

THE ELIZABETHAN STAGE JEW
AND CHRISTIAN EXAMPLE
GERONTUS, BARABAS, AND SHYLOCK

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There will be no final solution to the Shylock problem. Learned journals will continue to publish articles invoking Elizabethan attitudes toward Jews and the distinction between the Old Law and the New Law. Meanwhile, no amount of contextual information (or even evidence in the text) will prevent actors and directors from presenting *The Merchant of Venice* as "The Tragedy of Shylock," the story of a persecuted Jew in a Christian society. Teachers, students, and general readers, often torn between their instinctive responses and what they are told to believe, will continue to be disturbed by Shakespeare's apparent lapse in tolerance. After all, they will ask, how could a poet not of an age but for all time create such a narrow, inhumane, Jewish villain? In spite of the efforts of many astute critics, no Moses will appear to lead the modern reader or theatergoer to that promised land where *The Merchant of Venice* will fit comfortably with the post-World War II sensibility.

There are many reasons, both obvious and subtle, for this discomfort. On the simplest level, Shakespeare, unlike Dickens, has had no opportunity to answer the charges leveled against him, either by a direct statement (like Dickens's letter to Eliza Davis) or through a favorably depicted character in a later work (such as Mr. Riah in *Our Mutual Friend*).¹ The creator of Aaron, Richard of Gloucester, and Iago, more-

¹ For an account of the correspondence with Mrs. Davis and the relevant passages in *Our Mutual Friend*, see Edgar Johnson, *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph* (New York, 1952), II, 1010-12.

over, probably had his own distinctive view of villainy and evil and may not have shared our need for clear "motivation." Thus, in at least two productions I have seen, directors have sought to make Shylock's vindictive posture in Act IV more understandable for the audience by presenting it as a reaction to Jessica's elopement. But Shakespeare has forestalled such an interpretation (which might satisfy our sense of psychological progression) by including passages which show decisively that the Jew's animosity toward Antonio antedates the bond of flesh (e.g., Shylock's long aside in I.iii.36-47 and Jessica's comment in III.ii.283-89). Furthermore, Shakespeare (like Dickens) might wonder why a villain who happens to be a Jew should elicit such discomfort or angry responses while other villains who happen to be Moors or English kings or Italian ancients are deemed acceptable. Indeed, one *could* argue in the defense of the author that contemporary reactions to *The Merchant of Venice* tell us more about ourselves than about the comedy.

My purpose here is neither to minimize the problem facing the modern reader nor to offer another neat solution. The problem is a real one, with roots in our cultural assumptions that differ sharply from those of the Elizabethans, and no such solution exists. Rather I hope to shed some light on Shylock and his play by slightly changing the question being considered and then (with apologies) advancing some more contextual information. Thus, if we can assume that Shylock *is* a villain like Aaron or Richard III or Iago, the crucial question yet remains: what is the dramatic function of his villainy? Is Shakespeare's presentation of this noteworthy figure an end in itself, a display of despicable Jewish traits for the edification of the audience (a position held implicitly by many who are made uncomfortable by the play)? Or does this display, which obviously does draw upon racial or religious stereotypes, serve some larger purpose that transcends such an easy, limited target? Is Shylock under attack because he is Jewish or is his Jewishness included in this comedy to call attention to its essential themes?

Two studies devoted to the other famous stage Jew of the 1590s offer some help in answering such questions. Thus, G. K. Hunter has demonstrated that "symbolic Jewishness," as understood by the sixteenth century, had little to do with race or theology but corresponded to a state of mind or set of values to be found in Christian society. Citing George Herbert's "Self-Condensation," Hunter observes that

Herbert is at one with a long patristic tradition in seeing Jewishness as a moral condition, the climactic 'Jewish choice' being that

which rejected Christ and chose Barabbas, rejected the Saviour and chose the robber, rejected the spirit and chose the flesh, rejected the treasure that is in heaven and chose the treasure that is on earth. . . .²

Similarly, Douglas Cole argues that the evil in Marlowe's Barabas lies in "his 'Jewishness'—Jewishness understood partly in the literal or racial sense, but more pervasively in the figurative sense, the sense that evokes a spiritual condition characterized by lack of faith and love." Cole points out that the epithets "Jew" and "Turk" were "applied not only to opponents of Christianity but also to those Christians who acted as the non-Christian was imagined to behave, especially in manifestations of infidelity, usury, and greed."³ For example, in *The Wonder of a Kingdom* Dekker can describe a Christian pawnbroker, who has destroyed a family through his wiles, as a "christian Iew" (IV.ii.55).⁴

One particularly suggestive passage has not, to my knowledge, been cited in this context. So Princess Elizabeth in 1556, when informed of various plots in her behalf, wrote to her sister the queen:

When I revolve in mind (most noble Queen) the old love of pagans to their princes, and the reverent fear of the Romans to their senate, I cannot but muse for my part, and blush for theirs, to see the rebellious hearts and devilish intents of Christians in name, but Jews in deed, towards their anointed King. . . .⁵

The key phrase—"Christians in name, but Jews in deed"—pinpoints that habit of mind which could conceive of Jewishness as a spiritual or moral condition lurking behind the façade of orthodox profession. What might appear to be a racial slur in a modern context can here function as an ethical indictment of false Christians with the Jew invoked as a constant, a symbol of the unchristian qualities cited by Hunter and Cole.

It would seem but a short step from this formulation to the dramatic presentation of both Jewish and non-Jewish figures who, whatever their professed faith, share the same values. Few Elizabethan plays, however, take this step; rather, the typical brief appearance of the stage Jew em-

² "The Theology of Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*," *JWCI*, 27 (1964), 214.

³ *Suffering and Evil in the Plays of Christopher Marlowe* (Princeton, 1962), p. 132.

⁴ See *The Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker*, ed. Fredson Bowers, III (Cambridge, 1958), 621, and Jacob Lopes Cardozo, *The Contemporary Jew in the Elizabethan Drama* (Amsterdam, 1925), p. 116.

⁵ *The Letters of Queen Elizabeth*, ed. G. B. Harrison (London, 1935), p. 22.

plays his legendary or grotesque attributes in a simplistic way to depict total villainy. Thus, in *The Tragical Reign of Selimus* (1592) the “cunning Iew,” Abraham, is brought on stage twice as an expert poisoner, “a man so stout and resolute, / That he will venture any thing for gold”;⁶ later plays, like *The Travels of the Three English Brothers* (1607), provide similar examples of minor Jewish villains. We can only speculate about the lost play, *The Jew*, mentioned by Gosson in 1579, which represented “the greedinesse of worldly chusers, and bloody mindes of usurers”;⁷ the obvious Jew (the bloody-minded usurer) need not have been the only such worldly chooser in a play concerned with “Jewish” values in Christian society. Many of the morality plays of the 1560s and 1570s were, like *The Jew*, concerned with the impact of materialistic values upon Christian society. To set up their dramatic sermons, however, such moral dramatists apparently did not resort to the stage Jew but instead brought on stage obvious ethical alternatives embodied in contrasting figures like Worldly Man and Heavenly Man (*Enough Is as Good as a Feast*) or Lust and Just (*Trial of Treasure*). In *All for Money* (1577), Thomas Lupton displays Judas, Dives, and a host of venal figures but no designated stage Jew. At the end of George Wapull’s *The Tide Tarrieth No Man* (1576), Faithful Few tells the audience:

For better it were vnchristened to be,
Then our Christianity for to abuse:
The Iewish Infidell to God doth more agree,
Then such as Christianity do so misuse.⁸

Throughout much of this play a figure named Christianity is forced to bear the “titles” of Riches and Policy owing to the worldly values of nominally Christian figures like Greediness the usurer. Although there is no evidence that Greediness was portrayed as a stage Jew, he is a worldly chooser whose values allegorically undermine Christianity, a figure less pleasing to God (according to Faithful Few) than the “Iewish Infidell.”

⁶ Edited for the Malone Society by W. Bang and W. W. Greg (London, 1908), lines 1684-88. Dates attached to this and subsequent plays are drawn from Alfred Harbage, *Annals of English Drama, 975-1700*, rev. S. Schoenbaum (London, 1964).

⁷ *The School of Abuse*, reprinted for the Shakespeare Society (London, 1841), p. 30. Hermann Sinsheimer uses the German manuscript of *The Jew of Venice* (apparently a version of a play performed by English actors on the Continent) as the basis for some interesting speculations about *The Jew*. See *Shylock: The History of a Character* (New York, 1963), pp. 58-61.

⁸ Ed. Ernst Rühl, *SJ*, 43 (1907), lines 1852-55.

At least three extant Elizabethan plays, however, *do* use the obvious stage Jew to indict false Christians. The earliest and simplest example is Robert Wilson's *Three Ladies of London* (1581),⁹ a morality play which follows by only a few years *The Jew* mentioned by Gosson. At the heart of this allegorical analysis of contemporary society are the rise to power of Lady Lucre and the resulting subjection of Lady Love and Lady Conscience. The only scenes not set in London involve Mercadorus, a merchant who worships Lucre, and Gerontus, a Jewish moneylender. At their first meeting, when the merchant postpones payment of a long-standing debt, Gerontus observes that if Jews should deal so with each other, no one would trust them, yet "many of you Christians make no conscience to falsifie your fayth and breake your day" (D³V). When Mercadorus is brought to trial in Turkey for his debt, the judge cites the law which provides that all debts will be canceled for any man who forsakes his faith, king, and country to worship Mahomet. Gerontus the Jew is horrified when the merchant starts to take such an oath and, after offering increasingly better terms, finally cancels the debt entirely; Wilson's Jew would rather lose the money than have others charge that, because of his insistence, a Christian was forced to renounce his faith. When Mercadorus then announces that he will not forsake Christ "for all da good in da world," the Turkish judge (as neutral observer) provides the obvious moralization: "One may iudge and speake truth, as appeeres by this, / Iewes seeke to excell in Christianitie, and Christians in Iewisnes" (F1^r). In this simple dramatic lesson, Wilson uses his stage Jew to indict a Christian (in name) corrupted by the worship of Lucre. Through the heavy-handed paradoxes, "Jewishness" and "Christianity" are shown to be values not limited to racial or ethnic groups but determined by deeds.

Marlowe's Malta is many leagues from Wilson's London, yet his use of the stage Jew sets up an analogous indictment of a Christian society. Thus, at the outset of the play Barabas states openly that he would rather be hated as a rich Jew than pitied as a poor Christian; commenting sardonically upon Maltese hypocrisy, he observes: "For I can see no fruits in all their faith, / But malice, falsehood, and excessive pride, / Which methinks fits not their profession" (I.i.114-16).¹⁰ In the

⁹ Edited for the Tudor Facsimile Texts by John S. Farmer (1911).

¹⁰ *The Jew of Malta*, ed. Richard W. Van Fossen, RRDS (Lincoln, Nebr., 1964). Throughout my discussion I am indebted to the Cole and Hunter essays already cited and to Eric Rothstein, "Structure as Meaning in *The Jew of Malta*," *JEGP*, 65 (1966), 260-73, and David M. Bevington, *From "Mankind" to Marlowe* (Cambridge, Mass., 1962), pp. 218-33.

following scene Marlowe reinforces this critique by placing the Elizabethan audience in the awkward position of watching a stage Jew (with his red wig and bottle-nose) ironically achieve moral stature at the expense of Ferneze and his Christian supporters. Thus, the moral posturing of the Maltese spokesmen (e.g., "Excess of wealth is cause of covetousness, / And covetousness, O, 'tis a monstrous sin" [I.ii.123-24]) and the ironically revealing echoes of the Gospels ("And better one want for a common good, / Than many perish for a private man" [98-99]) are played off against Barabas's apt rejoinders (e.g., "Will you then steal my goods? / Is theft the ground of your religion?" [94-95]). Here in the second scene, before the many horrors that follow, Barabas is more sinned against than sinning. Our first exposure to Maltese society thereby supports the Jew's critique that the reality ("malice, falsehood, and excessive pride") belies Christian "profession."

Nor does Marlowe give us much opportunity to upgrade our estimate of Christian Malta. A few scenes later, Del Bosco persuades Ferneze to break his treaty with the Turks because "Honor is bought with blood and not with gold" (II.ii.56). There is no mention, however, of returning the money extorted from the Jews. The reference to honor, blood, and gold is soon followed by the setting up of the slave market, an institution that could not have existed if the treaty had been kept (II.ii.21-23). Each slave's price, we are told, "is written on his back" (II.iii.3), a situation that also applies to many of the Christians in the play who can be manipulated once their price is known. By the end of Act II, we can at least understand Barabas's argument that "it's no sin to deceive a Christian" (II.iii.310), for, in practice, he is merely following Christian example. Again, the best Christian to be found in the play is a converted Jew, Abigail. But her dying request ("Convert my father, that he may be sav'd, / And witness that I die a Christian") only elicits the friar's sardonic rejoinder: "Ay, and a virgin, too; that grieves me most" (III.vi.39-41). In spite of the crescendo of horrors associated with Jew and Turk that begins in Act III, Marlowe is leaving us with no firm sense of a true Christian alternative in Malta.

Marlowe's most provocative use of his stage Jew occurs in IV.i, a scene which epitomizes the distinctive dramatic flavor of this play. After Abigail learns the circumstances of her lover's death, she determines to become a Christian because "there is no love on earth, / Pity in Jews, nor piety in Turks" (III.iii.47-48). The failure of this alternative (for Abigail and for Malta) is demonstrated by the revealing interaction between the two visual symbols of Maltese Christianity, Friar Jacomo

and Friar Barnardine. When the two friars confront Barabas with his role in the deaths of Mathias and Lodowick, the Jew takes advantage of the price written on their backs. Posing as a repentant sinner ("I am a Jew, and therefore am I lost"), he asks: "Is 't not too late now to turn Christian?" (IV.i.56, 49). After tantalizing the friars with an elaborate catalogue of his wealth, Barabas concludes: "All this I'll give to some religious house, / So I may be baptiz'd and live therein" (74-75). The subsequent competition between the two friars is both intense and petty: "O, Barabas, their laws are strict. . . . They wear no shirts, and they go barefoot, too" (81-83). Such a dangling of wealth before the eyes of these two representatives of Christianity has suddenly blotted out all memory of the Jew's involvement in the deaths of two young men and has made a mockery of the vows of poverty supposedly basic to a friar's profession. The subsequent skirmish between Giacomo and Barnardine is but the first indication of the effect of that monstrous sin, covetousness. Ironically, the Christian ideal of giving up all worldly goods to a religious house in order to pursue one's salvation is here placed in the mouth of a Machiavellian Jew who uses that profession to subvert the two obvious symbols of Christianity. Something is rotten in the state of Malta.

The most revealing insights into spiritual values in Malta are yet to come. The Jew and the Turk, who (as Abigail noted) lack any semblance of pity or piety, have no difficulty strangling the sleeping Friar Barnardine (an act that not only demonstrates the villainy of the murderers but also symbolizes the lack of force in Maltese Christianity which, in its own way, is sleeping if not defunct). A moment later the murderous attack is acted out again, but this time the audience is offered the stage spectacle of a friar attacked not by the obvious infidels but by a fellow Christian, Friar Giacomo. Although perhaps unrealistic from our modern vantage point, this dramatic duplication acts out a second and more insidious threat—not from the grotesque outsiders but from forces within Malta, from the "Jewish" or "infidel" values shared by the Christians who duplicate the villainy of the Jew and the Turk.

Marlowe spares no opportunity to drive home his sardonic point. Once Friar Giacomo has been apprehended for the "murder," both Jew and Turk moralize about such crimes:

ITHAMORE.

Fie upon 'em! Master, will you turn Christian, when
holy friars turn devils and murder one another?

BARABAS.

No, for this example I'll remain a Jew.
 Heaven bless me! what, a friar a murderer?
 When shall you see a Jew commit the like?

ITHAMORE.

Why, a Turk could ha' done no more.
 (IV.i.189-94)

Here Marlowe with characteristic irony points to the failure of Maltese Christianity to provide a positive alternative to Barabas's Jewishness. That Barabas and Ithamore, not Friar Jacomo, are the true murderers is only a matter of timing. Why then should infidels "turn Christian" if the Christian model held up for emulation is of such dubious value? What fruits *are* to be found in Maltese faith, especially if holy friars can turn devils? Jacomo's dilemma in no way exonerates Barabas or makes the Jew's crimes palatable. Rather, Marlowe is stressing the essential similarity between the acknowledged Jew and the "Jewish" Christian who prides himself upon his assumed superiority. As Barabas puts it later in the play at the peak of his success: "This is the life we Jews are us'd to lead; / And reason, too, for Christians do the like" (V.ii.115-16). Throughout the play Barabas can justify his way of life in this sardonic fashion by appealing to Christian example. "Jewish" values—in both infidel *and* orthodox—are destroying sleeping Christianity in Malta.

The Maltese Christians, of course, see no such relationship between their values and Barabas's Jewishness. Rather, in another curious scene they heave the Jew's apparently dead body over a wall, thereby (they assume) ridding themselves forever of this enemy within. But in near-allegorical fashion Barabas rises from his "death" to lead the Turks into Malta. Ferneze's naïve account of the downfall of the Jew and his cohorts ("the heavens are just: / Their deaths were like their lives; then think not of 'em" [V.i.55-56]) is not very encouraging, for what Barabas stands for will not be eliminated that easily. As the fate of the two friars has shown, Jewishness cannot be purged from Malta until a true Christian example is available, an example not to be found in murders or broken treaties or slave markets or pat assumptions about moral superiority and heavenly justice.

Barabas's subsequent fall into a trap of his own making is a fitting end for such a lurid stage villain. But Ferneze's acceptance of "a Jew's courtesy" or treason (V.v.107-109) says little for Maltese moral superiority, while the governor's final words ("let due praise be given / Neither to

fate nor fortune, but to heaven" [122-23]) sound a hollow note for an audience well aware that Christian success at the end of this play is based upon superiority in treachery. Where then is the answer to Barabas's series of challenges to Christian Malta ranging from the soliloquy of I.i to the gibes of IV.i? The obviously villainous stage Jew has gone to his deserved end, but the Christians who have survived have learned little if anything from the events of the play. The cauldron, that self-constructed trap with hellish overtones,¹¹ awaits them as well. Without resorting to the simplistic moral extremes of *The Tide Tarrith No Man* or *The Three Ladies of London*, Marlowe has used his stage Jew to indict a society which is truly Christian in name but not in deed.

The Merchant of Venice, in contrast, is a romantic comedy, not a sardonic tragedy, so Shakespeare's presentation of his stage Jew is somewhat different in tone and over-all effect. Nonetheless, in the middle of the play at the end of his best-known speech, Shylock throws down a challenge to Christian Venice quite similar to Barabas's indictment of Christian Malta:

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
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? re-
venge! If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by
Christian example?—why revenge! The villainy you teach
me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruc-
tion. (III.i.58-66)¹²

Barabas, we should remember, had justified his villainy by arguing that "Christians do the like." Here Shylock, in similar fashion, defends his

¹¹ For a valuable discussion of the cauldron and hell, see Hunter, pp. 233-35.

¹² Citations are from the New Arden edition, ed. John Russell Brown (London, 1955). *The Merchant of Venice* in general and Shylock in particular have elicited an enormous response from critics, historians, and apologists, a wealth of material to which I am greatly indebted. The many studies of the Jew in Elizabethan literature (e.g., the works by Cardozo and Sinsheimer cited above) often do link Shylock to Gerontus and Barabas but, on the other hand, do not deal with symbolic Jewishness and dramatic convention in the manner of this essay. Similarly, some of the many essays and chapters on Shylock, the trial scene, and the larger issues of this comedy do advance arguments similar to my analysis but none, to my knowledge, deals with such issues and events (especially the reactions of the Duke, Antonio, and Gratiano after the reversal in IV.i) within the context or framework established here. In general terms, I would like to acknowledge a particular debt to Brown's edition and to J. W. Lever, "Shylock, Portia and the Values of Shakespearian Comedy," *SQ*, 3 (1952), 383-86, and Barbara K. Lewalski, "Biblical Allusion and Allegory in *The Merchant of Venice*," *SQ*, 13 (1962), 327-43.

pursuit of Antonio's pound of flesh by appealing to "Christian example." According to this argument, the villainy about to be executed by the Jew has been taught him by vengeful Christians who in their practice show little humility or sufferance. Shylock's promise to "better the instruction" is therefore the statement not only of a stage villain but also of a good student who has mastered his lesson.

Faced with such an indictment at the beginning of Act III, an audience would think back to the "Christian example" to be found in the first two acts. Admittedly, there is no precise equivalent in this play for Ferneze's hypocrisy in I.ii or the Maltese breaking of faith with both Jews and Turks, but in terms suitable to a romantic comedy Shakespeare has provided analogous evidence. Thus, although Antonio exhibits a selfless love for Bassanio ("I think he only loves the world for him" [II.viii.50]), that merchant is also characterized by his intense loathing for Shylock, an unchristian passion which is described at length by the Jew (I.iii.101-24) and reaffirmed by Antonio ("I am as like to call thee so again, / To spet on thee again, to spurn thee too" [125-26]). Launcelot Gobbo's decision to leave Shylock, in which he chooses the devil ("Budge!") over his conscience ("Budge not!" [II.ii.18-19]), provides another negative example, albeit in low comic terms, while the clown also contributes a comically confused account of the Christian source of Jessica's virtues ("if a Christian [did]¹³ not play the knave and get thee, I am much deceived" [II.iii.11-12]). The misguided choices by Morocco and Arragon of the gold and silver caskets provide striking negative examples of false or confused values. Perhaps most revealing is the Venetian casket scene (II.vi) in which Jessica throws down to the waiting Lorenzo some of her father's treasure and goes off to "gild myself / With some moe ducats" (49-50). Gratiano's reaction to Jessica's behavior—"Now (by my hood) a gentle, and no Jew" (51)—suggests that for at least one character "Christian example" can include theft, elopement, and betrayal so long as a Christian profits. As with Antonio, Launcelot, Morocco, and Arragon, such confused thinking often lurks beneath the surface of Christian profession in this play. Thus, Shylock's indictment at the beginning of Act III cannot be easily dismissed.

Since Shakespeare's play is a comedy, this challenge to Christian so-

¹³ I use F2's "did" rather than Q's or F1's "do" because I take "get" of line 12 to mean "beget." For me, this reading is confirmed by Launcelot's expansion of this passing comment in III.v.1-16. For the alternate argument, see Brown's note on p. 46.

ciety does not remain unanswered. In the next scene, in fact, Bassanio chooses the leaden casket, thereby demonstrating his willingness to venture all he has in a love that transcends gain and possession. Moreover, when the news of Antonio's plight reaches Belmont, both Bassanio and Portia forgo their own personal fulfillment to aid a friend and benefactor. Nonetheless, at the start of the famous trial scene Shylock can still forcefully attack the hypocrisy of Christian Venice, this time using as evidence the institution of slavery:

You have among you many a purchas'd slave,
Which (like your asses, and your dogs and mules)
You use in abject and in slavish parts,
Because you bought them,—shall I say to you,
Let them be free, marry them to your heirs?
Why sweat they under burthens? let their beds
Be made as soft as yours, and let their palates
Be season'd with such viands? you will answer
"The slaves are ours,"—so do I answer you:
The pound of flesh (which I demand of him)
Is dearly bought, 'tis mine and I will have it:
If you deny me, fie upon your law!
There is no force in the decrees of Venice:
I stand for judgment,—answer, shall I have it?
(IV.i.90-103)

As in Marlowe's II.iii, Shakespeare uses slavery to call attention to the gap between Christian profession and Christian practice, especially by having Shylock apply such terms as "ours," "mine," and "dearly bought" to human beings or human flesh. After listening to this blunt account of the slavery practiced in Venice, we do not condone Shylock's vindictive treatment of Antonio but we *are* made aware of "Jewish" values in a supposedly Christian society. In his possessive attitude toward his enemy's flesh, this stage Jew is bettering the instruction provided by the Venetians while calling attention to Christians in name but not in deed on and off stage.

Although Portia's legalistic maneuvers soon turn the tables on Shylock, this reversal offers no real answer or alternative example. As many readers have noted, Portia merely out-shylocks the Jew, meeting and defeating him on his own terms. In her famous speech she had argued that mercy was the most admirable of human qualities, "an attribute to God himself" (191). Since thus far in the play there has been little evi-

dence of such tolerance or forgiveness, Shylock's refusal to show mercy was consistent with his claim of following Christian example. Now Shakespeare reverses the situation, so that the Jew is suddenly subjected to the justice or mercy of Christian society. With the tables turned, the audience can note what kind of example will be set by the Christians who profess to believe in the New Law of Christ, not the Old Law of strict justice. Will the Venetians live up to Portia's ideal of mercy or will they prove to be Jews in deed?

The answers that Shakespeare provides to such questions deserve our attention. First, the Duke announces:

That thou shalt see the difference of our spirit
I pardon thee thy life before thou ask it:
For half thy wealth, it is Antonio's,
The other half comes to the general state,
Which humbleness may drive unto a fine.
(364-68)

Shylock is thereby penalized financially (for him, a serious penalty, tantamount to death [370-73]) but is granted his life, in striking contrast to the Jew's treatment of Antonio. The Duke's initial judgment thus combines retribution and mercy in a manner not accounted for in Shylock's indictment.

Antonio too betters the instruction provided by Shylock. When Portia asks, "What mercy can you render him Antonio?" (374), the merchant asks the Duke and court "to quit the fine for one half of his goods" (thereby giving back to the Jew "the prop / That doth sustain my house") but only on several conditions, most notably "that for this favour / He presently become a Christian" (376-86). In spite of innumerable scholarly explanations based upon Elizabethan evidence (including the dying words of Marlowe's Abigail—"Convert my father, that he may be sav'd"), this enforced conversion consistently offends modern readers and playgoers and will continue to do so. Nowhere in the play is the cultural distance between us and the 1590s more apparent. But in fairness to both Antonio and Shakespeare, note what the merchant has done. Like the Duke, he has given back to Shylock something which had been forfeited according to the strict letter of the law (his life, his wealth). Although moments earlier Antonio had been helpless before Shylock's knife (and therefore could easily harbor a desire for revenge), he responds not in kind but in the spirit of Portia's lesson.

The Jew's earlier argument ("if you wrong us shall we not revenge?²—if we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that") has been answered in deed, even though the modern sensibility may not be fully satisfied with that answer.

The Christian example set by the Duke and Antonio, however qualified, is heightened by a third set of reactions to Shylock's new situation. Thus, in response to Portia's question directed at Antonio, Gratiano interjects: "A halter gratis, nothing else for Godsake!" (375). Earlier, before the Duke had granted the pardon, Gratiano had instructed Shylock:

Beg that thou may'st have leave to hang thyself,—
 And yet thy wealth being forfeit to the state,
 Thou hast not left the value of a cord,
 Therefore thou must be hang'd at the state's charge.
(360-63)

As Shylock leaves the stage, Gratiano states: "In christ'ning shalt thou have two godfathers,— / Had I been judge, thou shouldst have had ten more, / To bring thee to the gallows, not to the font" (394-96). Clearly there is little difference between Shylock's attitude toward Antonio and Gratiano's attitude toward Shylock. Shakespeare, in effect, provides us with a "Jewish" Christian or a Christian Shylock, a figure who has learned little from Portia's speech on mercy or from Antonio's subjection to the bond of flesh. In his vindictiveness, Gratiano (who earlier for dubious reasons had deemed Jessica "a gentle, and no Jew") calls attention to the persistence of values previously identified with Shylock and serves as a foil to set off the Christian example provided by the Duke and Antonio.

These three reactions to Shylock in his new role as a figure vulnerable to the law have too often been neglected. Even though modern audiences troubled by Shylock's fate will not let the actions of the Duke and Antonio pass without challenge, this disposal of the Jew's life and goods does reaffirm the higher values of this comedy. At least some of the figures on stage have listened and learned. In similar fashion, Portia's twitting of Bassanio about the ring in Act V sets up an analogous situation in which mercy and understanding are again pitted against the strict letter of the law. Even though the two husbands may be technically guilty of violating the troths sworn on the rings, both are forgiven in a Belmont characterized by moonlight and harmony, not by

profit and retributive justice. In a deft, lighthearted fashion, this comedic ending offers one last demonstration of that forgiveness and understanding rarely found early in the play. Both Act IV and Act V thereby provide Christians in deed to offset the less than Christian example associated with a wide range of figures typified by but not limited to Shylock.

What then are we to conclude about the stage Jew as presented by Wilson, Marlowe, and Shakespeare? Although initially the three plays seem to have little in common, in each the same distinctive stage figure has served a comparable function—not merely to vilify Jews and Judaism but to challenge the professions of supposedly Christian London or Malta or Venice. Indeed, with the proper allowances, there is an interesting continuity from Wilson's "Iewes seeke to excell in Christianitie, and Christians in Iewisnes" to Barabas's "This is the life we Jews are us'd to lead; / And reason, too, for Christians do the like" to Shylock's "The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction." In the morality play, the episodes involving Gerontus and Mercadorus provide a didactic *exemplum* which functions as one part of a full-scale attack upon materialistic London. In his sardonic tragedy, Marlowe makes more extensive use of his villainous Jew but his emphasis is the same—the failure of a Christian society to live up to its professed ideals. Of the three examples, Shakespeare's comedy is the only one to provide a positive, accessible Christian alternative, even though Gratiano, for one, fails to appreciate it. Significantly, in all three instances there is a common denominator, for Wilson, Marlowe, and Shakespeare all use this conventional figure as a means to a larger end, whether that end be moralistic, ironic, or comedic.

By viewing Gerontus, Barabas, and Shylock as dramatic kinsmen, the modern reader can grasp the convention that stands behind them and informs them. In morality play, tragedy, or comedy, the stage Jew could function as a dramatic scalpel with which the Elizabethan dramatist could anatomize the inner reality of a society Christian in name but not necessarily in deed. The fact remains that Shakespeare *did* choose as his villain what seems to us an objectionable stereotype, but by recognizing the stage Jew as a potential theatrical device (and not a direct expression of authorial bigotry) we may be able to sidestep Shakespeare's alleged anti-Semitism and instead appreciate the artistry with which he has incorporated such a stock figure into the world of romantic comedy. Admittedly, recourse to dramatic conventions and to Elizabethan con-

cepts of symbolic Jewishness will be of dubious value to a director at a Shakespeare festival; but readers may find some reassurance in the knowledge that Marlowe and Shakespeare, although perhaps building upon Elizabethan prejudices, were still using the stage Jew as a potent dramatic weapon against Christian hypocrisy and complacency. Perhaps then another reason for the discomfort caused by Shylock is our unconscious awareness of our own failure to answer his challenge. If so, we may have one more example of how, for Shakespeare, the play's the thing to catch the conscience of his audience.

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