158). The medium of film enabled the filmmakers to construct a multifaceted visual representation that employed several performative (often ‘real-world’) spaces. Selwyn was eager to exploit the possibilities of his medium; as he explains, while the work was ‘born out of the theatre’, film allowed him to ‘go beyond the proscenium’ and ‘expand the imagination of the story’ (qtd in ‘The Bard of Aotearoa’ 15).

This imaginative expansion of Shakespeare’s narrative involved the incorporation of iconic elements of the New Zealand landscape. The film’s opening image of Anatonio’s (Antonio’s) ships battling a storm-tossed open sea was shot in the upper reaches of Auckland Harbour. The following sequence, which tracks the progress of Piriniha O Morako (the Prince of Morocco) and his retinue towards Peremona — the home of Pohia (Portia), and the equivalent of Shakespeare’s Belmont — was filmed in a lush New Zealand forest. This sequence incorporates Maori mythology: the forest is represented as the forest of Tane, which is under the guardianship of the Turehu (fairy people) (Selwyn np). A Maori world is evoked; special effects enable the Turehu (portrayed by children) to scamper up tree trunks, leap from branches, and somersault through the air as they watch Morako’s approach from hidden vantage points. These images effectively bring to life a world ‘behind the scenes’ of Shakespeare’s story, which was a creative aspect Selwyn relished: ‘we’re celebrating all the cultural elements ... which you wouldn’t do normally in the stage production’ (qtd in ‘The Bard’ 15).

The film’s climactic trial scene was shot in the ornate Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Auckland’s Khyber Pass where the original 1990 stage version of the play was performed (Calder np). As well as reflecting Selwyn’s acknowledgement of the work’s theatrical origins, this overtly Christian setting amplified the cultural prejudice underpinning the psychology of the trial; as Selwyn observes: ‘a place like this [the church] just reinforces the influence of Christianity as opposed to the Jewish element. I find it much more dynamic that we set it in something that looks really Christian. We see the vulnerability of Shylock here’ (qtd in ‘The Bard’ 15).

Standing in contrast to this Christian setting is Peremona, which is situated beside a waterfall-fed lake within the forest of Tane, and is the locus of Maori culture within the film. Selwyn explains that because Shakespeare’s Belmont is a fictitious location, he was able to make Peremona an explicitly New Zealand space, governed by Maori culture (Selwyn np). Pohia plays a central role in this respect; she can be seen as the custodian of Peremona’s Maoritanga, and the embodiment of a wahine toa, or strong woman. Selwyn characterises Pohia as a Christian with strong Maori cultural roots who sets ‘the protocol and cultural ethos within her estate’ (Selwyn np). The Maori Merchant of Venice conveys a
definite sense that formalised Maori protocol is integral to Peremona. A conch shell announces the arrival of Piriniha O Morako (and is juxtaposed with the sound of Moroccan trumpets), after which he is given a ceremonial Maori welcome, involving a karanga (female cry of welcome) and wero (warrior challenge).

The interior of Pohia’s home is constructed as a romanticised, dreamlike idyll. Maori cultural elements pervade the space, and include wooden window frames carved with traditional Maori designs, numerous potted ferns, flax baskets, feather cloaks, tukutuku panels (patterned flax weavings), paua-lined steps, and a taiaha (a spear-club). This Maori imagery predominates, but is juxtaposed with European objects such as a harp, books, and a nineteenth-century sofa. Pohia and Nerita (Nerissa) appear in various costumes during the film, all of which are essentially European in style, but incorporate intricate Maori design features and Maori materials. In the first scene that she appears in, Pohia’s dress is decorated with a finely woven flax shawl that curls in a koru (coiled fern) shape above her shoulder. A koru pattern is also tattooed around her wrist (see fig. 1). In the same scene, Nerita wears a flax bodice and a feather necklace. Both women wear traditional Maori hairpins. This representational fusion extends to the music of the Peremona scenes; the approach of Pohia’s suitors is accompanied by Italian-style arias sung in Maori, and interspersed with traditional Maori wind instruments, all of which are performed by Maori artists.

When considered from a critical perspective that is cognisant of Eurocentric objectification of minority (and particularly indigenous) cultures, the unashamedly exoticised and fantastical representation of Peremona might be criticised for

Figure 1. Pohia (Portia) and (Patanio) Bassanio, Te Tangata What Rawa o Weniti / The Maori Merchant of Venice, He Taonga Films, 2001.
promulgating particular mythologies and stereotypes of Maori culture. Jackson raises this issue when he discerns ‘a hint … of the Victorians’ exotic “Maoriland”, of “Hinemoa the Maori Maiden”, and the long-forgotten cinematic fantasies of Frenchman Georges Méliès’ in the film’s representation of Peremona (158–59). He goes on to assert that the film’s ‘Maoritanga … is authentic’ (159) in reference to its various traditional Maori art and cultural objects. With this distinction, Jackson seems to be suggesting that the representations influenced by a European imaginary are less authentic than those derived from pre-contact Maori culture.

Jackson’s point is underlined by a tenable historical concern: the Victorian fantasies of Maoridom to which he refers became the substance of stereotype at the same time as lived Maori culture was being colonised and threatened. The concept of ‘Maoriland’ was ‘a sentimental fantasy of the imperial era’ (Blythe 91), which served to exoticise and thereby demarcate the unalterable ‘Otherness’ of Maori people. Additionally, by employing imagery evocative of ‘Maoriland’, The Maori Merchant of Venice runs the risk of operating in a similar manner to the early New Zealand films (by Europeans) that, as Merata Mita observes, tended ‘to exaggerate or minimise aspects of Maori character and culture, to make the action more accessible and attractive to a foreign audience’ (42). Yet, aesthetic judgements such as Jackson’s are problematic. To question certain modes of Maori representation because they bear the marks of European (mis)appropriation (or even simply of European influence) may amount to what Christine Prentice describes as an ‘oppressive ethics of originality’, which fails to ‘acknowledge the impurity of all beginnings in the postcolonial moment’ (553).

While observations like Jackson’s may point out the historical processes by which Maori representation has been taken out of Maori hands, they may ultimately end up circumscribing Maori creative expression.

Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice is arguably an inherently political play that, like The Tempest, lends itself easily to explorations of racial and cultural prejudice. In their introduction to Post-Colonial Shakespeares, Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin identify Shylock, along with Caliban and Othello, as characters that ‘enact the tensions of intercultural, interracial, or interreligious encounters’ (9). Similarly, John Theime asserts that in The Merchant of Venice, ‘Shakespeare clearly constructs a locus for investigating his own society’s anxieties about alterity’ (156). These politics have obvious resonances in relation to the marginalised cultural position of Maori people, and in one pivotal scene, The Maori Merchant of Venice provocatively engages with them by connecting the theme of Jewish persecution to contemporary New Zealand debates over Maori experiences of colonisation. This is the scene in which Hairoka (Shylock) and Anatonio negotiate the loan, and in which Hairoka protests the discrimination and dehumanisation of his people by the Christians. The scene takes place in an artist’s studio, hung with Selwyn Muru’s famous Parihaka paintings. These works commemorate the now notorious 1881 sacking of the small North Island
settlement of Parihaka by colonial forces, amidst attempts by Maori to halt an invasion using passive resistance. During this scene, the camera tracks back to reveal Muru working on a canvas clearly bearing the word ‘holocaust’.

In the film’s context, this word contains a double allusion, and, as Michael Neill observes, it causes ‘a double displacement’ for New Zealand audiences (vi). As well as referring to the genocide of Jewish people during the World War II, recent history’s most horrific manifestation of anti-Semitism, the word holocaust refers to an incident that occurred shortly before the film was made, in which Maori politician Tariana Turia referred to ‘the holocaust suffered by indigenous people including Maori as a result of colonial contact and behaviour’ (Turia np). This comment generated a public furore; Prime Minister Helen Clark condemned it, and asked Turia to apologise in Parliament — which she did (Main 2).

The Maori Merchant of Venice can be seen to symbolically re-validate Turia’s retracted statement by pointing to a moment in New Zealand’s history in which Maori did sustain an indiscriminate loss of life. Effectively, it called upon audiences to consider the manifestation within two seemingly disparate cultural histories — the Maori and the Jewish — of the same basic ideology, whereby the rights and humanity of a particular group of people are devalued by a more powerful society. Within a Maori language film aimed primarily at Maori audiences, the use of this (written) English word effectively constituted a momentary focus on cross-cultural communication.

The latter was not, however, the film’s central imperative. Critic Veronica Schmidt observes that Selwyn is ‘beyond using his work to preach to the unconverted’ (52), and that his primary political agenda was that of ‘getting a feature film made in te reo Maori’ (52). Selwyn is pragmatically aware that The Maori Merchant of Venice is unlikely to be seen by a large number of non-Maori people, freely asserting, ‘Shakespeare in Maori is enough to turn most people off’ (qtd in Schmidt 52). He guesses that beyond Maori, interest in the film will probably be limited to ‘theatrical people’ (qtd in Schmidt 52) in addition to a small number he refers to as ‘The Curious’ (qtd in Schmidt 52). This does not appear to concern him; as he explains: ‘First of all, it’s an art film geared for the Maori people to feel good about their own cultural dimension. Anything else is going to be a bonus’ (qtd in ‘Don Selwyn’ np). Selwyn is making the claim that he is not enormously concerned with how The Maori Merchant of Venice might operate in relation to non-Maori audiences. The fact that he chose to circulate the film in small Maori communities before releasing it elsewhere stands (alongside the fact that it is spoken in te reo Maori) as a commercial substantiation of this assertion.

The film’s Maori language has important implications in terms of Maori socio-cultural interests. The use of indigenous language in performance serves as a powerful statement of indigenous cultural ownership or authority over the work. Privileged access to indigenous language performances belongs to those with knowledge of the language, and access for non-speakers — through subtitles or
extra-linguistic performative means — will necessarily be secondary. *The Maori Merchant of Venice* contains brief and simple subtitles, written in contemporary English rather than Shakespearean English. Thus, the film departs from typical patterns of reception, so that audience members familiar with Shakespeare’s work but not with te reo Maori, find themselves in a position of alienation as cultural readers of a Shakespearean performance.

By appropriating Shakespeare in this way, Selwyn and Jones can be seen as adapters in the sense proposed within Patrice Pavis’s intercultural hourglass model: ‘The adapter can be the linguistic translator of the text as well as the director, designer, actor … [those who] adapt the source culture to the target culture, i.e. mediate or act as a bridge between two poles’ (191). However, characterising Selwyn’s and Jones’s roles in this way is problematic: the enormous temporal and geographical circulation of Shakespeare’s works means that their cultural ownership, and thus their source culture, is open to debate. Certainly, the Shakespearean text does not constitute a ‘more or less codified and solidified’ source in the sense propounded by Pavis (4). Even in English, Shakespeare is not necessarily any more foreign to an indigenous artist than to a non-indigenous artist. A translation of Shakespeare can highlight this: as Dennis Kennedy asserts, ‘In general, foreign productions of Shakespeare, freed from the burden imposed by centuries of admiring his language, have been more ready to admit that the door to the past is locked’ (146). In other words, translated Shakespeare productions can disrupt what Kennedy refers to as ‘the myth of cultural ownership’, and support the concept that ‘Shakespeare doesn’t belong to any nation or anybody: Shakespeare is foreign to all of us’ (146). This idea of Shakespeare’s cultural indeterminacy (and its counterpart, indigenous cultural hybridity) does not fit straightforwardly within Pavis’s hourglass model.

Nor does Pavis’s concept of a clear-cut target culture accommodate the heterogeneity of *The Maori Merchant of Venice*’s Maori audiences (not to mention its Pakeha audiences). The assumption that a target Maori audience member automatically occupies a position of receptive privilege or authority due to the film’s language is problematic, given that most Maori are not fluent speakers of te reo (Nicolson 206). In fact, a performance entirely in Maori could be seen to constitute a form of cultural exclusion amongst Maori. *The Maori Merchant of Venice* risks reinforcing an artistic hierarchy whereby knowledge of the Maori language is held up as a signifier of authentic Maori identity. Of course, to question the value of Maori language productions on this basis is absurd; rather, what is important is that the fostering of Maori language production does not equate to the concomitant devaluation of English-language performance by Maori — within either Maori or Pakeha discourses.

In any case, *The Maori Merchant of Venice* was underpinned by an educative ethos that largely dispels questions of cultural exclusivity: the filmmakers wanted the film to encourage the learning of te reo, rather than to communicate first and
foremost to those already fluent in the language. This aim was directed particularly at the young; Selwyn used several young actors in the film who were all highly proficient in Maori in order to ‘inspire other young Maori to take up the language’ (‘The Maori Merchant’ 10). The functionality of The Maori Merchant of Venice’s subtitles was not intended as an exclusionary or alienating device; rather, it was meant to promote awareness of the film’s Maoritanga. Audiences were encouraged to approach the film on its own terms, engaging with it as a Maori cultural text, rather than mediating their understanding via its Shakespearean counterpart. As Selwyn explains: ‘We want people to be able to ... get a feel for the reo, and a feel for the emotional element ... [to] hear the beauty of the Maori language’ (qtd in ‘The Bard’ 15). As a basic performative effect, the film’s Maori language — being something that permeates every scene, driving the narrative — is crucial to its evocation of Maori culture.

Maori critic Lana Simmons-Donaldson is enthusiastic about The Maori Merchant of Venice’s role in relation to Maori language acquisition, asserting that its ‘usefulness and relevance as an educational, even motivational tool for particularly young Maori will be hard to match’ (np). Speaking as an audience member with knowledge of the Maori language, Simmons-Donaldson asserts that the film ‘satisfies the full range of Maori language ability from those with a smattering, to the native tongue’ (np). This review differs from the norm by implicitly privileging a Maori perspective; like Selwyn, Simmons-Donaldson does not deem the development of Maori-Pakeha cross-cultural communication as one of the key purposes of The Maori Merchant of Venice.

The educative function of The Merchant of Venice connects it with other Maori language initiatives that have occurred in New Zealand. Maori became an official language of New Zealand under the Maori Language Act of 1987. The revitalisation of the language has been fostered by such developments as Te Kohanga Reo (language nest), the enormously successful Maori language immersion preschool system that was founded in 1982 (Barlow 52), and the long-anticipated Maori Television station, which was launched in March 2004 and remains successful. Maori language initiatives are frequently based around the performing arts. As Christopher Balme has observed: ‘Against the background of the renaissance of Maori culture and language, to which the theatre movement has in no small way contributed, the language issue is a central one’ (121).

A discussion of language in relation to The Maori Merchant of Venice inevitably raises issues concerning the cultural politics of translation. The notion that language and cultural identity are connected is widely accepted (the imperative of Maori language renaissance is, of course, implicitly based upon it). As Gayatri Spivak observes, ‘language may be one of the many elements that allow us to make sense of things, of ourselves.... Making sense of ourselves is what produces identity’ (179). In this light, the act of translation cannot be deemed culturally or ideologically neutral. Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere describe translation
as ‘a rewriting of an original text’, arguing that ‘[a]ll rewritings, whatever their intention, reflect a certain ideology and a poetics and as such manipulate language to function in a given society in a given way’ (xi). According to this view, translations produce a text that is in some way underpinned by a particular cultural or ideological position, and in a sense, can be seen to have a cultural or ideological effect upon the text that is being translated. In other words, translation effectively constitutes an assertion of power on behalf of the translator.

When, as is commonly the case, non-English texts are translated into English to make them accessible to the widest group of readers, the problematics of power are fairly obvious. As Spivak asserts, this practice ‘is merely the easiest way of being “democratic” with minorities. In the act of wholesale translation into English there can be a betrayal of the democratic ideal into the law of the strongest’ (182). By taking an English text and making it accessible to a minority language group, Jones’s translation of The Merchant of Venice effectively worked against this dominant pattern. Moreover, Spivak’s assertion that ‘[t]he status of a language in the world is what one must consider when teasing out the politics of translation’ (191) is particularly pertinent in relation to The Maori Merchant of Venice, given the relative cultural status or power in the world of, on the one hand, Shakespearean English, and on the other, te reo Maori. The act of translating Shakespeare’s texts can be seen as a disruption of traditionalist conceptions of these texts as literary icons that should be kept in their ‘pure’ form. James Bulman argues that when Shakespeare is ‘den[ied] … his language altogether’, the (Eurocentric) cultural authority of the Shakespearean text is subverted (7). The subversion of this authority through translation implies its replacement by the cultural authority of the translating language. In this light, it is necessary to consider the ways in which the text of The Maori Merchant of Venice, by imposing a Maori context on to Shakespeare’s play, operated in relation to Maori cultural interests.

The authorial ideological position of Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice is impossible to define precisely, as is Shakespeare’s own attitude toward the Jewish moneylender so central to his play. However, it is almost certain that his text, despite its complexities, was shaped by an element (at least) of naturalised anti-Semitism. Like any appropriator of Shakespeare, Jones — a Maori living in mid twentieth-century New Zealand — brought a different set of cultural frameworks and attitudes to bear upon the story from those of Shakespeare. Perhaps not surprisingly, Jones’s main conceptual departure from Shakespeare relates to the power relations and prejudices enacted in the play. Neill asserts that Jones’s translation ‘presupposes an audience that will sympathize with the Jew as representative of an oppressed minority’ (vi).

It is, of course, reductive to describe this sympathy with the oppressed as a Maori cultural sentiment; yet Selwyn, taking up the prerogative of strategic essentialism, asserts that The Maori Merchant of Venice’s ‘ethnic elements — the majority Christians and the minority Jews’ are issues Maori ‘can readily
recognise' (qtd in 'The Bard' 15). Waihoroi Shortland, who played Hairoka in the film, agrees with this, asserting an affinity for his character that is grounded in his own Maori identity: ‘Playing Shylock from a Maori perspective is the easiest role because you know something about what it is to hang onto your identity and to deal with prejudice, some of it overt, some of it not so overt’ (‘The Maori Merchant’ 13). Shortland adds that he sees Hairoka as ‘acting not only for himself, but ... on behalf of his people’ (‘The Maori Merchant’ 13). Selwyn’s and Shortland’s understandings of themes and characters are evidently informed and consolidated by their personal experiences of being Maori within contemporary New Zealand.

Several critics observed that the enactment of Jones’s Maori text catalysed specific semantic effects. Benedict Reid describes the impact of the translation: ‘the Shakespearean text is forced to resonate on a completely new level. The issue of race, always central to this play, becomes much more complex and harder to define’ (np). Philip Matthews asserts that in the film, Shakespeare’s play is transformed into ‘a Maori play about oppression, prejudice and the pursuit of bloody revenge’ (52). These observations illustrate the degree to which the film was able to position itself within a Maori cultural and political context informed by the experience of cultural marginalisation. This can be seen to corroborate Bulman’s assertion that ‘translation does ideological, ethnological, and cultural work that can only be achieved extra-linguistically in productions which remain “faithful” to the authorized text’ (8).

The Maori used in Jones’s translation is reminiscent of whaikorero, a classical, rhetorical variant of the language used in the formal marae oratory. Shortland identifies the often highly rhetorical and poetic language of Shakespeare as being ‘synonymous with whaikorero’ (qtd in White 115); both, he explains, are well suited to theatrical presentation, and are vastly different from contemporary speech. Critic Peter Calder discerned this from the actors’ style of delivery: ‘In the mouths of a large cast the text becomes a thing of musical beauty, fixing on the rhetorical and declamatory characteristics rather than seeking to cover it with a veneer of naturalism’ (np).

Along with Shortland, Selwyn observes that both the Maori of Jones’s text and the English of Shakespeare contain a strong poetic element, adding: ‘Today there’s a tendency for us to lose the poetry of our language — Maori and English’ (qtd in ‘The Bard’ 15). He argues that by providing a Maori equivalent of Shakespearean linguistic images, Jones’s text, within the film, will encourage more Maori to ‘have faith in their own language, in the indigenous language of this country’ (qtd in ‘The Bard’ 15). Echoing Selwyn’s views, Shortland is concerned that the teaching of Maori tends to focus upon practical usage, and that this is having a limiting effect: ‘We’re losing the colour, the passion, the intellectual ability of the language, the philosophical use’ (qtd in White 115). He observes that the film challenged its cast members to use Maori less colloquially, and cites an anecdotal
instance where one of the younger actors delivered Jones’s translation of Portia’s ‘quality of mercy’ (4.1.179) speech at a wedding. The speech uses the word ‘aroha’, which translates to ‘love’ as well as ‘mercy.’ Shortland asserts that it had an inspirational effect on people at the wedding: ‘everyone sat up and listened’ (qtd in White 115). So for both Selwyn and Shortland, *The Maori Merchant of Venice*’s educational role is not merely a functional one of basic Maori language acquisition, but also that of fostering a particular usage of the language.

The idea that Jones’s translation will enable Maori to rediscover or re-access the beauty of the Maori language is somewhat problematic insofar as it suggests that Shakespeare’s plays offer a mode of expression superior to and more complex than what is possible nowadays via Maori stories. Lefevere brings up this issue with the question: ‘why is it necessary to represent a foreign text in one’s own culture? Does the very fact of doing that not amount to an admission of the inadequacy of that culture?’ (1). In his defence, Selwyn does claim that contemporary English has, along with Maori, lost much of its poetic beauty; however, his use of Shakespeare as a conferrer of poeticism may amount to an ‘admission of the inadequacy’ of Maori storytelling (Lefevere 1).

As well as risking the implicit devaluation of Maori cultural texts, Selwyn’s belief in Shakespeare’s beneficial effect upon te reo Maori effectively acquiesces to the cultural status and power of Shakespeare’s texts. Widespread cultural acceptance of this status means that it cannot be separated from the cultural politics of Jones’s translation; certainly, it underlies the following comment by critic Margo White: ‘Cleaving an endangered language to some of the most famous and complex poetic verse in the English language can only be a good thing’ (115). By suggesting that the Maori language needs to insert itself into the textual frameworks of canonical English literature in order to survive, White’s observation situates the latter in something of a custodial or facilitative position in relation to future Maori expression. This Shakespearean power goes beyond the issue of linguistic status or hierarchy and extends to the practical implications of Maori creative production. As Mark Houlahan asserts, ‘it seems part of the scandal of Shakespeare in settler societies like ours [New Zealand] that it took Shakespeare to provide the occasion for the first full-length Maori film’ (121). While Houlahan points to the role Shakespeare’s cultural capital may have played in the genesis of the film, Jackson considers the effect that the film may have had on this capital: ‘Selwyn appropriates *The Maori Merchant of Venice* for Maori, while serving Shakespeare well at the same time’ (159). Jackson does not elaborate on precisely what it means to serve Shakespeare, but one can assume that he is referring to the act of bolstering Euro-imperialist cultural authority.

However, as far as Selwyn is concerned, to question the validity of Maori engagements with Shakespeare on the basis of the latter’s association with Eurocentrism limits Maori creativity: ‘We have to ... accommodate the range of European and Maori writers because only then are we going to be able to have
a kaleidoscopic view of what we have to offer the rest of the world. Otherwise there’s a tendency for us to be locked down in clichés’ (qtd in ‘The Bard’ 16). Selwyn is effectively advocating an acknowledgement of the diverse textual spaces within which Maori creativity can occur.

The companies that created and funded _The Maori Merchant of Venice_ evince the central importance of Maori language revitalisation to it. The film was produced by He Taonga Films, an Auckland-based Maori film and television production company that was established in 1992 by Selwyn and Ruth Kaupua Panapa. The company developed from a film and television training school directed by Selwyn. It produces Maori, English, and bilingual work for film and television, with the aim of fostering and providing opportunities for Maori artists, and enabling the telling of Maori stories (‘The Maori Merchant’ 35). The significance of a company like He Taonga is contextualised by Mita’s observation:

> Because of the monocultural domination of the media and related industries, there has been an absence of Maori technicians, directors, producers and production houses that would concern themselves with Maori projects and aspiring Maori film makers. Using history as a guide, it was clear we would have to be our own teachers, and determine our own place in an industry that had firmly locked its doors on us. (49)

He Taonga is precisely the sort of recuperative initiative to which Mita refers, being a company that has effectively created its own doors to the New Zealand film and television industry.

Despite its clearly defined position and focus in terms of Maori creative and cultural interests, He Taonga does not operate in an exclusionary manner in relation to non-Maori artists. It claims to make a point of ‘select[ing] its crews on a racially-inclusive basis’ (‘The Maori Merchant’ 35). _The Maori Merchant of Venice_ employed a crew from a range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Of this, Selwyn comments: ‘We’re not about excluding people. It’s wonderful to work with people who have so much experience in film, and you know you can trust them’ (qtd in ‘The Bard’ 16). In contrast, indigenous Australian director Noel Tovey frankly acknowledges that his employment of non-Aboriginal artists in the crew of his 1997 stage production of _A Midsummer Night’s Dream_ was due to necessity rather than choice; he asserts that he would have ‘love[d] to have used all Aborigines [in the crew] but they are not there’ (qtd in McCarthy 3). Evidently, for Tovey, the desire to produce a play that employed only Aboriginal artists constituted a not-yet-attainable ideal. Of course, it is impossible to ascertain from Selwyn’s diplomatic comment whether the non-Maori artists he employed in the crew of _The Maori Merchant of Venice_ possessed skills that he could not find amongst Maori artists. Yet, it is probably fair to infer that he was operating from a secure and well-established cultural base in terms of the Maoritanga of He Taonga (and the film), so that the involvement of non-Maori artists in the crew did not constitute a cultural compromise.
Moreover, while Tovey's work was produced under the auspices of the Sydney Theatre Company, an institutional structure that operates within a framework of largely non-indigenous cultural interests, *The Maori Merchant of Venice* received the vast majority of its funding (NZ $2.4 million) from Te Mangai Paho (White 114), New Zealand's national funding body for Maori language films, videos, television and radio programmes, and music CDs (*Te Mangai Paho* np). Te Mangai Paho is a Crown entity that was established in 1993 in recognition of the Crown's obligations under the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi, which guarantees the preservation of Maori taonga, or treasures — of which language is central. Te Mangai Paho aims to foster the advancement of the Maori language, increase opportunities for the acquisition and use of Maori, and promote Maori-English bilingualism as a valuable part of New Zealand society (*Te Mangai Paho* np). Being funded almost entirely by a Maori entity, *The Maori Merchant of Venice* was underpinned by Maori interests at a corporate level.

The very existence of Te Mangai Paho signals the kind of economic autonomy and access to the international market that are probably practical necessities for genuinely operative Maori creative authority. As Mita points out, one of the major issues faced by Maori filmmakers is 'the criteria of a white male-dominated value and funding structure' (49). Being substantially funded by a company not governed by such a structure, *The Maori Merchant of Venice* was not oriented towards typical commercial concerns; as Calder observes, 'the running time may be daunting for some; the project was conceived with aims other than quick commercial appeal in mind and so the text was untouched' (np). In other words, the filmmakers' imperatives in relation to the Maori language were not delimited by the dominant commercial criteria to which Mita refers.

The enduring nature of the filmic medium means that *The Maori Merchant of Venice* has ongoing meaning and significance, which has implications for both Maori language revitalisation and Maori creative and corporate autonomy. Film operates differently as an object of cultural circulation, both geographically and temporally, to theatre, which is received and generates meaning within a particular time, place, and performative context (although, as far as its initial entry into the public sphere is concerned, *The Maori Merchant of Venice* shared similarities with a theatrical text: it was launched via a series of charity premieres throughout New Zealand that were attended — generally in costume — by several of the actors. Since film is a permanent medium that is more widely and easily accessed than theatre, *The Maori Merchant of Venice* will be received long after its moment of creation, in New Zealand and elsewhere; in other words, its cultural work or effect will continue.

*The Maori Merchant of Venice* will exist as a linguistic resource for future generations, and can therefore be seen as part of larger, continuing project. Simmons-Donaldson points out that a Wharekura secondary school journal showcasing Selwyn and the film has already been written, and that other
educational resources are being developed (np). This concerted focus upon school-age audiences points to the fact that the film’s producers were conscious of the film’s future cultural effect. Not surprisingly, this awareness of ongoing effects extends to the way in which the film’s production company operates. With a view to the long-term development of Maori production, He Taonga Films has a kaupapa, or philosophy, of employing young Maori trainees (‘The Maori Merchant’ 11). In other words, works such as *The Maori Merchant of Venice* are made with close reference to the anticipated future of Maori film and television production, and serve in many ways to lay the groundwork for this future.

Being made in an easily transportable medium, *The Maori Merchant of Venice* has the capacity to be circulated in a range of receptive contexts in years to come. Indeed, although his primary focus was upon Maori audiences, Selwyn is by no means ambivalent about the film’s potential to disseminate Maori linguistic and cultural expression internationally; he acknowledges that one of his ‘reason[s] for making it into a film is that more people can access it’ (qtd in ‘The Bard’ 15). At the end of 2002, *The Maori Merchant of Venice* was screened at the Hawaii International Film Festival in Honolulu, where it received an Audience Award for best feature (Ryan np). In April 2003, it was screened at the Shakespeare Association of America’s annual meeting at the University of Victoria, British Columbia. The film has also been released in both DVD and video format internationally, and has been subtitled into various languages. The cultural capital of Shakespeare is in all probability a factor prompting this degree of circulation; as Houlahan comments, ‘the tactic of using Shakespeare to broadcast Maori throughout the world seems astute, for the film will certainly get air play’ (121).

Don Selwyn’s *The Maori Merchant of Venice* is a film with complex cultural implications; an undeniably groundbreaking work, its unorthodox integration of Shakespeare’s narrative and cultural image with the Maori language and Maori culture embroils it in questions of cultural and social value and social power. The film is likely to continue to generate debate due to the fact that its social, political, and cultural effects are still being enacted. This is largely due to the nature of the filmic medium, though not entirely so; the film’s creators made the film with a view to its future ramifications, intending that it would foster Maori creative and technical artists, encourage the ongoing revitalisation of the Maori language, and serve as a source of cultural inspiration for Maori people, now and in the future.

NOTES

1 Each of the following works were performed before predominantly non-indigenous audiences, and explored issues of racism within their respective national contexts: Oscar Kightley and Erolia Ifopo’s popular New Zealand play, *Romeo and Tusi*; Simon Phillips’s 1999 and 2001 Queensland Theatre Company / Melbourne Theatre Company productions of *The Tempest*; La Boite Theatre and Kooemba Jdarra’s collaboration on a 1999 production of *Romeo and Juliet*, directed by Sue Rider; and Bell Shakespeare Company’s 1999 production of *Romeo and Juliet*, directed by Wesley Enoch.
Mauritanga is Maori culture and Maori way of life/worldview.

Muru is a renowned Maori artist, and was also co-producer of The Maori Merchant of Venice.

Turia made the comment in a speech to the New Zealand Psychological Society Conference in August 2000, where she spoke on the psychology of colonisation. Remarking on the research that has been conducted into the trauma suffered by the Jewish survivors of the World War II holocaust, as well as by Vietnam War veterans, she argued that the experience of Maori and other indigenous groups has not ‘received similar attention’ (Turia np).

One of Clark’s key concerns about Turia’s holocaust comment was that it might alienate Pakeha; as reporter Victoria Main observed, Clark was concerned ‘to salvage middle-ground support for the Government programme aimed at closing the gaps between Maori and Pacific Island communities and the rest of New Zealand’ (2).

The Maori Merchant of Venice had its world premiere in Waikato on 15 February 2002. The Auckland premiere occurred several weeks later (Jackson 163).

In this way, The Maori Merchant of Venice has to be placed within a different category from several recent Shakespearean film adaptations, such as Michael Almereyda’s Hamlet (2000); Baz Luhrmann’s Romeo and Juliet (1996); and Richard Loncraine’s Richard III (1995), all of which employed popular actors and modern settings — features that facilitate broad appeal and box office success.

Further details on Te Kohanga Reo can be found at the comprehensive website: <http://www.kohanga.ac.nz/index.htm>.

Maori Television was founded under the Maori Television Service Act 2003, and is funded by the New Zealand Government and by Te Mangai Paho, the Maori broadcasting funding agency (‘Maori Television’ np).

Neill has observed of Jones’s translation: ‘It may be true, as the cliché has it, that something is always lost in translation; but the work of translators like … Pei Te Hurinui Jones ensures that (as Salman Rushdie has insistd) something is also gained’ (viii). It might even be argued that whatever was lost in Jones’s translation is of little significance, since for Selwyn, and presumably several of the other artists involved in the film, the language of Shakespeare was familiar. In other words, their engagement with Jones’s text would have differed from the norm in translation, inasmuch as the original text functioned as an additional cultural referent.

In an interesting parallel with The Maori Merchant of Venice, Maori playwright Briar Grace-Smith’s successful play Purapurawhetu has a character employ Shakespearean English, which is intended to be reminiscent of the imagery of whaikorero (Huria 4).

The Maori version of the Treaty of Waitangi also states that Maori shall retain tino rangatiratanga, or absolute control, over their resources, and, as Derek Tini Fox explains, ‘Like the land, the public broadcasting system is a vital present-day resource, and as such Maori are legally entitled to an equal share of it’ (126).

The Maori Merchant of Venice received marketing assistance from the New Zealand Film Commission (‘The Maori Merchant’ 11).

In this way, The Maori Merchant of Venice generated an artist-audience interaction akin — though not equivalent — to that of theatre. The filmmakers cultivated this sense of invading theatrical territory; in the film’s official media release, the charity launches are likened to a ‘touring theatre show’ (‘The Maori Merchant’ 3).
WORKS CITED


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