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VCU Menorah Review

*For the Enrichment of Jewish Thought*

Winter/Spring 2009 no. 70

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## A Poem by Richard E. Sherwin

I don't know where or if a soul exists  
even cyberspace has got black holes  
and no ones heard the faintest whisperings  
thru nanospaces gravities of ghosts

and still my heart is haunted images  
and voices his I tell myself are echoes  
love fills in the hole his dyings dug  
from my life to dull this thudding unhappiness

time they say cures all I don't believe  
this for a second let alone a minute  
what happens is you just can't bear such grief  
and live and so your genes turn off the spigot

you learn you can exist on less and breathe  
without the air you never thought of needing

## Believing Christian... Agnostic Believer

A Review Essay by Frank E. Eakin, Jr.

### ***Jesus for the Non-Religious* by John Shelby Spong, Harper San Francisco**

*Jesus for the Non-Religious* is a captivating study done by Bishop John Shelby Spong, one in which his characteristic iconoclastic attitudes are apparent. If one has read faithfully his works through the years, or if indeed one has known him on a conversational level over the years, this book is a rather logical culmination of his thinking. Concluding with material from *Christpower*, Lucy Negus' poetic distillation of a 1974 sermon by Spong at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia, the circle is closed as he seeks to clarify in 2007 where he was beginning to move in 1974.

The attraction of the author is the fact that, confronted by all of the trapping of the mythological Jesus, he finds himself deeply conflicted. As a priest in the Episcopal Church, and through the last years of his professional life the Bishop of the Diocese of Newark, one might expect him to be grounded in the certitudes of the tradition. It is his debunking of these certitudes that makes him so appealing to many contemporary Christians who do not want a schizophrenic relationship between their daily rational lives and their lives of faith. Nonetheless, he has clearly been a "problem" for many of the "faithful" who refuse to recognize a schism between scientific reasoning and traditional interpretations of scripture. Let it be acknowledged that the traditionalist would declare Spong to be dogmatic in his rejection of the "faith of the fathers." Moreover, the traditionalist would declare him to be equally as dogmatic in the position that he espouses as he declares the traditionalist to be in the traditional faith affirmation. Long ago this reviewer learned that, where presuppositions differ, two parties can never reconcile their differences--at best there can be agreement to agree to disagree. As one reads Spong, it is recognized that he does have a tendency to assume that the only rational position is the one he

sets forth, no thinking person would suggest otherwise! *Jesus for the Non-Religious* consciously draws upon the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's "religionless Christianity" (p. xiv) as Spong attempts to flesh out for the 21st-century reader what this mid-20th-century victim of the Third Reich sought to express. Several of Rudolf Bultmann's books are listed in his bibliography, although Spong does not invoke Bultmann in his text. Nonetheless, it seems that one should recognize that it is a radical Bultmannian-type *formgeschichte* approach that undergirds his material. Of his 25 chapters, he spends 18 chapters, i.e., Part 1 which focused on "Separating the Human Jesus from the Myth" (chapters 1-11) and Part 2 which developed "The Original Images of Jesus" (chapters 12-18); emphasizing that what is recorded is not and cannot be understood as a "historical" record. It is the typical demythologizing of the text to separate the thought from what he sees as the corruptness of the Christian "religion" built around theistic thought in order to remythologize it according to development around the Jewish liturgical year. The other earlier figure invoked by Spong is Bishop John A. T. Robinson, an earlier iconoclastic but exceedingly helpful figure within the Anglican communion (as in his *Honest to God*).

In Part 1, "Separating the Human Jesus from the Myth," Spong has effectively marshaled his evidence, and it helps that the reviewer basically agrees with the Bishop's arguments. His general position is if you can describe the event other than as history that is preferred. He characteristically views the data as built upon the Tanach; i.e., drawing upon the Jewish liturgical year.

An apocalyptic argument not used which would have enforced his general position (although not a reliance upon the Jewish liturgical year) is the idea that, as the end time approaches (all of the New Testament materials were written during the apocalyptic era), the events associated with the beginning of Yahwism's emergence would be repeated. Using this forced interpretive mechanism of the period, this explains the threat to the young child's life and the necessity to have Joseph take Mary and the baby into Egypt. This type of repetitive activity would presage both the imminent apocalyptic end and also Jesus' role

in history's fulfillment as apocalyptically envisioned.

It is important to affirm that all of the Biblical material was written in a pre-scientific era. They could not think or write scientifically because they predate the phenomenon. Thus, their writing was mythological because that was the literary genre that described the actions of the gods, or in this case the God YHWH among humans. To declare this text as mythology should not be seen as a negative but indeed as the most positive comment one can make, i.e., it affirms the action of God among us. To juxtapose the actions of God with the historical reality of human existence gives rationale for reinterpretation (demythologizing and remythologizing) of the text as historical circumstances and human awareness alters--reinterpretation is the most natural of responses!

One cannot argue with Spong regarding his rejection of Biblical miracles. I would have preferred, however, that he deal with Hebraic perceptions, such as "mighty acts," the "outstretched arm of God," etc. The point is that Hebraically they did not deal with miracles, for miracle is a Greek concept that assumes natural order and the cessation of same during which something happens contrary to natural order. Hebraically, we speak of signs and wonders, and the more naturally you understand these more they affirm YHWH, the Lord of history. The real question then is how the Christian community became so Hellenized, when Jesus is so clearly a first-century Jew (see Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew*). Jesus is recorded as saying "...if it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the Kingdom of God has come to you" (Luke 11:20). Much of the Hellenistic view of miracle incorporates the sense of the struggle between body and spirit, whereas in Hebrew thought there is no such dichotomy. God created the cosmos and humankind, looked upon the totality of his creation, and said "...very good" (Genesis 1:31).

Whereas the reviewer agrees with most of Spong's conclusions, I have a basic concern pedagogically. When preaching to the converted, one may be more caustic in presentation. When seeking to alter the

thinking of the traditionalist, however, one must move more cautiously. After all, traditional religion impacts the beliefs, actions, and emotions of the individual, i.e., the entire being. His treatment of the entire miracle section could lead one to conclude that essentially 95 percent of the Gospel narrative is “made up” on the basis of earlier stories in the Tanach. To say this is what happened, even to point to some parallels, is not sufficient proof for the traditionalist. Because of this I consider this one of the weaker sections, but for Spong, as he writes of Paul and his understanding of the crucifixion and death of Jesus, Paul assumed such to be “...beyond either debate or doubt” (p. 98). For the traditionalist, I believe it will take more convincing!

This leads us to an area where one treads gingerly, for I am confident that this is not what Spong is saying although it might be so interpreted. It would seem that Spong’s suggestion that the New Testament materials are formulated according to the Jewish liturgical year, using events such as Passover and Yom Kippur, is at best examples of midrashic interpretation, indeed a view not unique to Spong. At worst, however, such interpretation becomes supersessionist is this “Jesus” interpretation the “real” interpretation? Again, Spong never suggests this, but against the reality of Church history it raises a red flag! To mention it at this point is more to warn against a misuse of Spong’s words for a view I know he does not accept!

Part 2, “The Original Images of Jesus,” is an interesting section, and in many ways Chapter 12, a brief introductory chapter (pages 133-137), is one of the strongest chapters because it factually describes the rejection by both Roman Catholicism and Protestantism in the 1960s of a possible movement away from traditionalism and fundamentalism. Rather, he suggests, the Church retreated into the safety of its tradition, away from the possibilities of new approaches to an understanding of Jesus.

One cannot over emphasize the Kerygma as found in Acts 2, 7, 10 and 13. This standardization of the proclaimed message of the early Church makes impossible the formulation of a clear story of Jesus.



Spong is also certainly correct according to the best textual evidence that Jesus died alone, that much had to be reconstructed, and the Kerygma gives clear evidence of this fact.

It would be expected that the Jesus story was understood by his followers to be encapsulated in the chronicles of Judaism because the earliest followers were Jews. On the other hand, we recognize that strong antipathy developed between the “followers of the Way” and the Jews at a rather early stage, and thus to build overly on the development of the Jesus story a la the Jewish liturgical year in part because this was proclaimed in the synagogues is somewhat shakey. Neither for Spong nor in general is Jesus portrayed as the poster child for traditional Judaism, so the transmission of this Jesus story would more likely be within the developing ecclesia , not the synagogue (see chapter 13, page 146).

I would see as most viable the idea that data relative to Jesus did transmit during the “oral transmission” period without concern for either chronology or context, and thus we end up with the Gospel writers, none of whom seems to have been eye witnesses to Jesus’ ministry, with practically no biographical knowledge of Jesus the man. Even in the Synoptic Gospels the man of history is often covered by the Christ of faith, and this is without question true for the Fourth Gospel. As a result, I would not use the Fourth Gospel except to discuss a confessional perspective on Jesus as developed by the end of the first common century.

As an aside, it is noteworthy that Paul, even though the earliest contributor to the New Testament, was the writer most concerned with the risen Lord, the Christ of faith as opposed to the Jesus of history (one might argue that in some ways the Fourth Gospel contrasts with the Synoptics in this same way). Thus, Paul’s favored way to refer to Jesus is Christ Jesus rather than Jesus Christ. This subtle distinction is crucial in understanding Pauline thought.

It is generally acknowledged that the Gospel of John had paramount

influence in the development of Christian thought, for example in supporting creedal development when Biblically based. It is also from the Fourth Gospel that we get the radical association of Jesus with Passover. As Spong notes, it is the portrayal of Jesus as the paschal lamb who had been introduced earlier by John the Baptizer as “the lamb of God” that colors this picture. Again, recognizing the significant differences between the Synoptics and the Fourth Gospel, it is questionable how much of the Jesus story should be constructed from the Fourth Gospel’s association of Jesus and the Passover.

Many will find Spong’s arguments convincing and will accept without question the associations he draws, i.e., Jesus with Passover, Yom Kippur, Son of Man, Servant, and Shepherd. For this reviewer, the associations often seem somewhat forced, trying so hard to associate the tradition as developed with a more standardized Jewish liturgy one loses any foundation in the historical Jesus. Like Form Criticism, which has done so much to enlighten the Biblical text, its radical use comes at significant cost. Spong’s approach likewise comes at significant cost.

Relative to the “Son of man” imagery in Daniel, it is instructive to emphasize that this is apocalyptic imagery, as acknowledged by Spong (p. 173), but that means that this book is highly symbolic, cryptic in its presentation, and contextually not at all what on the surface it appears to be. Granted that Jesus seemed to adopt this designation as his self-designation (only Stephen in his address in Acts 7 refers to Jesus as “Son of man”), but is this Jesus’ self-designation or an appellation placed upon Jesus by the early Church? Is it so clear that Jesus so understood himself or that this is the way the early Church understood Jesus? This is a difficult interpretive issue and one somewhat shaky as a foundational presupposition. Indeed, in Matthew 10:23, when Jesus is reputed to have said, “You will not have gone through all the towns of Israel, before the Son of man comes” (see Spong, p. 176), was Jesus referring to himself or in that apocalyptic era to the anticipated coming of the “Son of man”?

In the “Son of man” chapter (p. 179), Spong uses the word “immortal-

ity” to describe the door opened by the Jesus experience. This reviewer suggests that, especially if one seeks to place the Jesus phenomenon in Jewish context, “immortality” is not an appropriate word. Within the Church, highly influenced by Hellenistic thought, “immortality” is regularly used, but immortal (or not mortal) is not in the early Jewish lexicon. Humans are forever mortal! We have life as a result of the beneficence of God, and if there be anything beyond this life it is at that same beneficence. We do not possess an “immortal” core that assures our continuing life. That continuing life is the gift of God. As Christians, we need to acknowledge that this Greek concept came into the Church vocabulary with the Hellenization of the Church. Jesus, however, was born, lived, and died a Jew. The Church might speak of “immortality,” but I doubt seriously that the Jesus of history would have done so!

Whereas the book is carefully written and has many commendable suggestions, several concerns for this reviewer should be noted:

1. On page 18 he suggests that “only in the synagogue...” could the “interpretive process” of understanding Jesus have taken place. The potential fallacy here is that rather quickly the “followers of the way” and the Jews went separate ways. Granted there was evidently early on some Jewish sabbath worship coupled with “first day” worship, but quickly it was only “first day” worship and Jewish-Christians were excluded from the synagogues. For the synagogues to have so influenced the view of Jesus would require much greater simpatico than history indicates existed.
2. On page 183 there is confusion regarding the origin of the Samaritans. They emerged as a result of the conquest of Samaria by Assyria in 721 B.C.E., when eventually those Israelites left behind by the Assyrians intermarried with persons imported into the area by the Assyrians. Samaritans already existed at the time of the 587 conquest of Jerusalem by the Babylonians.
3. In like fashion, Ezra was a scribe and Nehemiah a governor. Neither man is understood to be a prophet.

4. On pages 243-244 it should be noted that Paul did not find this transforming experience in the human Jesus (the Jesus of history) but in the Christ of faith.
5. On page 245 Spong suggests that the Gospel writers framed a highly symbolic, analytical, and perceptive message. To this reviewer, this makes the Gospel writers entirely too Hellenistic, when only Luke seems to be appropriately so designated, and Luke significantly used Mark.
6. On page 257 one must be cautious in reading a New Testament sense of the "Holy Spirit" into a Hebrew "Spirit of God" (*Ruach Elohim*). These are not comparably understood phenomena, and confusion of the two obscures our understanding of the Hebrew text.
7. On page 258 Jesus' new definition of "messiah" is suggested, i.e., when he indicated to the Samaritan woman that "messiah" is "the one who now invites her into wholeness" (as opposed to "the one who rescues"). Again, this rather analytical and psychological redefinition of terms leads to the question the understanding of the Jesus of history or of the much later Church?
8. One should be cautious about using the term "Jew" to refer to YHWH's people prior to the Babylonian Exile, i.e., sixth century B.C.E. It was at this point that the Torah was drawn together, and since Torah is the prerequisite to "Jews" and "Judaism," prior to this time better terms would be "Yahwist" and "Yahwism."

If one accepts Spong's view that Mark's Gospel is constructed according to the Jewish liturgical year, what has been demonstrated is that no one of the Gospel writers, and I would include both those of the Synoptics and the Fourth Gospel, was an eye witness to Jesus and his ministry. Thus, the Gospels would be examples of Christian Midrash, building a story around a larger and more established construct. On the one hand this would correlate with those who have suggested that the Gospels are a unique type of Christian Midrashim. On the other hand, it leaves us with the form critically induced question, does it

make any difference whether or not we can relate at all historically to the figure Jesus of Nazareth? The response to the latter question will largely determine an individual's reaction to *Jesus for the Non-Religious*.

Nonetheless, the book is both interesting and thought provoking. Typical of the writings which emerge from Spong's fertile mind, it will encourage the believing Christian to read more carefully the New Testament materials and to question long-held assumptions and traditions. This reviewer would judge that there is probably no better label for the believing Christian than an agnostic believer.

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## From the Classics

### **The Laws of Moses Interpreted**

Rabbi Judah said in the name of Rav: When Moses ascended on high [to receive the Torah] he found the Holy One, blessed be He, engaged in affixing *taggin* [crown-like flourishes] to the letters. Moses said: Lord of the Universe, who stays Your hand? [i.e., is there anything lacking in the Torah so that these ornaments are necessary?] He replied: There will arise a man at the end of many generations, Akiva ben Yosef by name, who will expound upon each tittle, heaps and heaps of laws. Moses said: Lord of the Universe, permit me to see him. God replied: Turn around. Moses then went [into the academy of Rabbi Akiva] and sat down behind eight rows [of Akiva's disciples]. Not being able to follow their arguments, he was ill at ease; but when they came to a certain subject and the disciples said to the master: How do you know it?, and the master replied, It is a law given to Moses at Sinai then Moses was comforted.

*Talmud Menachot 29b*

## New and Notable Books

*For the Love of God and People: A Philosophy of Jewish Law* by Elliot N. Dorff. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society.

*Jewish Philosophy as a Guide to Life: Rosenzweig, Buber, Levinas, Wittgenstein* by Hilary Putnam. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

*A History of Modern Israel* by Colin Shindler. West Nyack, NY: Cambridge University Press.

*The Writer Uprooted* edited by Alvin H. Rosenfeld. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

*Exiles on Main Street: The Creative Dialogue between Jewish Writers and American Culture* by Julian Levinson. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

*The Jewish Enemy: Nazi Propaganda during World War II and the Holocaust* by Jeffrey Herf. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

*Hidden Children of the Holocaust: Belgian Nuns and their Daring Rescue of Young Jews from the Nazis* by Suzanne Vromen. New York: Oxford University Press.

*JPS Guide: The Jewish Bible*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society

*Anguished Hope: Holocaust Scholars Confront the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict*, edited by Leonard Grob & John K. Roth. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, William B. Publishing Company.

*Hitler, the Germans, and the Final Solution* by Ian Kershaw. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

*Hebrew Writers on Writing*, edited by Peter Cole. San Antonio, TX: Trinity University Press.

## Oy Vey Is Mir

**Christ Killers: The Jews and the Passion by Jeremy Cohen, New York: Oxford University Press.**

A Review Essay by Robert Michael

In his novel, *The Last of the Just*, Andr Schwartz-Bart has a character say: "Yeshua, [Jesus] was really a good Jew you know, sort of like the Baal Shem Tov a merciful man, and gentle. The Christians say they love him, but I think they hate him without knowing it. So they take the cross by the other end and they make a sword out of it and strike us with it! They take the cross and they turn it around, they turn it around, my God." (*The Last of the Just*, New York 1960, 365-67)

For two millennia, a predominant ideology with Christian belief has concentrated on the Jews' enduring "sins" and "crimes." Jews were an inherently evil people who slaughtered their prophets, betrayed and murdered their true messiah/maschiach, persisted in their stiff-necked *perfidia*, a people who never failed to express their greed, their treason, their murderous rage at Christ and Christians. Christian thinkers and theologians, politicians and prelates, playwrights and poets have expressed antisemitic attitudes toward Jews that have incontestably influenced average Christians. In the earliest centuries of the Christian era, mild pagan antagonisms developed into historical and theological beliefs that the Jewish people were abhorrent and that any injustice done to them was justified. Jews became the archetypal evil-doers in Christian societies. This anti-Jewish attitude was (and perhaps still is) a permanent element in the fundamental identity of western Christian civilization.

The Christian Church, the new Israel ordained and sanctioned by God succeeded the cursed and rejected old Israel (Jews) morally, historically, and metaphysically. Although all Jews should not be massacred, they must be punished for their "sins." As Jacob Neusner wrote, "At no time before our own century did Christianity contemplate Judaism as



an equal, identify in Judaism a medium of salvation distinct from the Church, find in the Torah as read by sages a message both true and also original, or in any way accord to Judaism a place within that tradition of truth that the Church alone nurtured." (Jacob Neusner, "Christian Missionaries Jewish Scholars," *Midstream*, October 1991, p. 31).

These religious antagonisms elaborated by the theological and popular writings and preachings of the Church's great theologians and popes, exploited by Christian authorities, enhanced by the sermons, theology, liturgy, laws, art, and literature of the Church stirred in most of the faithful an automatic hostility toward Jews, Judaism, and Jewishness and continued into the modern period with only minor deviations. (See Frederick Schweitzer, "The Tap-Root of Antisemitism: The Demonization of the Jews," *Remember for the Future: Jews and Christians during and after the Holocaust*, Oxford 1988) Put another way, Christianity has maintained the same anti-Jewish themes over most of its history and served as the ideological and emotional support for modern Antisemitism.

Just as Christian theology denied Jews salvation in the next life, so it disqualified Jews from legitimate citizenship in Christendom. In a sense, Jews were ostracized from full human status. Some protective Roman legal traditions, some Christian feelings of charity, and the Jews' profoundly ambivalent role as suffering examples of the consequences of offending God provided Jews with a precarious place within Christian society. But until their emancipation in the 18th and 19th centuries, Jews had only very tenuous legal and moral rights to exist. The Jews had to plead with Christian authorities kings and princes, bishops and pope to protect them. Sometimes this worked. Other times, the authorities turned their backs on the Jews or collaborated with those Christians intent on cursing, expropriating, expelling, or murdering Jews. Blaise Pascal, a Christian reformer who saw some good in Judaism but stood solidly with the Christian anti-Jewish tradition, unintentionally condemned his own point of view when he stated that, "We never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when we do it out of religious conviction." (Blaise Pascal, *Oeuvres Complètes*, Paris

1954, *Pense* 794)

A recent examination of Catholic Antisemitism questions the relationship between Christian beliefs and the outrageous “excesses and perversions” of Catholics in their ideas and behaviors toward Jews. The author asks why Christian rhetoric so easily serves anti-Jewish hatred, even for men like Adolf Hitler, “Why the cross seem [s] so readily wielded as a sword?” (James Carroll, “Boston’s Jews and Boston’s Irish,” *Boston Globe*, 12 January 1992, p. 65) In an earlier post-Holocaust study of American opinion, Charles Glock and Rodney Stark discovered that even at a time of growing ecumenical harmony led by the Catholic Vatican II Council, about half of the Americans interviewed--both Catholic and Protestant, both lay and clergy believed that:

- All Jews were responsible for crucifying Christ, and they could not be forgiven for this act until they converted to Christianity.
- God punishes Jews because they reject Christ.
- The Jews were responsible for their own suffering.

The researchers concluded that far from being exclusively secular, “the heart and soul of Antisemitism rested on Christianity.” Fully 95 percent of Americans got their secular stereotypes of Jews from the Christian religion. (Charles Glock and Rodney Stark, *Christian Beliefs and Antisemitism*, New York 1966, p. xvi, 50-65, 73-74, 105, 185-187) Christianity, as other religions, stands as the focus of prejudice because “it is the pivot of the cultural tradition of a group.” (Gordon Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice*, New York 1988, p. 446) This group, the Christians, is unlike any other group in Western history; it has been the controlling in-group over the last 1700 years.

In *Christ Killers*, Jeremy Cohen, an authoritative and insightful historian, has written a text dealing with what he considers the most essential Christian anti-Jewish myth. He means myth in two senses: First, the standard one referring to a false belief. Second, and more important, Cohen refers to myth as a fundamental “story that expresses the ultimate truths and values of a community.” The myth of all Jews, collectively, as Christ killers is a *sine qua non*, a “that without which”

Christianity cannot exist.

Although Cohen does not use the following analogy, it explains as well as any the role of Jews doe Christians in general, for Christian Antisemites in particular. Picture the scene in the Night at the Opera where Groucho Marx stands on a stage in front of the theater curtain arguing with a dour tenor named Lassparri, who has humiliated Harpo, struck him, and fired him. (On a small stage, not unlike what Jews are traditionally accused of doing to Jesus Christ by Christian Antisemites.) From behind the curtain, a club slams Lassparri on the head and knocks him out. Harpo appears from behind the curtain, revives the tenor with smelling salts while Groucho comments on how kind Harpo's behavior is. (Christ's forgiveness of the Jews while he hangs on the cross.) Once Lassparri has regained consciousness and is sitting up, Harpo again whacks him on the head and knocks him out a second time. (Christian revenge on the Jews for their "hateful assassination of Christ.")

In this drama, unfolding before the audience's eyes and hearts, the evil-doing is Lassparri; Harpo is taking his just revenge twice over. The audience, sympathizing with the initially mistreated Harpo, is first merely pleased with his slamming Lassparri. Once Harpo wakes him and knocks him out again, the audience roars its approval.

So with the drama of Christ's Passion, not on a small stage with a few actors lasting a few minutes, but writ in the largest venue possible, on a world-wide stage with millions of Christian and Jewish participants lasting two millennia and counting. The Passion has established most clearly that in the drama of Western Christian culture and civilization, the "bad guys" are the Jews. Just as without evil, we cannot know good, and without good we cannot discern evil, so, without the Jewish "villain," "good" Christians would float through the air without a definitive anchor. Once defined as evil-doers in league with the Devil, there was/is no escape for the Jews or hardly any (reactions to the Holocaust such as *Nostra Aetate*, which Cohen critiques as allowing "much of the Christ-killer myth [to remain] intact," have begun to change this

relationship for the better but there is a long way to go.) Jews, the Lassparris of Western Christian civilization were, and still are for many, arch-villains, and so anything, or almost anything, done against them would be “justified,” if not celebrated.

Cohen shows that for Jews and Christians both, the keys to salvation lie in blood sacrifice, whether Passover lamb or crucifixion, that even before the Gospels were written, Paul, or one of his disciples, demonstrates that Jews were guilty of crucifixion and opposition to the true faith of Christianity. The second-century bishop Melito of Sardis portrayed the Jews not just as a people unfaithful to God, but as the exemplar or all the unfaithful, just as later Christians discerned in Jews the originators and sustainers of all heresy.

It was during the High Middle Ages when the Jewish condition fully deteriorated. We learn that even Peter Abelard, the famous defender of Jews from the collective guilt of deicide, still maintained like many Christians up to the present that, unbaptized, Jews would find themselves in hell once they died. Abelard, the forcibly castrated Catholic outsider, was the best of the lot. Other Churchmen like St. Thomas Aquinas and Peter the Venerable and Raymond Martini as well as devotional literature were circuitously or directly hostile to Jews as demonic vampires in league with the devil to destroy, to crucify and recrucify, Christians and Christianity and Christendom. These theological attacks on Jews fed into political assaults and physical violence. The result thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of Jews slaughtered. As Cohen points out, these tendencies were also obvious in the Dreyfus Affair and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion.

Covering the essential anti-Jewish defamations, accusations, and myths, Cohen spends a lot of time on literature and the arts time well spent. His efforts seal his point that the Christ-killer myth was spread from Churchmen down to the faithful by means of painting, sculpture and drama, keeping the issue and Jew-hatred alive in the most vivid manner and at the most basic emotional level. Hieronymus Bosch’s “The Carrying of the Cross” (Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Ghent),

one of the few relevant paintings Cohen omits from his book, shows Jesus en route to Golgotha spiritually transported beyond the frenzied Jewish mob portrayed as despicable, dehumanized Jewish monstrosities (except for St. Veronica).

Cohen and I agree that the Jew has become the archetypal alien in Christian civilization, an outsider “whom the insiders stereotype as malignant.” It is obvious that the Nazis murdered others in addition to Jews. But whereas the Nazis killed non-Jews only when it served the practical purposes of the Third Reich, they intended to murder all the Jews for being Jews, that is, as the only essentially evil people, and idea that did not appear from nowhere, but from ancient, medieval, early-modern, and modern Christian Antisemitism. For, as in Christian eschatology, the Jews were considered allied with the Antichrist whose evil nature served to establish the positive identity of the insiders. (See Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, New York 1980) As the late Klaus Scholder observed, Hitler’s major goal was to extirpate the “root of all evil, Judaism.” (Klaus Scholder, “Judentum und Christentum in der Ideologie und Politik des Nationalsozialismus, 1919-1945,” *Historical Society of Israel*, Jerusalem 1982, 197-198) The distinction between how non-Jewish enemies of the Reich and Jews were to be treated was made clear in a speech by Heinrich Himmler to SS leaders at Poznan on 4 October 1943. Himmler, widely known as a racist, nevertheless appeared to believe traditional Catholic defamations about Jews such as ritual murder and here distinguishes between the National-Socialist policy toward the inferior Slavic peoples, the dehumanized Untermenschen, and the regime’s more radical attitude toward the inhuman, satanic Jews, die Unmenschen. About the Nazi policy toward non-Jews, he stated, “What happens to the Russians, what happens to the Czechs is a matter of total indifference to me. Whether other nations live in prosperity or croak from hunger interests me only insofar as we need them as slaves for our culture. We shall never be brutal or heartless where it is not necessary.... We Germanstake a decent attitude toward these human animals.” He contrasted this policy with his attitude of secrecy and regard to “the

evacuation of the Jews, the annihilation of the Jewish people" was the glory and moral duty of the Reich. "We had the right, we had the moral duty toward our people, to kill this people which wanted to kill us. Our inward being, our soul, our character has not suffered injury from it." ("Document PS-1919," *Trial of the Major War Criminals before the International Military Tribunal*, 29:110-73. Heinrich Himmler, "Speech to SS-Gruppenfuhrer at Posen Poland, October 4, 1943," U.S. National Archives document 242.256, reel 2 of 3) In other words, the Nazis dehumanized the Slavic peoples into slaves, but they "dehumanized" the Jews into devils, and in this they sensed the bi-millennial Christian tradition and felt they were doing their duty. They did not wake up one morning and decide to murder all the Jews.

Like the Christian theologians who have railed against Jews and the Jewish spirit for nearly two millennia, Hitler regarded the Jews with an *odium theologicum* as the models of all evil, the most sinful of sinners. Hitler's practical behavior was like that of the Crusaders. Hitler himself chose as his official portrait of 1938 one that depicted him as a medieval knight on Crusade. (Robert Waite, *The Psychopathic God: Adolf Hitler*, New York 1985, 4-5) They had been Christian warriors on whom the Churches' precarious distinction between protection and degradation was lost. Their behavior put the lie to the distinction commonly made between medieval Christian anti-Judaism and modern Antisemitism. Although in theory, Christian theology held that "Jewish sin" ought to be expugnable through baptism, often times, Crusader intent was not conversion but the expulsion or destruction of the Jews, Jewishness and Judaism.

What differentiated Crusaders and the Nazis was that the Third Reich was technologically highly efficient, it controlled a powerful nation, it was led by a brilliant Fhrer with no moral restraints when it came to Jews, and it was completely devoted to achieving its Final Solution of the Jewish Problem at all costs, even self-destruction. Yet all the other elements were already in place thanks to theological Antisemitism and the Churches: the anti-Jewish climate of opinion, the devastatingly hostile ides forces, the negative ideological and emotional groundwork,

the administrative procedures and the calls for murder. (See Raul Hilberg, *Destruction of the European Jews*, New York 1977, 121) Both Christian triumphalism and National-Socialism regarded the Jews, Judaism, and the Jewish spirit as hateful and dangerous, and therefore these satanic people, this evil religion, and this demonic ideology had to be destroyed. Tamas Nyiri, an observer of the Holocaust in Hungary, wrote, "The Holocaust is no theological accident. The anti-Judaism of the Middle Ages is shockingly close to Hitlerian racism." (Tamas Nyiri, "In Lieu of a Preface," in Sandor Szenes, *Befejezetlen mult: Keresztenyek es zsidok sorsok [Unfinished Past: Christians and Jews, Destinies]*, Budapest 1986, and in Asher Cohen, "Review," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1988, 104-06) Messianic crusader that he was, Hitler transformed, like his fierce medieval predecessors, Christian ideology into action. He catalyzed the brooding anti-Jewish antipathy of the great mass of the Christian populace into terrifying actuality.

Leaders of Christian opinion paved the way for the Nazis in the first place through their influence on the faithful. Did not many, if not most, Christian Europeans stand in silence tacitly approving at least the first half of the Holocaust, the "mild" phase of discrimination, expropriation, and exile because it matched the millennial demands of Church theologians, prelates, and popes? Did not the Nazis and their collaborators carry out the requirements of the most radical of the Christian theologians, St. John Chrysostom and Martin Luther, both of whom argued that Christians were at fault in not slaying the Jews? (For Luther, see Robert Michael, "Luther, Luther Scholars, and the Jews," *Encounter*, Fall 1985, 339-56) Thus the Jews were forced to try to live through a war dominated ideologically by a deep-seated, religious hatred, which in turn had its origins in theological antagonism between Jews and Christians concerning the authentic interpretation of the most sacred of experiences birth, death and resurrection. Although Christian Antisemitism was not alone sufficient to cause the Holocaust, in many ways it provided the necessary ingredients. Theological anti-Jewishness was so strong before and during World War II, and shortly thereafter, that



even the leading Christian opponents of National-Socialism within Germany Pastors Martin Niemoeller and Dietrich Bonhoeffer were at one time or another caught up in it. (For Niemoeller, see Robert Michael, "Theological Myth, German Antisemitism and the Holocaust: The Case of Martin Niemoeller," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies: An International Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 1987, 105-22)

Cohen's analysis of the Oberammergau Passion Play is, like the rest of his book, insightful. He points out that despite the attempts to purify the play of its anti-Jewish elements both before and after Vatican II nevertheless "the linkage between Cain, Judas and Christ killing remains," as does the emotional conflict between Jesus and the Jews, as if Jesus were not a Jew, and the climactic crucifixion, as if *Nostra Aetate* had not been issued.

Near the end of his chapter on "Crucifixion on the Screen," Cohen analyzes Mel Gibson's snuff film, *The Passion of the Christ*. David Edelstein reviewed the film a few years ago: "This is a two-hour and-six-minute snuff movie *The Jesus Chainsaw Massacre* that thinks it's an act of faith. For Gibson, Jesus is defined not by his teachings in life by his message of mercy, social justice, and self-abnegation, some of it rooted in the Jewish Torah, much of it defiantly personal but by the manner of his execution." (David Edelstein, "Jesus H. Christ: *The Passion*, Mel Gibson's Bloody Mess," *Slate* [*The Washington Post* and *Newsweek*] 24 February 2004. [www.slate.com/id/2096025](http://www.slate.com/id/2096025)) Cohen pretty much agrees. He notes not only the atonement, birth, and salvation involved in the film, but also the film's aggravation of the conflict between good Christians and evil Jews.

Cohen ends his book as he began observing that Christians need Jews, requires them to give the Passion meaning. The Passion narrative necessitates both a hero and a villain, a Christian Jesus of Nazareth and a Jewish Judas Iscariot, a Christ and a Satan. In the words of my old Yiddishe momme, Oy vey is mir.

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*Hatred," "The Dark Side of the Church," "Judenha," "Dictionary of Antisemitism," "The Holocaust," "Nazi-Deutsch/Nazi-German" and "Concise History of American Antisemitism."*

## The Ancient Grudge: The Merchant of Venice and Shylock's Christian Problem

Third of three installments, by Jack D. Spiro

### **5. Jacob (aka Shylock?) & Laban (aka Antonio?)**

We now take a closer look at the dialogue, or verbal duel, between Shylock and Antonio on the biblical story of Jacob and Laban and examine its implications.

Shylock: "...me thoughts you said you neither lend nor borrow for advantage."

Antonio: "I never do."

At this point, Shylock's persistence in finding some common ground for discussing the issue of acquiring currency, leads him to believe the Hebrew Bible might be the proper medium for both a Christian and a Jew to explore. Shylock chooses the story of Jacob and Laban in the Book of Genesis in order to exemplify the erroneous distinction made by Antonio between natural and unnatural ways of earning a living, the case resting on the Aristotelian statement that the "art of money-making out of fruits and animals is always natural," but the money-making derived from usury is "most unnatural." (*Politics* I.10.4; 11.1)

Shylock's argument is based on the idea that even though reproduction of certain kinds of sheep is natural, the specific form that the reproduction took in the biblical account is based on Jacob's skill and ingenuity in manipulating the productivity of the sheep.

*Shylock*: When Jacob grazed his Uncle Laban's sheep, this Jacob from our holy Abram was, as his wise mother wrought in his behalf, the third possessor; ay, he was the third

*Antonio*: And what of him? Did he take interest?

*Shylock*: No, not take interest, not as you would say directly interest.

Mark what Jacob did: When Laban and himself were compromised that all the eagling which were streaked and pied should fall as Jacob's hire, the ewes being rank in end of autumn turned to the rams, and when the work of generation was between these woolly breeders in the act, the skillful shepherd pilled me certain wands, and in the doing of the deed of kind, he stuck them up before the fulsome ewes, who then conceiving did in meaning time fall parti-colored lambs, and those were Jacob's. This was a way to thrive, and he was blest; and thrift is blessing, if men steal it not.

*Antonio:* This was a venture, sir, that Jacob served for, a thing not in his power to bring to pass, but swayed and fashioned by the hand of heaven. Was this inserted to make interest good? Or is your gold and silver ewes and rams?

Since Antonio does not understand or is not trying to understand Shylock's argument, Shylock simply gives up and resorts to humor, which is usually a gracious way out of an impossible situation: "I cannot tell, I make it breed as fast." Jewish humor has always proved itself to be an effective way of coping with those who have superior power to kick you and kill you. To paraphrase Freud, jokes are the revenge of the impotent. Behind the door of this humor could be Nuttall's observation that "Venice was the single, most spectacular example of the power of wealth to beget wealth, and its miraculous setting in the sea is emblematic of that power." Nuttall also quotes the historian Brian Pullman who wrote that "'Jews were deemed to be there [Venice in the 16th-century] for the purpose of saving Christians from committing the sin of usurious lending;' and again, 'The Venetians had consistently combined the attitude of ritual contempt for the Jews with a shrewd and balanced appreciation of their economic utility.' He quotes the diarist, Marino Santo: 'Jews are even more necessary than bakers to a city, and especially to this one, for the sake of the general welfare.'" [pp. 121 and 129, 1983]

In this context, what is the difference, as Shylock argues, between Jacob's managing the sexual generation of lambs and the generation

of “use” by money. He compares sexual generation with financial generation. Ewes and rams are the same as monetary principal, and their offspring are the interest. Antonio tries to argue that animals are different from money. But Shylock was not saying that money is generative; that it has a creative power like animals. Nor was he saying that money begets money, but that metal (gold and silver) are precisely similar to the “scientific” manipulation of ewes and rams. Antonio argues that it was nothing that Jacob was responsible for directing anyway since the entire development was directed by God.

The sum and substance of the argument appears to be that Shylock thinks Jacob responsible for the actual method of generation just as he, Shylock, is the mind behind the system of lending capital while Antonio considers the use of the biblical narrative to be disanalogous since God is responsible for whatever happens to Jacob. The disagreement is not only about the idea of lending money at interest, but also about one’s approach to biblical interpretation itself. Shakespeare may have penetrated a difference between Jewish and Christian perspectives on the Bible. In Judaism there is more emphasis on human incentive and motivation, based on the idea of free will, while in Christianity there is a greater tendency to see divine intervention in events. Although this “dialogue” appears to be going nowhere, we should remember that Shylock also expresses his willingness to take no interest at all (1.3.136-139, 164).

We might also think about the argument this way. Through the decades, literary critics have put too much emphasis on the sheep and not enough on the shepherds the relationship between Jacob and Laban. There was no love lost between these two relatives. Each manipulated and tried to outwit the other. Rather than treating each other as human beings, they were objects to be mutually exploited: Jacob by Laban for his labor, and Laban by Jacob for his daughter Rachel. In fact, Shylock does not even refer to Laban’s perfidious act of removing all “the streaked and spotted he-goats and all the speckled and spotted she-goats every one that had white on it and all the dark-colored sheep....” (Gen 30.35) The double-dealing turns out to be reciprocal.

You scratch or knife my back; I'll scratch or knife yours.

So Shylock and Antonio are pitted against each other in this adversarial dialogue, "united and divided by the scripture they revere...." (Harley Granville-Barker in Scott 1987, p. 232). They are fastened to each other in reciprocity of both affinity and alienation. This may be why Portia says, in the trial scene: "Which is the merchant here, and which the Jew?" The "Jewish gabardine" Shylock is wearing sets them apart, but that is only a material difference. Since the clothing does distinguish them, Portia may be asking something altogether different.

Returning to the Bible, is it possible that Jacob and Laban, as the biblical characters, actually symbolize Shylock and Antonio as doubles of each other in their mutual hostility and willingness to manipulate each other Shylock as Jacob, Antonio as Laban? If so, consider that Laban is himself a famous manipulator of laws and customs for his own advantage. With the goats and sheep, he does his best to outsmart Jacob by a device intended to fix the genetic lottery in his favor. But Jacob's method turns out to be better, and his knowledge of what at least is a biblical idea of arboreal "genetics" is superior to Laban's. He and Jacob are pitted against each other in the context of legalism, and Laban meets his match, just as Shylock meets his match in the disguised Portia, known as Balthazar an Old Testament name for Daniel. [Appendix 2] Her cunning legalism, instead of mercy, triumphs over Shylock's legalism. It is only the law that ultimately works in the ordering of social relationships. Even love has to negotiate through the mediation of justice.

Shylock and Antonio are also pitted against each other in their competitive claims of interpreting the shared Scripture. But they have completely different perspectives on the holiness and meaning of the text. In the correctness of interpretation there is also a claim to rightful possession. But there is also the possibility that Antonio does not really know how to interpret a biblical text. After all, by his own admission he is a "want-wit" who has "much ado to know" himself. (1.1.6) If he lacks knowledge of his own being, this could extend to a lack of

clarity about many other ideas and issues. W. H. Auden's interpretation of Antonio's sadness has found a generally positive reception; namely, the consequence of his repressed homosexual desires for Bassanio. But the answer appears to stare us in the face, lodged in the same passage as his confession of sadness: a failure to know himself in the spirit of Apollo's adage: "Know thyself" or Shakespeare's adage: "To thine own self be true...."

Beyond all these interpretations is the possibility that in their dialectic with each other through the biblical medium a totally original facet of the play there is the deeper idea that Christianity is really an expression of Judaism, which could also be embedded in Portia's question, "which is the merchant here, and which the Jew? We may also see this inextricable interdependence in several ambiguities.

First, Shylock says that he will not eat with Christians, but then he does. The ritual of dining together may indicate that there is a fellowship of fundamentally shared values that could be expressed between Jews and Christians, but a fellowship that has become antagonistic through centuries of human shortcomings. Breaking bread together may be possible because of shared values, but too many obstacles have evolved during centuries of misconceptions.

Secondly, Shylock refers to Jesus as the "Nazirite" instead of the "Nazarene." Most critics see this as an error by Shakespeare. But Nazirites were a people who lived during the period of the Hebrew Bible, admired by the prophet Jeremiah, devoted to principles similar to those of Jeremiah and of Jesus (the Nazarene). In fact, many biblical scholars believe that John the Baptist was a Nazirite. Perhaps Shakespeare wanted to convey the idea that Judaism and Christianity share important ideas stemming from both the Nazirite of the Hebrew Bible and the Nazarene of the New Testament. But since the time of Nazirite and Nazarene, the sharing has turned into mutual contempt, witnessed by the contentious dialogues between Shylock and Antonio. The pure ideals have become corrupted, as usual, through human behavior. The relationship between Leviticus 19 and Matthew 5 is contaminated by

human miscreance.

And thirdly, even references to the New Testament by a Jew and references to the Old Testament by a Christian indicate the intimate relationship between the two traditions. Again, behold how something beautiful in its potential has been transformed by human beings into a source of ugly conflict.

### **Many a Slave**

The issue of slavery is also an inventive focus by Shakespeare in the unfolding conflicts between Shylock and the Christian community. Confident that justice will be done in the courtroom, Shylock says:

“What judgment shall I dread, doing no wrong?  
 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....” (4.1.90ff)

According to David Brion Davis, “no protest against the traditional theory [of slavery] emerged from the great 17th-century authorities on law, or from such philosophers and men-of-letters as Descartes, Malebranche, Spinoza, Pascal, Bayle or Fontenelle.” (Quoted in Gross 1992, p. 86)

In Shylock’s speech on slavery, as in others, Shakespeare humanizes a character who could easily have been the stereotypical Jew satirized by Christopher Marlowe; in fact, Barabas the Jew purchased the slave

Ithamore. In Elizabethan England, slavery was considered an entirely normal institution.

Shylock, however, is emphasizing that he's not the only one who takes advantage of other human beings. The right to human ownership goes unanswered by the Christians. Their silence is eloquent. But why did they not speak up? Perhaps Shylock's auditors are daunted by a new awareness, or the emergence of a suppressed incongruity between reality and values. The emphasis is on the purchase the severe fact that human beings are bought and sold, transformed into commodities. In this Venetian word, everything is a commodity. Does it refer also to the English world? The slave trade from Africa to the New World began in England two years before Shakespeare was born.

Shylock (and Shakespeare?) is saying *No* to a world in which human beings are acquired as one would buy a lump of meat at the butcher shop. What is the difference between a lump of meat and a pound of flesh? The Christians do not reply. But their response of silence is a tacit echo of those words from the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the poor....the persecuted. In Luke 4, Jesus is sent to heal the broken-hearted and to liberate the enslaved.

The devil may cite Scripture, but do these Christians actually read Scripture and if they read it, do they heed its words? If they did, they would liberate their slaves and not treat others as commodities. Shylock must make them uncomfortable.

Of course, both sides are virtually indistinguishable in their respective behavior. Shylock is wrong, but he is part of a larger wrong. Shylock is hardly a Hebrew prophet or an ideal Jew. We have bad Christians and a bad Jew. Bad Christians do not make Christianity wrong, nor does a bad Jew make Judaism wrong.

Still, Shakespeare does give us clear indications that Shylock's commitment to Jewish practice is genuine. He observes the Sabbath, attends the synagogue, tries to keep the dietary laws, he is loyal to his heritage and people, he recoils from masques which are probably



associated with the Monday after Easter (known as “Black Monday”). We learn the origin of this name from the following passage:

“...on the 14 of April [1360] and the morrow after Easter-day, K[ing] Edwarde [III] with his hoast lay before the cittie of Paris; which day was full darke of mist and haile, and so bitter cold, that many men died on their horses backs with the cold. Wherefore unto this day it hath beene called the *Blacke Monday*.” (In Furness 1965, p. 89)

Masques and “varnished faces” would be a violation of the second commandment against making graven images, especially in association with Easter a time that was particularly ominous for Jews in the Middle Ages and later. Since it was related, in the Christian mind, to the charge against Jews of deicide, it was a hazardous time for Jews to be out for a stroll. Commentators seem to emphasize the idea that Shylock did not like music (“the vile squealing of the wry-necked fife”), but their focus is misplaced. The music was probably associated in Shylock’s mind with the rabbinic statute against the use of musical instruments as a way of memorializing the destroyed Temple in Jerusalem. In spite of Christian oppression, Shylock appears to have been steadfast in his fealty to Judaism.

In this spirit, Yaffe believes that Shakespeare deliberately set out to “correct what he sees as the theologically unwarranted and politically deleterious abuse of Jews in the name of Christian teaching.” (1997, p. 47)

Yet another speech exemplifying Shylock’s humanization is the famous “Hath Not a Jew Eyes.” Am I not a human being just like you, Shylock says to those who taunt and ridicule him.

He has the courage to repudiate the Christians who want to stereotype and pigeonhole the outsider, expressed clearly by the Duke in speaking to Shylock: “Thou shalt see the difference of our spirits,” (4.1.368) showing the “us-them” mentality.

But any “not-us” outsider will make insiders uncomfortable because

the individual who is different immediately sets up a challenge to their common presumptions and comfortable perceptions. Moody believes that Shylock's behavior is "a direct consequence of the way the Christians abuse him." Goddard says that the Christians "project on him what they have dismissed from their own consciousness as too disturbing." (Scott 1987, pp. 31-32)

Shylock is not only, specifically, a Jew but, generally, an outsider, and all non-Christians are outsiders. But the Jew is the "perfect" outsider, the "archetypal other" in the English imagination since he was officially expelled in 1290 (unless he or she converted) until his return in December 1655 as a result of negotiations between Oliver Cromwell and Menasseh ben Israel, leader of the Amsterdam Jewish community.

More generally, perhaps, everyone is an outsider who does not share or who differs from the category of White Protestant "Englishness." This word "Englishness" is elusive. But if you have it, you know what it is and you know what it isn't. It is similar to the difficulty of defining "pornography," but you know it when you see it. And you certainly know that Shylock the Jew is "not one of us."

Neither is Othello the blackamoor.....

### **Outsiders and Insiders: *Othello* and Racism**

The word "black" is used many times in contrast to the word "fair" in *The Tragedy of Othello*. In a novel by Giraldi Cinthio, published in Venice in 1565, the opening line is, "There once was a Moor in Venice...." Perhaps Shakespeare recalled his earlier play, *The Merchant of Venice*, when writing *Othello*.

Othello is a hero with dark skin manipulated by Iago, a villain with light skin. Othello is black without and white within. Iago is white without and black within. Perhaps his sources gave Shakespeare the opportunity to explore the stereotypes of a man with black skin once again an outsider in Venice, once again different from the WEPs (White English Protestants).

Only Desdemona can say, "I saw Othello's visage in his mind" (not in his skin). But we are constantly reminded by Brabantio, Iago, Roderigo, and Emilia of the color of Othello's skin. Othello himself is self-conscious about the difference of color.

Let's look at some examples:

\* Iago says to Brabantio: "...an old black lamb is tugging your white ewe..."

\* Iago says again to Brabantio: "...you'll have your daughter cover'd with a Barbary horse..."

\* And again: "...you'll have coursers [charging horses] for cousins and gennets [black

Spanish horses] for germans [near relatives]...."

\* Yet again: "...your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs." [the image of an animal with two backs, one white and the other black.]

\* Roderigo refers to Othello as "thick lips."

\* Brabantio wants his daughter to marry one of the "wealthy curled darlings of our nation."

This refers to the young white men who pay special attention to their hair styles.

\* Emilia refers to Desdemona's marriage as a "most filthy bargain."

\* Brabantio says to Othello: "O thou foul thief, where hast thou stow'd my daughter?

Damn'd as thou art, thou hast enchanted her." Othello must be a sorcerer. How else could a white woman love a black man?

\* Again Brabantio says: Desdemona's judgment errs against all rules of nature...." It is unnatural to love a black man.

\* To the Duke, Brabantio says that his daughter is "abus'd, stol'n from me, and corrupted by spells and medicines bought of mountebanks, for nature so prepost'rously to err..." Again, an interracial marriage is unnatural, opposing nature to an absurd degree.

\* Brabantio refers to Othello's "sooty bosom."

\* When talking to Cassio, Iago refers to "black Othello."

\* And Othello himself says: "I am black and have not those soft parts of conversation that chamberers have...."

\* Again, Othello refers to Desdemona: "Her name...is now begrim'd and black as mine own face."

\* Iago tries to make Othello jealous by saying that Desdemona would probably have preferred someone of her own color: "Ay, there's the point [that nature errs from itself]." This ambiguous remark is said by Othello but interpreted immediately by Iago to mean that it is much more natural for matches to be of the same "clime, complexion, and degree, whereto we see in all things nature tends."

\* Sounding almost liberal, the Duke says to Brabantio: "Noble signior, if virtue no delighted beauty lack, your son-in-law is far more fair than black."

The language of the play, in its entirety, is a language of feral hatred.

One of the unremitting ways that the pervasive hatred of this play is expressed is through racism. Othello is a black man in a white world; Shylock is a Jew in a Christian world.

Both Othello and Shylock are strangers in the English world, both are Semites in a Christian world. The outsider is estranged because he is the only one who calls into question the comfortable verities of the insiders, simply by being different from the others.

Shylock in particular makes the insiders reflect on their own values and beliefs. Blackburn, in a passage from his book *Think*, having nothing and everything to do with Shakespeare, still sheds a radiant light on "forced" reflection:

"Since there is no telling in advance where it may lead, reflection can be seen as dangerous. There are always thoughts that stand opposed to it. Many people are discomfited, or even outraged, by philosophical questions. Some are fearful that their ideas may not stand up as well as they would like if they start to think about them. Others may want to stand upon the 'politics of identity,' or in other words the kind of identification with a particular tradition, or group, or national or ethnic identity that invites them to turn their back on outsiders who

question the ways of the group. They will shrug off criticism: their values are 'incommensurable' with the values of outsiders. They are to be understood only by brothers and sisters within the circle. People like to retreat to within a thick, comfortable, traditional set of folkways, and not to worry too much about their structure, or their origins, or even the criticisms that they may deserve. Reflection opens the avenue to criticism, and the folkways may not like criticism. In this way, ideologies become closed circles, primed to feel outraged by the questioning mind." The cozy club of Belmont is not accustomed to having their suppositions challenged. (1995, pp. 11-12)

In both plays, Shakespeare is dealing primarily with hatred of the stranger, with a discomfiting sense of feeling alienated from the alien. *The Merchant of Venice*, in particular, makes the insider feel alienated because the alien asks too many questions. Shylock asks more questions than anyone else in the play:

*"What should I say to you? Should I not say 'hath a dog money? Is it possible a cur can lend three thousand ducats?'"*

*"...and for these courtesies I'll lend you thus much moneys?"*

*"...what should I gain by the exaction of the forfeiture?"*

*"Who bids thee call?"*

*"But wherefore should I go?"*

*"What, are there masques?"*

*"What says that fool of Hagar's offspring, ha?"*

*"Hath not a Jew eyes...."*

*"No news of them?"*

*"What, what, what? Ill luck, ill luck?"*

*"Is it answered? What if my house be troubled with a rat and I be pleased to give ten thousand ducats to have it baned? What, are you answered yet?"*

*"Hates any man the thing he would not kill?"*

*"What, wouldst thou have a serpent sting thee twice?"*

*"What judgment should I dread, doing no wrong?"*

*"I stand for judgment. Answer: Shall I have it?"*

*"On what compulsion must I?"*

*"So says the bond; doth it not, noble judge?"*

*"Is it so nominated in the bond?"*

*"Is that the law?"*

*"Shall I not have barely my principal?"*

Perhaps Shakespeare saw the frequency of questioning in the Hebrew Bible (*"Am I my brother's keeper?" "Will not the Judge of all the earth do justly?"*) as a Jewish trait, reflecting what Leo Baeck once said: "It is an old saying: Ask a Jew a question, and he answers with a question." More importantly, the very frequency of questions may indicate a behavior of the Jewish outsider radically different from the nature of conversation by insiders who are basically comfortable with all their static answers. Questions can be nettlesome.

Returning to *Othello*, Charles Lamb wrote in an 1811 essay: "[Everyone seeing the play must] find something extremely revolting in the courtship and wedded caresses of Othello and Desdemona." Lamb sounds just like Brabantio!

Samuel Taylor Coleridge believed it was "monstrous to conceive this beautiful Venetian girl falling in love with a veritable negro." Another Brabantio! Or, as a fellow southerner once said: "You see what can happen when you start inviting them to dinner!"

### **Racism in Other Plays**

#### *Troilus and Cressida*

Troilus tells Pandarus how beautiful Cressida is, and Pandarus replies: "But what care I? I care not and she were a blackamoor, 'tis all one to me." (1.1.78)

#### *Titus Andronicus*

Aaron the Moor is happy to "have his soul black like his face."  
(3.1.212)

#### *The Merchant of Venice*

The Moor, known as the Prince of Morocco, is also black in the white world of Belmont.

When Portia hears that he has arrived, she says: "If he have the condition [disposition] of a saint, and the complexion of a devil, I had rather he should shrive me than wive me." (1.2.130) Devils in Shakespeare's day were represented as being black. The expression "shrive me" means: Hear my confession and grant me absolution.

The Prince says to Portia: "Mislike me not for my complexion." (2.1.1)

But after he leaves, Portia says: "A gentle riddance. Draw the curtains, go. Let all of his complexion choose me so." That is, let all dark-skinned people choose a rotting skull. Morocco "explains" his dark complexion as "the shadowed livery of the burnish'd sun to whom I am a neighbour, and near bred," which parallels another statement by Shylock: "...let us make incision for your love, to prove whose blood is reddest, his or mine." (2.1.4-7) And this statement, too, is starkly similar to what Shylock reflects about himself as an outsider: "If you prick us, do we not bleed?"

Jessica says to Lorenzo: "...he [Launcelot] tells me flatly there's no mercy for me in heaven, because I am a Jew's daughter: and he says you are no good member of the commonwealth, for in converting Jews to Christians, you raise the price of pork."

Lorenzo: "I shall answer that better to the commonwealth than you can the getting up of the negro's belly: the Moor is with child by you, Launcelot!"

Launcelot: "It is much that the Moor should be more than reason: but if she be less than an honest woman, she is indeed more than I took her for." (3.5.29f)

This ostensibly light banter seems to mean that it is not reasonable for the black woman to be pregnant because she is a virgin; "more [with a play on the word Moor] than reason;" that is, it is larger (like the pregnant woman) than is reasonable. However, the Auden edition states

that "this passage has not been explained."

There are parallels between *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Tragedy of Othello*. Othello is called "The Moor of Venice." The earliest publication of *The Merchant of Venice* is subtitled "The Jew of Venice" the only two plays whose titles refer to race and religion, as well as the same city. Both plays depict similar societies, one of racial bigotry, the other of religious bigotry. In both, there is a strong sense of community: members of the society who are bound together through (a) joint commercial enterprises and (b) through being so homogeneous that they border on a wearisome sameness. They share the same values, they manifest the same behaviors; they are white, Protestant, and very Venetian (a.k.a. English). Both Shylock and Othello, as resident aliens, are outsiders, keenly and painfully aware that they are circumscribed by their society. As members of two different minorities, they are both diminished as human beings by the narrowness, intolerance, materialism, xenophobia, and insularity of the "citizens."

Both Moors and Jews are referred to as "the devil," a commonplace symbol associated with the outsider. Portia refers to Morocco as the devil (1.2.130), and Shylock is transformed into the devil many times throughout the play. Unlike the history of this Jewish archetype, however, Shylock's association with diabolism is frequently put into an economic context. With this connotation, it becomes legitimate for the insiders to use virtually any method to exorcise such a creature.

Being an outsider, alien, stranger, foreigner, the Jew was also the creature of Satan. Medieval Europe saw the Jew as an ally of the devil, a diabolical agent doing his work for him on earth a notion first put forward in the New Testament. In John 8.44, Jesus says to the Jews: "You are of your father the devil...." The Book of Revelation 2.9 and 3.9 refers to the Jewish house of worship as the "synagogue of Satan." We have already referred to John Chrysostom of Antioch, who wrote that "the synagogues of the Jews are the homes of idolatry and devils even though they have no images in them." He also said: "... Jews do not worship God but devils, so that all their feasts are unclean," and



further: "They are become worse than wild beasts, and for no reason at all, with their own hands they murder their own offspring to worship the avenging devils who are the foes of our life." In Christianity, therefore, manifold writings and myths couple Jews and the devil, put succinctly, if ungrammatically, by Launcelot Gobbo: "...certainly the Jew is the very devil incarnation." (2.2.26) On seeing Shylock approaching, Solanio remarks to Salerio: "Let me say 'amen' betimes, lest the devil cross my prayer, for here he comes in the likeness of a Jew." Mark Van Doren wrote: "He [Shylock] is a man thrust into a world bound not to endure him," and one reason is that the devil is simply unendurable.

The casket symbolism could relate to making judgments on the surface just as the Venetians do of Othello because of his skin color. The labeling syndrome of religious and racial bigotry is also frequent in both plays. The word "Jew" occurs 57 times in *The Merchant of Venice*, and the word "Moor" occurs 62 times in *The Tragedy of Othello*. But both words are used as meaning "non-Christian" any non-believer (as Launcelot uses the word "pagan" when referring to Shylock).

And yet, through all the insults and epithets being called old carrion, Jew dog, inhuman wretch, fiend, wolfish, bloody, starved and ravenous, cruel devil, currish Jew, villain with a smiling cheek, goodly apple rotten at the heart, even when "all the boys in Venice follow him, crying his stones, his daughter, his ducats" (2.8.23f), despite all the expressions of personal demonization -- Shylock maintains a self-control beyond comprehension, even when being tormented by the Jew-baiting of street urchins. We do see that Shylock can hate and hurt as any human despite being stripped of his name, his dignity, his humanity. But still he holds on to an admirable degree of reticence until.... Until when?

## **6. Loss upon Loss**

When does Shylock harden his position and decide inflexibly to take the knife to Antonio? When does he cross the Rubicon, becoming irrevocably obdurate in his wrathful commitment to physical violence?

## **I Never Felt it till Now**

Is there one particular moment when Shylock turns into a monster of rage and revenge?

Yes, when he discovers that Jessica has deceived him. He leaves his keys with her to lock and secure the house (a symbol of his trust in her). Later he discovers that she has done just the opposite. She moves from open trust to slippery betrayal, conspiring with Lorenzo's friends and being used by them to deceive her father so she could escape from his house instead of protecting it with the money bags of his prescient dream and her heedless defection from Judaism.

In the entire play, Shylock breaks only at this tragic moment: When he learns that his daughter has robbed him, run away to marry a Christian, and forsaken her heritage the legacy that he has tenaciously upheld at the risk of his dignity and his life. Treason...Stratagems.... Spoils.

In that desperate moment he becomes the embodiment of his "sacred nation's" vengeance for centuries of dehumanization, goading him to better the instruction. But William Hazlitt's comments, written in 1817, (125 years before the Holocaust) deserve to be quoted more fully:

"...Jewish revenge is at least as good as Christian injuries. Shylock is a *good hater* ; 'a man no less sinned against than sinning' [King Lear 3.2.60]. If he carries his revenge too far, yet he has strong grounds for 'the lodged hate he bears Antonio,' which he explains with equal force of eloquence and reason. He seems the depositary of the vengeance of his race; and though the long habit of brooding over daily insults and injuries had crusted over his temper with inveterate misanthropy, and hardened him against the contempt of mankind, this adds but little to the triumphant pretensions of his enemies. There is a strong, quick, and deep sense of justice mixed up with the gall and bitterness of his resentment. The constant apprehension of being burnt alive, plundered, banished, reviled, and trampled on might be supposed to sour the most forbearing nature, and to take something from that 'milk of human kindness' with which his persecutors contemplated his indignities. The desire of revenge is almost inseparable from the sense of wrong; and we can hardly help sympathizing with the proud spirit hid beneath his Jewish gaberdine, stung to madness by repeated undeserved provocations,

and labouring to throw off the load of obloquy and oppression heaped upon him and all his tribe by one desperate act of lawful revenge, till the ferociousness of the means by which he is to execute his purpose, and the pertinacity with which he adheres to it, turn us against him; but even at last, when disappointed of the sanguinary revenge with which he had glutted his hopes, and exposed to beggary and contempt by the letter of the law on which he had insisted with so little remorse, we pity him, and think him hardly dealt with by his judges. In all his answers and retorts upon his adversaries he has the best, not only of the argument, but of the question, reasoning on their own principles and practice. They are so far from allowing any measure of equal dealing, of common justice or humanity between themselves and the Jew, that even when they come to ask a favour of him, and Shylock reminds them [of their treatment of him], Antonio, his old enemy, instead of any acknowledgment of the shrewdness and justice of the remonstrance, which would have been preposterous in a respectable Catholic merchant in those times, threatens him with a repetition of the same treatment. After this, the appeal to the Jew's mercy, as if there were any common principle of right and wrong between them, is the rankest hypocrisy or the blindest prejudice." (Quoted in Furness 1965, p. 427)

Agreeing with Hazlitt, Harold Goddard emphasizes the intuitive accuracy of Antonio's remarks about Shylock's intensity:

"Antonio recognizes the futility of opposing Shylock's passion with reason. You might as well argue with a wolf, he says, tell the tide not to come in, or command the pines not to sway in the wind. The metaphors reveal his intuition that what he is dealing with is no ordinary human feeling within Shylock but elemental forces from without that have swept in and taken possession of him....It is elemental in character because it comes out of something vaster than the individual wrongs Shylock has suffered: the injustice suffered by his ancestors over the generations." (1951, p. 104-105)

Shylock *is* the consequence of the Christian hatred of Jews. He is wearing his tribe's badge of sufferance. And what is the recompense for that sufferance? Not money, but the right to dignity as a human being. Slowly but surely, he is robbed of his humanity, climaxed by the treachery of his daughter who forsakes the centuries that her people have struggled and sacrificed everything, life itself, to hold on to their faith and legacy. Shylock's Jewish future is killed by Jessica's apostasy. For Shylock and his late wife Leah, Jessica's womb will not be the home of Jewish children, and therefore, for them, there is no Jewish

future. What his people have martyred themselves to keep alive, she has killed in one irresponsible evening. It was not just goodbye to Shylock, but goodbye to the Jewish heritage. His forebears lived in him; they died in her.

How well Shylock knows the sufferance of his nation, a cankerous wound that had been festering for centuries, not just in one Jew's lifetime, a palpable tragedy of unceasing opprobrium which he never felt, in its deepest dimensions, "until now" *as a father bereft and betrayed*. And now, because of this profoundly intimate duplicity, he takes into his very marrow, into the deepest core of his being, the Jewish sufferance of the ages. His personal life becomes subjectively one with the historical life of his despised and ravaged people. His connection to Jewish history has been somewhat dispassionate, but now he stands in to the most acutely personal relationship to that history. The history is turned inward, and Shylock is transformed.

### **England *Judenrein***

When *The Merchant of Venice* was produced, there were only 80 to 100 crypto-Jews living in England, having all but disappeared approximately three centuries before. Then the Crusades legitimized the relentless dehumanization, persecution, and murder of Jews, also fostering an assortment of grotesque myths that grew up during that dark period. The most common and comprehensive was that of Jews as enemies of God, Christianity, and humanity. The legend of the Wandering Jew also developed in medieval Christian folklore, telling of a Jewish cobbler who refused to give Jesus a moment of rest by the wall of his house on the way to the Crucifixion. That rejection led to the curse of eternal wandering until Jesus returns to earth.

The charge of ritual murder and well-poisoning also germinated throughout Europe. As we have seen, the latter was repeated by the prioress in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

These myths and others had their perilous consequences. Jews were compelled to wear pointed hats and yellow badges throughout Europe,

making them always identifiable and therefore vulnerable. Ghettos became a common feature, the first one emerging in the city of Shylock and Antonio. The first total expulsion of a Jewish community took place in England at the end of the thirteenth century. In their absence, Jews became as mythical as the devil.

Two specific tragedies took place in England in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, both having to do with the false charge of libels: the libel of blood and the libel of desecrating the host.

### **A. The Blood Libel Charge**

1144 was the year of the first recorded case of "Blood Libel" against the Jews of Norwich; that is, the charge of murdering a Christian child by crucifixion to use his blood for seasoning the Passover Matzah.

[Appendix 4] The "reasoning" behind the argument was that ever since the Jews killed Jesus, they have thirsted for Christian blood.

A first-hand account of a similar libel in Blois, a town in France, was written by Ephraim ben Jacob, a German Jew. Here are excerpts of this account:

"In the year 4931 (1171), evil appeared in France, too, and great destruction in the city of Blois, in which at that time there lived about 40 Jews. It happened on that evil day, Thursday, toward evening, that the terror came upon us. A Jew [Isaac bar Eleazar] rode up to water his horse; a common soldier... was also there watering the horse of his master. The Jew bore on his chest an untanned hide, but one of the corners had become loose and was sticking out of his coat. When, in the gloom, the soldier's horse saw the white side of the hide, it was frightened and sprang back, and it not be brought to water.

"The Christian servant hastened back to his master and said: 'Hear, my lord, what a certain Jew did. As I rode behind him toward the river in order to give your horses a drink, I saw him throw a little Christian child, whom the Jews have killed, into the water....he [the master] hated a certain Jewess, influential in the city....[he told Theobald, ruler of the city who] became enraged and had all the Jews of Blois seized and thrown into prison.... The ruler was revolving in his mind all sorts of plans to condemn the Jews....they were taken and put into a wooden house around which were placed thorn bushes and faggots. As they were led forth they were told: 'Save your lives. Leave your religion and turn to us.' They mistreated them, beat them, and tortured

them, hoping that they would exchange their glorious religion for something worthless, but they refused....they then took...the pious Rabbi Yehiel, son of Rabbi David Ha-Kohen and the just Rabbi Uekutiel ha-Kohen, son of Rabbi Judah, and tied them to a single stake in the house where they were burned....The fire spread to the cords on their hands so that they snapped. [They threw] all 31 into the fire....A settlement was made...to save the other Jews of that accursed ruler....O daughters of Israel, weep for the 31 souls that were burnt for the sanctification of the Name, and let your brothers, the entire house of Israel, bewail the burning."

Other charges were made of a similar nature in Gloucester (1168), Bury St. Edmunds (1181), Bristol (1183), and Winchester (1192).

In addition, severe "tallages" (taxes that had to be paid specifically by Jews) were extorted. In 1168, Henry II forced Jews to pay 5000 marks. In 1188 still another "Jewish tax" was levied against the Jews of London.

The murder of many London Jews took place in September 1189 after the coronation of Richard I. In Dunstable, Jews converted to Christianity because their only alternative was death. In Lynn, the entire Jewish community was massacred. The Jews of York killed themselves in 1190 instead of facing death from Christian mobs. These massacres were consistently linked to the burning of bonds of indebtedness to Jews. The Crown also suffered a loss of revenue, however, when the mobs took over and wiped out these debts. It was difficult for a dead Jew to pay Jewish taxes.

Consequently, Richard I established the "Ordinance of the Jewry" in 1194, by which all records were duplicated so that what was owed to the Crown, regardless of what was seized from Jews, would still have to be paid. As a result, the *Saccarium Judaeorum* (Exchequer of the Jews) was instituted to administer the ordinance along with the *Presbyter Judaeorum* the office which represented all Jewish matters in England.

The Bristol Tallage of about 62,000 marks was instituted in 1210, which virtually reduced England's Jews to penury. Then in 1222 the Council of Oxford enforced the legislation of the Fourth Lateran Council

(1215) of the Catholic Church requiring all Jews to wear a special badge. One of the purposes of Lateran was to define the Church's position on restriction and separation. Under Henry III, a "Parliament of Jews" was founded with six representatives from large communities and two from smaller ones. It convened in 1241 at Worcester for the purpose of apportioning more revenues for the Crown.

In 1232 a new synagogue in London was confiscated by the Crown, followed by additional ritual murder charges.

### **B. "Little St. Hugh"**

The climax came in 1255 with the second major tragedy: the infamous case of eight-year-old Hugh of Lincoln whose body was found in a well. As a result of the accusation of ritual

murder, 90 Jews from Lincoln were sent to the Tower of London; 18 out of the 90 were executed. The charge was the ritual murder of "Little" St. Hugh.

Decrees were issued in 1253 prohibiting Jews from living anywhere except in towns which already had established Jewish communities. During the Civil War of 1262, Jews were attacked. In London, 1500 were slaughtered; in 1279, 280 were executed.

Edward I came to the throne in 1272. By then Jews were in financial ruin because of relentless extortion. Although some financial opportunities were opened during Edward's reign, they were not allowed to enter the "Gild Merchant," making the opportunity meaningless. Finally on July 18, 1290 an edict was issued by the King banishing Jews from England by All Saint's Day, November 1, of that year, the first expulsion of the Middle Ages (later to be emulated by France and Spain), when thousands of Jews left for France and Belgium. The edict was distributed to the sheriffs of all the counties to implement the decree which happened to be issued on the same day as *Tishah B'Av* (the ninth of the Hebrew month of Av), which is the day in Jewish history commemorating the destruction of both Jerusalem Temples, the first in



586 BCE. and the second in 70 CE.

There is no written edict by Edward I of the expulsion in existence. However, at least two contemporary chroniclers confirm the event. The following was written by John of Oxnead:

"The Lord the King [Edward I] condemned all Jews of whatever sex or age living throughout England into perpetual exile without any hope of return. In truth, out of all that large number of Jews whose total number from young to old was reckoned to be 17,511, no one who would not be converted to the Christian faith, either by promise or allurements, remained beyond the fixed and decided day of departure."

Secondly, the following was written by an anonymous chronicler:

"About that time an irritatingly large number of Jews who lived in many different towns and strongholds, in view of what had happened in the past, were ordered, albeit in a faltering fashion, to leave England with their wives and children and with their goods and moveables at about the Feast of All Saints; this date had been imposed on them as a limit and they did not dare break this under threat of punishment." (Mundill, 1998, pp. 1-2.)

This is the Jewish story, possibly known to the popular mind in Shakespeare's time.

And this is what Shylock had to endure along with thousands of his people, always in life-threatening peril throughout Europe, but bravely preserving their faith in spite of relentless degradation. And now Jessica abandons not only her father but her people, not only her house but the household of Israel. Shylock knew the Jewish law: The religious identity of children is based on the identity of their mother.

Heinrich Heine, an apostate Jew like Jessica, went to synagogue on the Day of Atonement, "looking for the face of Shylock," and this is what he wrote: "I heard a voice with a ripple of tears that were never wept by eyes. It was a sob that could only come from a breast that held in it all the martyrdom which, for eighteen centuries, had been borne



by a whole tortured people. It was the death-rattle of a soul sinking down tired at heaven's gates. And I seemed to know the voice, and I felt that I had heard it long ago, when, in utter despair it moaned out, then as now. 'Jessica, my girl.'" (Furness 1965, p. 452)

### **Passion So Strange**

Salerio and Solanio, whose reports cannot be trusted because of their vicious abuse of Shylock, are the first ones to describe his singular behavior. They feel sorry for Antonio, one of their own, but ridicule Shylock because he is an alien, beyond the pale of their sympathy or understanding. Their camaraderie with the insider is defined by their contempt for the outsider, making his existence in their midst quite tenuous as well as tormenting. These two gossips talk about events that have rapidly transpired.

Solanio: "I never heard a passion so confus'd,  
So strange, outrageous, and so variable  
As the dog Jew did utter in the streets,--  
'My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter!  
Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats!  
Justice, the law, my ducats, and my daughter!  
A sealed bag, two sealed bags of ducats,  
Of double ducats, stol'n from me by my daughter!  
And jewels, two stones, two rich and precious stones,  
Stol'n by my daughter! Justice! find the girl,  
She hath the stones upon her, and the ducats.' (2.8.12f)

Even in reporting what he believes to have happened, Solanio must do so with derisive language. But Jessica only adds to her own perfidy by doing at Belmont precisely what Solanio does here in Venice reports that she is a witness to Shylock's implacability.

"When I was with him, I have heard him swear  
To Tubal and to Chus, his countrymen,  
That he would rather have Antonio's flesh

Than twenty times the value of the sum  
That he did owe him; and I know, my lord,  
If law, authority and power deny not,  
It will go hard with poor Antonio." (3.2.285f)

The New Cambridge editors (in Scott 1987, p. 248) wrote:

"We are tempted to put this speech into square brackets as one from the old play which Shakespeare inadvertently left undeleted in the manuscript...it jars upon a nerve which Shakespeare of all writers was generally most careful to avoid: that a daughter should thus volunteer evidence against her father is hideous...." Exactly! It is hideous. The comment is omitted from the 1996 Cambridge edition, perhaps because the editors finally realized that Jessica is a "wicked little thing." Perhaps it was just her way of trying to be admitted by the "insiders" of Belmont. These are her only words when everyone is together. Interestingly, when she joins the Belmontese, no one notices her; finally Gratiano says to Nerissa: "...cheer yond stranger...." (3.2.237). Converted to Christianity, she is but a "yond stranger" still.

Solanio's hearsay speech to Salerio at least indicates the intensity of Shylock's passion. "The apocalyptic Shylock" is emerging when we return to the Rialto and our gossiping couple (*italics within the dialogue are mine*). When Shylock enters this scene, he says nothing about Antonio's flesh until Solanio puts the idea into his mind, and also after callously abusing him.

Solanio: Let me say 'amen' betimes, lest the devil cross my prayer, for here he comes in the  
likeness of a Jew. How now Shylock! what news among the merchants?

Shylock: You knew, none so well, none so well as you, of my daughter's flight.

Salerio: That's certain, I (for my part) knew the tailor that made the wings she flew withal.

Solanio: And Shylock (for his own part) knew the bird was fledged, and

then it is the complexion of them all to leave the dam.

Shylock: She is damn'd for it.

Salerio: That's certain, if the devil may be her judge.

Shylock: My own *flesh and blood* to rebel!

Solanio: Out upon it old *carrion* ! rebels it at these years?

Shylock: I say my daughter is my *flesh and blood*.

Salerio: There is more difference between thy *flesh* and hers, than between jet and ivory, more between your *bloods*, than there is between red wine and Rhenish: but tell us, do you hear whether Antonio have had any loss at sea or no?

Shylock: There I have another bad match, a bankrupt, a prodigal, who dare scarce show his head on the Rialto, a beggar that was us'd to come so smug upon the mart: Let him look to his bond! he was wont to call me usurer, let him look to his bond!

Salerio: Why I am sure if he forfeit, thou wilt not take his *flesh*, what's that good for?

Shylock: To bait fish withal, if it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge; he hath disgraced me, and hundred me half a million, laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scored my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies, and what's his reason? I am a Jew. 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 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! The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.

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It is possible that Christian revenge refers to the charge of decide against the Jews found in the New Testament. Christians have been avenging the death of Jesus through Jewish blood for centuries. "Jews

have been slandered, beaten, and murdered by Christians for supposedly killing the son of God.” (Hertzberg 1998, p. 69) Shylock may also be referring here to “the ancient grudge.”

After this rancorous dialogue with the two gossips, Tubal, a fellow-Jew, comes to see Shylock whose first concern is Jessica. Shylock: How now, Tubal! What news from Genoa? hast thou found my daughter?

Tubal: I often came where I did hear of her, but cannot find her.

Shylock: Why, there, there, there! A diamond gone cost me two thousand ducats in Frankfort, The curse never fell upon our nation till now; I never felt it till now. Two thousand ducats in that and other precious, precious jewels. I would my daughter were dead at my foot and the jewels in her ear: would she were hears'd at my foot, and the ducats in her coffin: no news of them? why so! and I know not what's spent in the search: why thou loss upon loss! the thief gone with so much, and so much to find the thief, and no satisfaction, no revenge, nor no ill luck stirring but what lights o' my shoulders, no sighs but o' my breathing, no tears but o' my shedding.

Tubal: Yes, other men have ill luck too, - Antonio (as I heard in Genoa)

Shylock: What, what, what? ill luck, ill luck?

Tubal: hath an argosy cast away, coming from Tripolis.

Shylock: I thank God, I thank God! Is it true, is it true?

Tubal: I spoke with some of the sailors that escaped the wrack.

Shylock: I thank thee, good Tubal, good news, good news: ha, ha! heard in Genoa!

Tubal: Your daughter spent in Genoa, as I heard, one night, fourscore ducats.

Shylock: Thou stick'st a dagger in me,--I shall never see my gold again fourscore ducats at a sitting, four-score ducats!

Tubal: There came divers of Antonio's creditors in my company to Venice, that swear, he cannot choose but break.

Shylock: I am very glad of it,- I'll plague him, I'll torture him,- I am glad of it.

Tubal: One of them showed me a ring that he had of your daughter for a monkey.

Shylock: Out upon her! Thou torturest me, Tubal, it was my turquoise, I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor; I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys.

Tubal: But Antonio is certainly undone.

Shylock: Nay, that's true, that's very true, go Tubal, fee me an officer, bespeak him a fortnight before,--I will have the heart of him if he forfeit, for were he out of Venice I can make what merchandise I will: go Tubal, and meet me at our synagogue, go, good Tubal, at our synagogue, Tubal."

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Shylock is constantly being ridiculed by Salerio and Solanio, by Antonio and Gratiano: they demean his person, they denigrate his business, and they desecrate his religion. A magnet for their relentless maledictions, he feels surpassingly and cumulatively humiliated both as a person and as a member of the Jewish people. Why should he not succumb to enmity, even revenge and madness? We know, virtually from the beginning of the play, in the same monologue, that Shylock hates Antonio because "he is a Christian" (1.3.37) just as Antonio hates his "sacred nation." Two reciprocal hatreds, based on religion, saturated with the sludge of centuries.

### **Our Nation's Curse**

But the *coup de grace* finally comes with his daughter's treachery: (3.1) Salerio asks him if he heard what happened to Antonio, and Shylock says: "There I have another bad match referring, first, to Jessica, as if Antonio's fate would be a mere distraction from the heart of his agony.

To Tubal he makes this revealing statement: "The curse never fell upon our nation until now; I never felt it till now." He is a person apart who belongs to a people apart; now, for the first time, his people's portion through the centuries has pierced his own heart in the most personal,

intimate way imaginable, shaken him to his core. In fact Tubal has to remind Shylock of Antonio's misfortune, because he is obsessed with Jessica's renunciation of her father and her heritage.

Victor Hugo said: "When [Shylock] lost his own cause, he gained the cause of his people." Of course the curse fell upon his nation many times before the moment of betrayal, but that manifold curse is now uniquely, internally identified as his own. From that moment on he is frenzied and crazed -- no longer concerned about the money he lent and the interest, but only the penalty. It is time for retribution; the only repayment he can even imagine at this point is retaliatory. He has been kicked about, spat upon, and deceived too often. "So can I give no reason, nor I will not." There is no reason unless one can descend into the ebony depths of a human being's singular agony, lived all alone to find the reason. His aversion to Antonio parallels the aversion that people have to pigs or cats or bagpipes. (4.1.52f) The condition is beyond rationality. He senses inwardly, subjectively, and intensely that all the Antonios of history have made his people suffer immeasurably more than the suffering he will unleash on the object of his own vengeance.

When Shylock gains "the cause of his people," another subtlety enters the scene. Many critics have commented on why Shylock only speaks in prose the first major character to do so -- while others speak in both prose and poetry (except Antonio who speaks nothing but poetry). Many theories have been entertained, but since literary style is not the purpose of this book, we will not discuss these theories. However, Shylock does indeed speak a form of poetry in this critical statement:

"I would my daughter were dead at my  
feet, and the jewels in her ear.

Would she were hearsed at my foot, and the ducats in her coffin."

As a poet and biblical student, Shakespeare was familiar with the form of biblical poetry known as synonymous parallelism, the second line of a couplet repeating the same thought as the first line in different words. Here is only one of virtually countless examples from the Bible

this one, appropriately, from the Book of Job (3.13):

"Why did I not die at birth,  
Expire as I came forth from the womb?"

At this critical juncture in Shylock's life, when he takes on the cause and destiny of his fellow-Jews, he speaks in biblical poetry! In assuming this cause, he sees himself existentially involved in the history of his people. Perhaps he now sees himself as a kind of Job, protesting against the injustices that not only he suffers but his people suffer from the hands of the majority, protesting against the cruel inequities of life and the many expressions of dehumanization that infect his society.

When Bassanio asks him, "Do all men kill the things they do not love?" Shylock answers: "Hates any man the thing he would not kill?" (4.1.66-67) The answer may be an ironic response to the disparity between Christian beliefs and behavior. Certainly Christians must have detested Jews during the Crusades; why else would they have killed thousands on their way to the Holy Land? Why were they ejected from their homes and land and robbed of their subsistence during the reign of Edward I if not because non-Jews despised them? Was it rational to expel and confiscate and kill particularly if these ferocious deeds were done in the name of religion?

Nor is it rational that Shylock's "Jewish gabardine" should be soiled by the spit of the gentleman Antonio. Nor is it rational that Venetian Jews had to wear distinctive clothing and live in ghettos the first ghetto, in fact, ever created. Nor is it rational to permit Gratiano's vulgar outbursts in a court of law.

Notice Antonio's change of demeanor when he realizes it may be too late for him when Shylock demands a jailer to arrest him. "Hear me, yet, good Shylock." And Shylock responds: "You called me dog without cause. Well if so, watch out for my fangs." (3.3.4f) It's as if he were saying: "I wanted to be a human being, but you have demeaned me repeatedly with canine epithets, with kicking and with spit. You have

refused to accept me as a human being equal to your own humanity. It is not rational for a human being to be rejected as a human being and to be dehumanized. All right, then, but as a dog I do more than bark." And when Shylock leaves, Solanio is persistent in referring to him as a "cur." They simply cannot cease their own dehumanization of another person. Antonio even misinterprets his motives by thinking the only thing that has offended Shylock is that Antonio has caused interest rates to drop, thereby hurting Shylock's business. He just doesn't get it. He doesn't even realize the intensity of his humiliation of another human being. But Salerio and Solanio realize the motives and justification; they seem to understand the depths of Shylock's hurt and rage earlier when they saw how he behaved in response to his daughter's betrayal. Let's go back to that scene in 2.7:

We first learn about Shylock's reactions through the hearsay of Solanio and Salerio. They tell us that Bassanio and Gratiano sailed to Belmont, seemingly as a smokescreen to deceive Shylock who may have thought Jessica was on board with them. Shylock got the Duke to go with him to search the ship, but they came too late. As a decoy, they learned that Jessica and Lorenzo were seen together on a gondola. Then Solanio says that he never heard such raving, passionate outcries as Shylock's response "so strange, outrageous, and so variable as the Jew dog did utter in the streets." Then he quotes what he heard Shylock screaming. And street boys were following and taunting him. Solanio then is ominously prophetic:

"Let good Antonio look he keep his day  
Or he shall pay for this." (2.8.25f)

Seeing Shylock's disquieted demeanor, they sense the depth of his rage. But these two dullards cannot fathom the depth of his desolation. His nose has been rubbed in the dung of denigration too often.

But we can experience and feel Shylock's hurt, motivating him into a maniacal intensity of unbounded passion. He has been tormented and degraded over and over by Christians who profess Christian values, but continually objectify him with scornful epithets rather than by



name: Jew, Hebrew, carrion, Jew dog, cur, villain, enemy.

While the word Jew and related words are used 74 times, Shylock is addressed by his name only 17 times. Even when he and Antonio are in dialogue as seemingly two equals, Antonio refers to him as Jew, but Shylock addresses Antonio by his name. He has actually been spat upon and stereotyped (how can you be kind if you are a Jew?). His passion for revenge has been matched by the passion of their bigotry and cruelty, as if Shylock might have said: "If the Christian did grow kind, he must have turned Hebrew." Is this not enough? It should be.

But he is alone in this Christian world, and now his isolation is magnified beyond measure by the treasons, stratagems, and spoils of his only child. He trusted her to lock up the house when he went out to avoid the possibility of being robbed. It may also be that he wanted to avoid the "varnish'd faces" (2.5.28f) because it was a violation of the commandment against making images.

Instead of securing the house, Jessica robs him of his ducats and jewels. She apostatizes herself by forsaking her heritage and her people. Is this not enough? It should be, but there is still more to send a dagger into his heart. She steals the most cherished keepsake of his widowhood the ring his wife Leah gave him. Is this not enough? It should be, but she then traded for a monkey that ring whose value, based solely on affection and memory and loving companionship, was incalculable. It would seem, then, at this point in his distress that life itself might have become unbearable. What may make it bearable is the law and the bond and retribution as a possible form of reparation for all the agonizing grief that he has experienced. But it's not just the immediate insults and treacheries. It is cumulative; for many years, throughout his life he has represented the Jewish people with the badge of suffering, believing that Antonio "hates our sacred nation." He has been reviled because of his identity, he has been maligned as a human being because of his commitment to Judaism, he has always lived in this debasing world of anti-Semitism. He is almost accustomed to being called an animal although it has undoubtedly distorted his

perceptions and warped his attitudes towards other people. In spite of it all, he has remained loyal to his people. But now, with his daughter Jessica's perfidy, his disorientation reaches unprecedented dimensions. As if he were screaming internally:

*"Betrayed by my own flesh and blood? Well, then, let flesh and blood be the reparation for my pain and the torment I have known all my life because I am a Jew a Jew like the very Nazarene my tormenters revere. Let it be, come what may!"*

He has no one to counsel or console him: "No sighs but o' my breathing, no tears but o' my shedding." Tubal seems to have disappeared, and Shylock is left to his own resources --heartbroken, crushed; devastated but the emotional turmoil he's in overwhelms whatever resourcefulness he may still possess. Beneath his severe denunciations of Jessica, there is a mordant suffering because he has been betrayed and abandoned.

### **The Course of Law**

The trial scene then becomes a somewhat anti-climactic outcome which ultimately perverts the very mercy and compassion of Portia's famous speech by making Shylock bend to the floor, by forcing him to forsake his heritage, by robbing him of his livelihood and dignity. The trial scene, furthermore, is a bitter satire on a court of justice. Everything is blurred in this courtroom: judge and executioner, plaintiff and defendant, lawyer and layperson, justice and mercy.

Some critics see the trial as one between the Old Testament emphasis on justice and the New Testament emphasis on mercy with mercy ultimately manifesting its superiority over justice. There is nothing in the words or experiences of the characters to support this argument. One could easily argue either way (but with no concrete evidence), indicating once again the "inexhaustible complexity" of the play. Perhaps another view is expressed by Robert Browning: "All's love, yet all's law." Is either dispensable in real life?

Certainly, as Browning himself may have known considering his interest in Judaism as demonstrated by the poem, *Rabbi Ben Ezra* -- the Jewish position is that neither is separable from the other; justice (law) and mercy (love) are twin components of an indivisible ethic.

Thus we read in the rabbinic literature that God made several worlds before ours, but destroyed them all because God was pleased with none until our world was created. Even this world, however, would have no permanence if God had executed the original plan of ruling it according to the principle of justice alone. It was only when God saw that justice by itself would undermine the world that He associated mercy with justice and made them rule jointly (Silverman 1971, p. 35).

In the court we do learn that just laws are essential for the creditable and dependable functioning of the state. But given the weakness of human nature, we could not survive without mercy. The court represents the nature of humanity itself in terms of its ability and willingness to strike a balance between these two actually inseparable virtues.

In fact, the greater focus of the court scene seems to be that all humanity is on trial not just the merchant, not just the Jew. Everyone in the court is exposed to our moral scrutiny, and in our own process of inquest, we find ourselves, personally and introspectively, interrogating and assessing our own sense of values, and questioning where we stand on these issues of justice and mercy.

But "the Jew" is stripped of justice, even mercy, redress, family, fortune, and religion his occupation and subsistence all of which accompany the theft of his dignity as a human being by this Christian community. "Something of the villainy the Jew taught them the Christians will now execute...." (Harley Granville-Barker in Scott 1987, p. 238). Shylock is thrust into a world and out of a world that chooses not to endure him as a human being.

Is Shakespeare anti-Semitic? Of course not. He was a consummate

artist of character portrayal, of narrative, of the ugliness and beauty in human nature; he created many worlds with his incomparable power of negative capability, his own nature subdued like the dyer's hand. The world he portrays in *The Merchant of Venice*, as in *The Tragedy of Othello*, is a world of insiders and outsiders, the privileged and the marginal.

Perhaps he saw this keenly and painfully during the Lopez Trial when the Marrano Jewish community was unveiled as Christians on the outside, Jews on the inside. He may have thought of the casket story as a metaphor for these persecuted people who could not live their own religious lives freely and openly, but had to conform to the bigoted demands of the Christian community in which every other religious or ethnic group is a deviation from what is normal and right because it is not Christian.

Perhaps he realized that they exemplified a people who hazard all they have, trying to hold on to their heritage and stay alive. What an ironically cruel fate it is that the descendants of Jesus must live in this dreadful state of opprobrium, subject to the verbal and physical abuse of countless Antonios, Portias, and Gratianos. In addition to the Lopez Trial, Shakespeare may have been aroused by the ignominious treatment of Jews in Marlowe's play and motivated to offer corrections but not so radical that they could not be acceptable, or creditable or digestible. The playwright is appealing to many different kinds of theater-goers with a diversity of religious and cultural backgrounds. If he moves too far from where they may be intellectually and emotionally, too far from their stereotypical expectations by making Shylock a paragon of virtue, they won't be responsive and he will not have been effective in conveying the message embedded in the dramatic content. At the very least, the world he does portray is deeply, contagiously bigoted, burlesquing its own Christian values with indefensibly un-Christian behavior.

There is also a strong opinion, expressed by many critics, that this anti-Semitic world must be portrayed with a sensitive awareness of the

Holocaust, of how this nefarious ideology has brought us to the most catastrophic event in human history. The result is that most directors find it impossible to portray Shylock as a villain. Even though my own interpretation is sympathetic to Shylock as an unattractive victim, I think it is important for us to see the world of Shylock and Antonio as Shakespeare perceived it, as William Hazlitt in 1817 perceived it rather than in terms of a calamitous event that occurred over 300 years later. The play's the thing not events beyond the play influencing us in a radically different time and world. The events and attitudes revealed within the world that we observe on the stage are sufficient for understanding the shattering cruelty of prejudice, the hypocrisy of individuals who define themselves as "religious" because they believe their dogmas are superior to those of other individuals, giving them justification for verbal and physical abuse towards the ostracized outsider. Without referring to the Holocaust, or reacting to the play because of its ineffable horror, we can see quite plainly the jeopardy of "us-them" attitudes and the perilous consequences of such attitudes, especially when they are rationalized by religious rectitude and moral self-righteousness.

A.D. Moody put it this way: "I would suggest that [*The Merchant of Venice*] is 'about' the manner in which the Christians succeed in the world by not practicing their ideals of love and mercy; that it is about their exploitation of any assumed unworldliness to gain the worldly advantage over Shylock; and that, finally, it is about the essential likeness of Shylock and his judges, whose triumph is even more a matter of mercenary justice than his would have been. In this view the play does not celebrate the Christian virtues so much as expose their absence....their worldliness is shown to be of a kind which subverts their religion." (Scott 1987, pp. 300-301)

Shylock himself "begins to tremble for the fate of his daughter who has married among people who can sacrifice their wives to their friends, who can slight the vows they made, and he says to himself in an aside and not aloud: 'These be the Christian husbands! I have a daughter would any of the stock of Barabbas had been her husband rather than

a Christian!” (Heinrich Heine in Scott 1987, p. 201)

Shylock does not “better the instruction” of revenge. His Christian adversaries do so in transforming him from plaintiff at the beginning of the trial to defendant at the end, from a reviled man demanding the fulfillment of a legal document to a convicted criminal who must forsake his past and sacrifice his future. As Søren Kierkegaard would have said about Venice (a.k.a. England), it may be a world of Christendom, but not of Christianity.

It must be said, however, that Shylock’s constricted and diminished world is also quite un-Jewish. From the values of Judaism, he did not learn to seek revenge regardless of the hurt. He did not learn that to hate is to kill, or that killing is morally justifiable as a response to personal humiliation. The lesson is this: external affiliation can mean one thing, life-involving commitment quite another whether, by label, we are Jews or Christians.

Through the trial scene to its very end, a dark cloud is cast over the final act, obscuring all the attempts to be happy in Belmont. Shylock’s final remark fails to give us closure; on the contrary, it leaves a gaping wound. Shylock departs from the stage, but he doesn’t withdraw from our thoughts as we move from the Venetian courtroom to the enchantment of Belmont.

## ***7. When the Sun is Hid***

In Act Five the “muddy vesture of decay” deadens the “concord of sweet sounds.” Some critics consider the fifth act to be dispensable primarily because, they argue, nothing is left to resolve. There are directors who have even deleted the entire fifth act from their productions. After all, Portia has her man, and the man has won the redoubtable lady of Belmont. She can then make certain that Bassanio’s best friend does not lose a pound of flesh and his life. Jessica has successfully escaped the “hell” of her father’s house with a prodigious amount of her father’s wealth. Shylock is soundly humiliated and unequivocally vanquished in a kangaroo trial.

There is considerable action in the first four acts, but very little is left to be done except for the trivial and unnecessary episode of the rings which hardly deserves a complete and final act. But the “ring trick” cleverly serves the purpose of creating a theatrical bridge from Act Four to Act Five so that the playwright’s real objectives can be explored more fully.

If we focus on the disputatious and perilous relationship between Christian and Jew, then the final act is indispensable and eminently germane because of the Christian community’s unsuccessful and ineffective attempt to rectify what has now become unalterable; namely, the gratuitous punishment of Shylock and the distressingly cruel behavior of Christians whose ideals articulated are ideals violated. Their values were beautifully but hypocritically expressed by Portia in her lecture to Shylock on mercy and implied by the Duke in his plea to Shylock. Act Five, then, becomes another way and possibly the most critical way of viewing the first four acts in one. Shylock has a larger role than his 400 lines would indicate, and his countenance is greatly enlarged because of the act in which he never actually appears. The gnawing awareness of Shylock’s physical absence, which transforms the absence into a diaphanous presence, seems to be precisely what Shakespeare wanted to accomplish. Out of sight but never, never out of mind. Absence can speak, remind, and shame.

What is the point of this ingeniously artful technique? Perhaps it was to show his fellow -Christians their failure to live their own Christian values. Perhaps it was to encourage them to understand the suffering perpetrated for centuries on an entire people persecuted, hounded, expelled, reviled, mocked, scorned, cheated, demonized, robbed of life and dignity, livelihood and security, schooled in revulsion by Christians. Perhaps it was to ask them how they would respond to similar conditions. But, given the conditions of his own time, he had to do this subtly and delicately. The play asks the audience and the reader to suspend disbelief in a variety of situations, as most fiction does but, to reiterate, depicting a Jew, the devil incarnate, as the personification of magnanimity would have been stretching suspension too much for the

sixteenth century English audience.

How are the ostensibly “sweet sounds” of Christian principles subverted as the fifth act unfolds? Generally, through the sharp discrepancies between love professed and love practiced. What the Christian community professes is in the first through the fourth acts. What they actually practice is in the fifth act. When we perceive the contradictions between the two, our minds are transported back, especially to the trial scene. Act Five, then, becomes a disturbing echo of what precedes it. It is an act of discordant resonance in spite of Lorenzo’s musings on the “concord of sweet sounds.” Let us look at examples of this echo effect:

Lorenzo and Jessica are together under the romantic moonlit sky while reflecting on the harmonies of Pythagoras’ philosophy, which only takes us back jarringly to the disharmonies generated by Gratiano’s strident and uninformed utterances about the relationship between animals and Pythagoreanism in the trial scene, thus degrading Pythagorean philosophy just as he degrades Judaism through his anti-Jewish invectives against Shylock.

Lorenzo rhapsodizes, but at the same time refers to our bodies as muddy vestures of clay. Even in this romantic mood, we are reminded of carrion flesh, of the body that can be kicked, spat upon, and abused with violence.

When he says that harmony is impossible as long as “this muddy vesture of decay doth grossly close us in,” and “we cannot hear it,” this echoes the absence of harmony in the trial scene which immediately precedes this rhapsodizing.

As the act opens with the two lovers, they make us remember what immediately preceded it: Lorenzo and Jessica stole Shylock’s life savings and what was possibly the only thing that had sentimental value for him: his wife Leah’s ring. They even refer to their stealing in this sardonic dialogue by using the word “steal,” referring to both escape and theft. And Jessica uses the same word in wondering about Loren-



zo's fidelity.

And then a measure of cynicism is injected, rivaling that of Jaques. All the mythological lovers Lorenzo and Jessica mention are in discordant conflict with each other: Troilus and Cressida, Pyramus and Thisbe, Dido and Aeneas, Medea and Jason -- unhappy lovers all, just as there is discord between Jessica and Lorenzo themselves, between Portia and all her suitors, between Bassanio and Balthazar, between Gratiano and Balthazar's clerk.

\* Troilus, a prince of Troy, was a leader in the Trojan War. He and Cressida were lovers. But Cressida betrayed him in favor of the Greek Diomedes. The original story is found in Homer's *Iliad*.

\* Derived originally from Babylonian myth, Thisbe and Pyramus are in love, but they are forbidden by parents to see each other. They agree on a secret meeting place. Thisbe arrives first and sees a lion who has eaten a recent kill. She runs away in fear, leaving her scarf behind. The lion tears and bloodies the scarf. When Pyramus arrives and sees the bloodied scarf, he believes Thisbe has been eaten by the lion. He kills himself with his sword. Thisbe returns and, seeing Pyramus dead, she kills herself.

\* Dido is the daughter of Belus, king of Tyre. Sichaeus, her husband, was murdered by Pygmalion, Dido's brother. She went to Africa and became the queen of Carthage which she founded. Aeneas comes to Carthage on his way to Italy, and Dido fell in love with him. But he left for Italy, and after uttering a curse against the Trojans she killed herself with her sword.

\* Medea, a powerful sorceress, helps Jason acquire the Golden Fleece. Because she loved Jason, she helped to restore his father, Aeson, to youthfulness. But because Jason abandoned her, she killed their two children, Mermerus and Pheres.

Jessica mentions feeling uncomfortable with music, echoing her father's discomfort as well. "I am never merry when I hear sweet music."

It is the last line she speaks in the play. Lorenzo refers to one who dislikes music as filled with treasons, stratagems and spoils, which fills his own character since he encouraged Jessica to steal and to steal away. He calls her a shrew and says that he will forgive her anyway, which seems bizarre at the beginning of a marriage in a beautifully romantic setting.

The lovers stay up until dawn and feel uneasy about the time of day. Dawn is the grey between black and white, the neither/nor, when it's difficult to distinguish between heroes and villains, between Christians and Jews, between reality and appearance. Portia reflects that "this night methinks is but the daylight sick." "The sun is hid." The light she sees in the darkness of Belmont also reminds her of a "naughty world."

The conflicts among the lovers about the rings and different perspectives on what constitutes genuine fidelity in addition to a literal loyalty and a higher loyalty are filled with ambiguity. Portia insists on the *letter* of the vow, but Bassanio believes he has been faithful to the *spirit* of the vow, or the spiritual meaning of the vow.

Portia interrupts the bickering between Gratiano and Nerissa and says to Gratiano: "You were to blame; I must be plain with you, to part so slightly with your wife's first gift." (5.1.166f) echoing the first ring mentioned in the play: the ring that Leah gave to Shylock.

Portia and Nerissa continue to deceive their husbands by exploiting their ignorance, even to the point of saying that they will commit adultery. Evidently, infidelity is of little consequence when compared to the transgression of relinquishing the rings. But we also see Portia demanding a limit to generosity and, once again, being tightly literal.

When Antonio learns that his ships are safe, he says to Portia: "Sweet lady, you have given me life and living," linking him therefore to what Shylock says at the end of the fourth act: Taking away his livelihood is equivalent to taking away his life. As we noted earlier, life and livelihood are related in Ecclesiasticus 34.22: "He who takes away his neighbor's living kills him."

At the end of the play, Portia says: "I am sure you are not satisfied of these events at full." (5.1.295f) We're not. The play is unfinished, uncertain, unresolved as the actors depart and the stage darkens.

There are constant reminders of what we cannot unburden. Our minds cannot throw off Shylock, his presence and his destiny. Could it be that Shylock is still present throughout the fifth act even though absent just as the Jewish people had been expelled from England in 1290 but were still present in the Christian mind for a variety of reasons?

At the end we may say, as Antonio said at the beginning: "In sooth, I know not why I am so sad. It wearies me."

And what about Antonio? Everyone at the end pairs off Gratiano with Nerissa, Bassanio with Portia, Lorenzo with Jessica (each pair, incidentally, coupled with a sordid story about three different rings) and what about Antonio, the odd-man-out? Is he left standing there all alone? Does he just walk away? Has he been relegated to an emotionally solitary confinement? What is not speculative is that he does indeed stand all alone, realizing his own prophetic reflection much earlier: "I hold the world but as the world, Gratiano, a stage, where every man must play a part, and mine a sad one." (1.1.77f) As Auden imagines it, Antonio is "alone on the darkened stage, outside the Eden from which, not by the choice of others, but by his own nature, he is excluded." (Barnet 1970, p. 114)

And what about Shylock at the end of the fourth act? Is he all alone? Does he just walk away? He is excluded not by his own nature but by the nature of others.

As they both move away Shylock at the end of one act and Antonio at the end of another, each in his own isolation we must ask ourselves once again: Which is the merchant? Which is the Jew?

One component of Shakespeare's genius was the uncanny ability to present his material in such a way that it would evoke virtually unlimited interpretations and perspectives He does not condemn or condone

the behaviors of the sybaritic Belmontese. Are we satisfied with their ethical quotients, their moral worth? The diversions in the fifth act seem harmless, but do they divert the audience? Are we content as we observe the behaviors at Belmont? Shylock says that he is content; are we? Whether or not we are communicates some insight into our own souls. How we read the play says as much about us as it does about the playwright, if not a great deal more.

"*The Merchant of Venice* strikes me," writes Mark Lamos, one of the play's directors, "as a play that examines ideas most of us would prefer not to face. Because Shakespeare delineates the characters and actions with a sense of divinely omniscient irony, the audience is placed in an ambiguous, shifting and uncomfortable position. We are on *terra infirma*, forced to think about what we watch and how we judge our reactions with self-critical awareness." (Wheeler 1991, p. 360)

We are also on *terra infirma* because the play has no winners. "When malice [of bigotry] bears down truth," (4.1.210) there are no winners. As long as human beings are defined and classified by race or religion, there can be no genuine harmony in Belmont, Venice or elsewhere. A faint sense of unease courses through the sardonic postures of both romance and comedy from the beginning to the end of Act Five. The act, in its entirety, takes place, in that opulent, beautiful world of Belmont a world without Shylock. Jessica is there, but she is no longer a Jew. This Christian paradise of Belmont is a *Judenrein* world just like the world of England at the time of Shakespeare. The playwright created an act which represents the very act his theater-goers were playing in England for three centuries. The coerced conversion in Act Four precedes the forced ostracism in Act Five. Isn't that the way it usually happens, using Lorenzo's words first, the "treason" of the Jew against Christ, then the "stratagem" of forcing the Jew to convert; and if he refuses, then the "spoil" of expulsion?

The audience knew that Edward I, over three centuries before, simply decreed: "Jews, get out." As simple as that: Get out. And the few crypto-Jews living in England 300 years later had to play the role of

"Christian," similar to the outer aspect of the caskets, while within they tried to remain Jews. Like actors on the stage, they played a part that of Marranos: Christians outside, Jews inside.

Throughout Act Five, a metaphor in and of itself, it is impossible for the audience to dismiss the image of Shylock while the Belmontese banter trivially until dawn. His presence dominates by its absence. The Jewish image continues to haunt them even in the *Judenrein* world of England.

Was anyone in the Christian community giving serious thought, at the time, to allowing the return of Jews to England? By excluding an entire group of human beings created, according to biblical faith, in the divine image, were they true to what they professed? If they were, then "chapels had been churches and poor men's cottages princes' palaces." (2.2.12) But "the world is still deceiv'd with ornament." (3.2.80) Have they allowed themselves to be deceived by "outward shows" of love, mercy, charity, and friendship?

"In religion,

What damned error but some sober brow

Will bless it, and approve it with a text,

Hiding the grossness with fair ornament?

There is no vice so simple, but assumes

Some mark of virtue on his outward parts...." (3.2.77f)

What is the seeming truth which can "entrap the wisest," and what is the real truth? (3.2.100) In Shylock's business, ostensibly one based on the motive of greed, all that is expected in return for a loan of money is more money with clear stipulations and boundaries. The imprecision of Antonio's generosity, ostensibly based on love, makes Bassanio's indebtedness ambiguous and unresolved. When introducing Antonio to Portia, Bassanio says: "This is Antonio to whom I am so infinitely bound." (5.1.134f) To be "infinitely bound" is to be boundlessly obligated.

What is appearance and what is reality, what shadow and what sub-

stance? The caskets' exteriors can be deceptive. Semblances are misleading.

## Epilogue

*Exeunt.* The lovers retire from the stage to pursue their fantasies: Bassanio and Portia, Gratiano and Nerissa, Lorenzo and Jessica.

*Finis.* Curtain calls are taken, plaudits are sounded, stage lights are dimmed, problems are unresolved, questions are unanswered, mysteries remain. A subdued audience is reluctant to leave, hardly "satisfied of these events at full." (5.1.296) We think of Shylock, alone, at the end of Act Four and of Antonio, alone, at the end of Act Five. Although their paths diverge, there is a somber symmetry between them of brooding loneliness and foundering despair.

In our own time and place, *The Merchant of Venice* continues to convey a haunting message about the Jew as alien, a deep-rooted tradition in Christianity, solidly and densely embedded in its own scriptural roots, continuing to the present and undoubtedly beyond since the anti-Jewish passages of the New Testament are not going to vanish. Although Shakespeare depicted the circumscribed, obdurate world of his own epoch, centuries of indisputable evidence persuade us that abhorrence of the Jew is not a transitory phenomenon. It is a dogged perversion that can surface at any time, in any place, especially where the New Testament continues to hold *uncritical and literal* dominion over the minds and hearts of its readers. For centuries, its reading and its influence have turned the Jew into a symbol of whatever defines a "less-than-human" dog or a "more-than-human" devil. Deeply ingrained in the mind-set of Christendom, the Jew is a perennial stereotype, a complex caricature. The Venetian world could not, would not, understand Shylock as a human being. Relentlessly construed by everyone in the play as outsider, alien, and pariah, he represents the broken humanity of Jewish experience through twenty centuries of distorted reflections in the mirror of Christian antipathy, stemming from the earliest scriptural sources of this fragmentation. Shakespeare's

portrayal has proved to be true for all ages which, in the end, evokes a “want-wit sadness” of universal dimensions.

Shakespeare was not an anti-Semite like Antonio and Gratiano nor a racist like Portia and Brabantio nor a sociopath like Richard III nor cynical like Jaques nor disdainful like Coriolanus nor craven like Parolles nor forlorn like Juliet nor jealously green-eyed like Leontes nor hypocritical like Angelo. He may have been all of these or none of these, or much more or much less in the creation of 250 three-dimensional characters. One thing, however, is certain: he was subdued to his art, “like the dyer’s hand.”

“We all like to think of the Bard as our own. For homosexuals he is undoubtedly one of themselves; soldiers with a taste for scholarship are quite certain he must have been in the army; men of the law point to his remarkable knowledge of their mysteries; aesthetes like Lytton Strachey to what they think of as his later indifference to everything but poetics and style....Persons of faith know him for a devout Christian, while for unbelievers he was a dedicated atheist. It is not difficult to find what appears to be good evidence for each and every one of these Shakespeares.” (Bayley 2000, p. 35)

He was the pre-eminent master of representing the world as he, the master artist, saw it, as no one else before or after him could possibly see it always holding his celebrated mirror of truth not only up to nature, but to the nature of humanity and community. It is a mirror into which we must always be willing to look, and “look again,” even when it hurts, for the sake of our own humanity.

During the first year of the third millennium, two traditions looked again. In September 2000, a group of influential rabbis and Jewish scholars issued a statement calling on their fellow-Jews to regard Christianity more favorably because of the effort undertaken by many churches in recent years to alter their traditional views of Judaism. But the statement also says: “Without the long history of Christian anti-Judaism and Christian violence against Jews, Nazi ideology would

not have taken hold." If you proliferate Antonio, Portia, and Gratiano exponentially throughout the first two millennia, the statement quivers with candid rectitude.

Six months earlier Pope John Paul II spoke at Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem. His words exhort us to transform "ancient grudge" of two millennia into building "a new future in which there will be no more anti-Jewish feeling among Christians or anti-Christian feeling among Jews, but rather the mutual respect required of those who adore the one Creator and Lord and look up to Abraham as our common father in faith."

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This is the third and final installment.

