

# Mass Storytelling and the Power of Advertising

Liz Holt on *The Merchant of Venice*

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MASS  
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Imagine you are six years old. Imagine you're completely and utterly lost in a story. Your imagination has so powerfully transported you to another world that you're not even aware that you're holding a book and turning the pages.

But something calls you back from that place. In two thumps of your heart you're aware of the book and the ink-stained school desk under your hands. Quick as a wink, you look up. But it's not your classmates around you and not your class teacher glaring at you. You have been so enchanted that you weren't aware of own class leaving the room and your friends yanking your gray woollen sweater, trying to get your attention.

A few kids titter. Flushed, you mumble some words, grab your bag and stumble out of the classroom.

This happened to me at Moss Hey Junior School. And in that moment I realized two things. First: stories were powerful, even dangerous. Second: I was a story junkie. I was hooked.

I grew up with *Anne of Green Gables*, Stig from the dump, Charlie and his chocolate factory, *The Iron Man*, The Little Prince on the moon. I cuddled my own Velveteen Rabbit. I wanted to change my name to tragic and beautiful Beth from *Little Women* (then, secretly, was delighted to be called Lizzie when I first encountered the tall, dark mysteri-

ous Darcy stereotype). Something about stories, about narrative, gripped me.

And I'm not alone in this. Tim Byrne—now, interestingly, a book cover designer—confesses to story-influenced thinking when he was seven. He stood amid wild flowers and lush grass beneath a glittering sky with his mate Tiff and they held out their hands, closed their eyes and called out “Aslan! Aslan! Aslan!.” For a minute or two, they believed a door would magically appear and, like Eustace and Jill, they would walk into Narnia.

As a teenager, stories hit harder and bit deeper. I was appalled and thrilled that Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* demanded a pound of Antonio's flesh. Shylock's blood thirst for vengeance, fueled by prejudice, was my first awakening to character-driven action. I started to understand the power of characters drawn with psychological insight. I also remember the fury of others at the (apparent) anti-Semitism of the play.

I loved the ability of words to make you want to climb into yet another character's head, another life, another world. This love propelled me into advertising, working as a copywriter ever since.

The best TV commercials are mini stories. All the big brands down the decades—Baccardi, Guinness, Levis, Bisto, Gold Blend, Smash and so on—use stories in this world of relatively homogenous products in the hope of creating a point of difference.

So what can *The Merchant of Venice* teach us? The title alludes to business but little commercial wheeling and dealing takes place, and the passive “*I know not why I am so sad*” Antonio is untypical of the proactive Venetian entrepreneurs. Like an English privateer, Bassanio's adventurous pursuit (at almost all costs) of the wealthy Portia, turns Antonio into a venture capitalist. From the gold, silver and lead caskets' storyline (a suitor's choice determined who Portia should marry), we have the wisdom of “*all that glisters is not gold*.” Like so many phrases that Shakespeare created, this articulates emotional intelligence and has entered our language.

Yet it's the intrinsic power of the story as a whole that, like all great stories, is the most profound and probably unconscious influence upon business writers today.

To watch the story acted on stage, Elizabethans rowed across the stinking heaving River Thames and endured several hours on hard seats or standing in the thrashing rain in the pit. All simply to feel bewitched by the play. They chose to pay a penny for this experience instead of watching bear-baiting, cock-fighting or disappearing into a tavern or brothel. Audiences were often over a thousand strong: for the first time stories became mass entertainment in Britain. And Shakespeare, along with Marlowe, Jonson, Webster, Fletcher and Middleton, made a living.

Shakespeare cast his spells through convincing characters and powerful plotlines. He wrote *The Merchant* following the success of Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, weaving together plots and themes from other stories: Ser Giovanni's *Il Pecorone* for the basic plot; the Indian Sanskrit epic *Mahabharata* for the flesh-bond story; *Gesta romanorum* for the casket story.

The character of Shylock is arguably and untypically the play's only character with true psychological depth and the ideal anti-comedic character who blocks the action of the play. Unlike the malevolent Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*, Shylock is cast as one of life's outsiders simply by birth, reflecting the prevalent anti-Semitism of the time. Because he is Jewish, he is spat upon by Antonio and others, is forced to live in a ghetto and is permitted to earn a living in few ways, one of which was usury. And for this he is despised.

Through Shylock, Shakespeare demonstrates what happens when human beings are pushed to extremes; he displays all the monomania that follows isolation and persecution. He is a tragic character, marking a turning point in Shakespeare's writing towards the great tragedies to come.

Two critical factors elicit our sympathy for Shylock. He learns that his daughter Jessica has run away with his jewels (Act 3, Scene 1) minutes before he discovers that Antonio's ships are lost. Next, he utters this highly emotive speech:

*Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs,  
dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with the same  
food, hurt with the same weapons; subject to the same  
diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by  
the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you*

*prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not take revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why revenge.*

He then proceeds to take this one-off opportunity to assert himself.

Shakespeare also set Shylock in Venice—a place considered to be of dubious morality. Other characters in the play are hardly free of judgement, such as Jessica. Even the heroine Portia devises the cruel punishment that Shylock must forsake his religion and therefore his identity.

Yet we are presented with Shylock's monstrous desire to remove and weigh Antonio's flesh—the epitome of calculated murder. John Keats described this type of dramatic tension as Shakespeare's "negative capability": his genius in taking a mass of conflicting notions and using the ensuing conflict to provide the drama.

Shylock is the outsider—stereotypically, since the earliest tales were spoken around fires, the one blamed for all ills. The bogey. The monster. The scapegoat. The Jungian projected shadow self.

Perhaps Shakespeare portrayed this outsider with such sympathy because at some level he, too, shared a sense of isolation. In Elizabethan and therefore firmly Protestant England, his parents were quietly Catholic. Nobody knows whether he shared his parents' convictions. But at a time when people were beheaded for less, when every play was censored by The Master Of Revels, when theaters were regularly shut down if threatening views were perceived, Shakespeare was clearly unable to write about the Protestant—Catholic troubles. Yet in *The Merchant* he portrays someone who is an outsider due to his religion, conveniently setting it in a different country.

Plays had to be politically expedient; the power of stories was feared. Today in many countries, writers of all types still live in fear for telling stories in all their forms.

Stories are feared for their power—but why are they powerful?

As readers, listeners and viewers, we almost compulsively seek the experience of leaving our own reality to travel along with the story and feel somehow altered when we return. In fact, if some emotional or rational shift doesn't take place, we feel dissatisfied, as though the story hasn't "worked."

All of us tell stories, all the time. Whether that's beside the water cooler, in the pub, over the backyard fence, in the boardroom, in the press, in debating chambers, in the making of history. There's something fundamentally human about constructing meaning by connecting one event to another in a narrative; we make sense of life through stories.

## But why?

As we absorb a story, we unconsciously play out the reality of our own life in a different context, as if the distance helps us to interpret life in a new way. So we don't just find stories entertaining or uplifting or exciting or frightening or whatever—at a subconscious level we find them helpful.

We are living stories with a beginning, middle and end. Our life is a journey, a staggering metaphorical passage through time. As Carl Jung writes, at the most primitive level it's a journey of survival from childhood through adolescence to adulthood, when we can reproduce and ensure the continuation of our own species. Stories could be archetypes: models of development that guide us as we move through our journey. It's as if we are programmed to deliver stories to each other. Through stories we are unconsciously encouraged to overcome the physical and psychological challenges we face; stories resonate powerfully within our subconscious.

Christopher Booker identifies a nucleus of situations and figures at the heart of all stories across all cultures in his book *The Seven Basic Plots*.

*All kinds of story, however profound or however trivial, ultimately spring from the same source, are shaped around the same basic patterns and are governed by the same universal rules.*

Despite the darkness and ambiguity of the play, *The Merchant of Venice* has always been classed as a Comedy because a series of situations are resolved which bring about the reconciliation of the two central couples, Bassanio to Portia and Nerissa to Gratiano.

Booker said that, “*the essence of Comedy is always that some redeeming truth has to be brought out from shadows into the light.*” Comedy’s distinguishing feature is the movement from feelings of winter to summer, from shadow to light, from incompleteness to wholeness. A key character or event brings self-revelation and fulfillment and greater self-knowledge so that the protagonist passes to the next stage of maturity. The premise of the resolution, according to the genre, is that discovering who you really are becomes a precondition to living happily ever after.

It’s difficult to identify the protagonist in *The Merchant*. If it is Shylock, this looks like satire: and not, if the protagonist is Bassanio. Neither Portia nor Antonio travel on a sufficiently complex journey to qualify as the protagonist. So because Shylock is the character with the strongest psychological depth and therefore most likely to be the protagonist, this does point to elements of satire within the play.

This is consistent with the common view that Shakespeare was never didactic. He holds the “truth” lightly and holds more firmly to mystery and ambiguity. Perhaps in this way he pre-dates post-modernism. Perhaps it’s another reason why his plays have such resonance today.

However the protagonist issue is resolved and despite the moral tension surrounding Shylock, the play does conclude with a sense of resolution and optimism that has been created by the romantic reconciliations.

Exploring the power of story—and therefore Shakespeare’s greatest influence upon us today—the premise in Comedy that deeper self-discovery leads to happy-ever-after is an archetype that “speaks” to us in a way that bypasses our conscious mind. This could be why a sense of resolution can literally feel so satisfying and cause an emotional shift.

Most stories have this sense of brightening and resolution, even if they don’t use overt humor and therefore can be categorized as Comedy. And most TV commercials fall firmly into this category.

Why is advertising so successful in influencing our behavior—why can it be so powerful? Is it just peer pressure, the collective ego at work? Even then, something must spark a new consensus within a peer group.

Perhaps its power lies in the way that the character or event that creates the satisfying story resolution is substituted with a brand. This is the case even when the brand is subtly epitomized by a character.

The brand changes the feeling of winter to summer, shadow to light, problem to solution, incompleteness to wholeness.

This profound story archetype influences us powerfully in our subconscious. It connects with the part of us that is programmed to receive and be influenced by story.

So despite the fact that at a conscious level we may not believe that a certain brand can make us more fulfilled, more mature, more whole, happier and more attractive, at a deeply unconscious level something else is taking place. If we are in the target audience for the commercial, the brand may be resonating very strongly within, creating a feeling of need for this brand that will deliver us into wholeness, completion and satisfaction.

In the process of coming to this conclusion, I asked lots of people which TV commercials they felt worked the best: Tango “Orange guy,” “Blackcurrant,” Orange “Dancing couple” and “Black out” set in Manhattan; Gold Blend, Kwik Fit, Lynx. Carling Black Label “Laundrette” and “Dambusters.” Pot Noodle “Miners.” Typhoo “Chimps.” Honda “Diesel.” Warbutons “Bread tree,” Guinness “Dancing man,” British Rail “Sighing chess pieces,” Nationwide “Brand new customers only.” Frazzles with Freddy Jones as the wolf. The public information films of the 70s. Watch the ads on and see how in their story structure they all substitute the redeeming character or event with a brand. Even when they are more dissonant and avant-garde.

If Sony is successful, by 2020 there’ll be no more TV screens. Instead, we’ll all be watching moving holograms in our living rooms, just like a mini stage. Everything—from advertising to the new Interactive Storytelling—will be communicated through a medium we don’t yet know. In comparison to the mass entertainment of today, it will be

more like a play... infinitely more dialogue-based. On this new stage, the focus will be upon the same elements—character-driven, believable action—that make Shakespeare’s stories so compelling. And perhaps, alarmingly, the hidden, unconscious universal story archetypes will be even easier to exploit.

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