



THE SILENT MERCHANT - A VERY INDIRECT TRANSLATION

Dror Abend-David, Ph.D.

Lecturer, Department of
Languages, Literatures, and Cultures

SUNY New Paltz

Cell 1-352-222-1349

Email: abenddd@newpaltz.edu

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19330361>

Keywords: *Silent Films, The Merchant of Venice, adaptation, original, and identity.*

Der Kaufmann von Venedig [*The Merchant of Venice*] is the title of a silent film adaptation of Shakespeare's play. It was released in Berlin in 1923 and distributed to over ten countries from the United States to Japan. The film was particularly popular in the United Kingdom, where it was praised as a thoughtful production with great literary merit.

In fact, previous research has only discussed the British version of the film. I discuss the previously unexplored German version, revealing not only that the British version has made radical changes to the German film (including changing the film's title and the characters' names as well as removing a great deal of the plot), but that the German version has taken great liberties in rendering the Shakespearean play. I discuss the cultural as well as the political context for these liberties both in Germany and the United Kingdom in the 1920s.

The liberties that are taken in both versions of the film lead to a number of theoretical questions, most vividly about the concept of originality and indirect translation. Can the English version be described as derivative when it is based on a German adaptation of Shakespeare's work? Also considering that the German version is an adaptation of written drama into film, is it possible to discuss the German version as an original text? Furthermore, Shakespeare's play (like many others) is based on previous sources, which point to Italian origins. And taking into account that a great deal of the production was filmed in Venice, the location in which the story takes place, is the film German? British? or Italian?

The difficulty in designating an original source and ascribing a national identity to texts in general, and to silent film in particular, raises a number of questions about methodology and the linguistic, professional, and cultural skills that are required for the discussion of film translation.