For the past hundred years, scholarship on The Merchant of Venice has been divided on the question of the play’s attitudes toward Jews. For a considerable number of decades, scholars tended to ignore the theological motifs of the play, even as they downplayed the significance of Shylock’s Jewishness and the question of the play’s antisemitism. Since the publication in 1996 of James Shapiro’s study Shakespeare and the Jews, however, studies of the play have been increasingly attentive to its Jewish and Christian elements. Shapiro’s book, which was less a literary analysis than a cultural study of the environment in which the play was written, demonstrated the centrality of debates over Jews within sixteenth-century England. Precisely, the absence of a formally recognized Jewish community stimulated attention to questions of Jewishness. Moreover, the prominent role of Marranos in England raised questions about the Christian nature of English nationalism, Shapiro argued.

As scholars have grown more attentive to the Christian setting of the play, its resonances with Christian theological anti-Judaism have attracted growing attention. Examining the text of The Merchant of Venice, Jacques Derrida proclaimed that the play “perhaps recapitulates the entire history of forgiveness, the entire history between the
Jew and the Christian” in the court’s declaration “Then must the Jew be merciful.”

Shylock, Derrida claims, “represents every Jew, the Jew in general in his differend with his Christian counterpart.” Similarly, Thomas Luxon has argued that Shakespeare “lends his astonishing imaginative powers to support some very sophisticated and elaborate versions of Protestant anti-Jewish polemic.”

Coming to the play from the perspective of Jewish studies, particularly from the experiences of German Jews that Michael Meyer has so thoroughly and eloquently studied, raises the question of how the play might be understood not only as an expression of Christian theological themes but also as an expression, primarily via the figure of Shylock, of Jewish attitudes toward Christianity. How does the play construct, via literature, both Christian and Jewish attitudes? What techniques of language, narrative, plot, and character are used to call our attention, even subtly, to those attitudes and to encourage us to read subversively, against the grain of commonly held interpretations? Indeed, I would like to ask how Shylock and Portia, were they to watch the play in an audience, would understand its multiple meanings—especially if they knew the history of Jewish-Christian relations that the play, as Derrida writes, recapitulates.

In narrative form, The Merchant of Venice staged the Christian theological problem of the presence of Judaism and transmitted the conundrum to a wide audience for centuries. Not only classical theology but also political issues of nationalism, race, and gender are expressed in the play through its interrogations of body and soul; money and blood; fathers, daughters, and patrimony; marriage and conversion; religious difference and transgendering. Readings of the play have differed widely over the centuries, and variations in productions of the play in several different cultural contexts provide clues to changes in Jewish and Christian identities and understandings of the other. As a text central to the European imagination, The Merchant of Venice has become a palimpsest for a wide range of exegetical and eisegetical traditions and productions. The earlier texts on which subplots of the play are based—Il Pecorone (mid-sixteenth century) and the Gesta Romanorum, a collection of texts from the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century—do not employ theological references, calling further attention to Shakespeare’s addition of biblical and religious motifs that he clearly wants us to take seriously.

The Jew in the Christian Realm

The Merchant of Venice is simultaneously about the Jew of the Christian imagination and about Christianity’s self-understanding about

The Merchant of Venice and Christian Europe
the presence of Jews and Judaism in its midst. What is the “Christian-ness” of Europe when Christianity’s “other,” the Jews, who are meant to be excluded, have a place at its center? Jeremy Cohen, in *Living Letters of the Law*, speaks of hermeneutical Jews: complex, shifting, and not entirely negative figures crafted in the interests of Christian self-definition. The hermeneutical Jew is an ideological construction, a tool of Christian theology. As ideological constructs of the Christian imagination, Jesus and Shylock are probably the two most famous Jews in western civilization. The one symbolizes what a Jew might become—a Christian—and the other, what happens when the Jew remains a Jew, the bitter and usurious Shylock. Given Shakespeare’s attentiveness to biblical and theological themes, it is clear why Shylock would have been perceived through the lens of Christian views of Jews and Judaism.

The presence of Jews within Christian society and the possibility of Jewish conversion to Christianity are central concerns of *The Merchant of Venice*, reflecting the disquiet of Shakespeare’s era. While no recognized community of Jews existed in England during Shakespeare’s lifetime, so-called New Christians had entered the country and flourished but had also attracted mistrust. The personal physician to Queen Elizabeth I, a Converso named Rodrigo Lopez, came under suspicion for attempting to poison her. He was hanged in 1594 in a public spectacle well publicized throughout the country. Whereas in earlier centuries Jews could simply be expelled as a foreign body, the early modern period, with its large-scale presence of baptized Jews, faced a different problem: the Jew was now concealed within the Christian, indeed, as a Christian. Yet the converted Jew, at least in the popular imagination, was not a Christian. The transgendering that is so often at the center of Shakespeare’s plots functions in the figure of Portia to call our attention to a broader question of transracial, transreligious identity: the Converso—the Jew concealed in the theological appearance of a Christian. This unstable figure, considered neither Jew nor Christian, attempted at times to be both, thus destabilizing Christian as well as Jewish identities and throwing into question the boundary between them. As a result, Shylock lent himself to a wide range of interpretations, from a Stürmer caricature of a Jew to a tragic figure of profound nobility.

**Depictions of Shylock on Stage**

Shylock has been portrayed over the centuries in a variety of modes—as comic fool, despised villain, or tragic hero. Those variations correlate not only to attitudes toward Jews but also to Christian self-un-
understanding. The play has been most fraught on the German stage, where it reached a climax of Jew-hatred in a 1943 production at Vienna’s Burgtheater, by the request of Baldur von Schirach, to mark the “achievement” of a judenrein Vienna. Shylock was played by Werner Krauss, the Nazis’ leading actor, who also starred in the film Jud Süß. His entrance upon the stage made the audience shudder. According to the newspaper accounts:

With a crash and a weird train of shadows, something revoltingly alien and startlingly repulsive crawled across the stage. . . . The pale pink face, surrounded by bright red hair and beard, with its unsteady, cunning little eyes; the greasy caftan with the yellow prayershawl slung round; the splay-footed, shuffling walk; the foot stamping with rage; the claw-like gestures with the hands; the voice, now bawling, now muttering—all add up to a pathological image of the East European Jewish type, expressing all its inner and outer uncleanness, emphasizing danger through humor.

The Nazis had already made good use of The Merchant of Venice during the first years of the Third Reich, despite difficulties with aspects of its plot. Worried about audience sympathy for Shylock and concerned that Jessica’s marriage to Lorenzo violated race laws, the play was both exploited for propaganda and, in 1938, placed on a blacklist for confiscation from libraries. Still, the play was produced consistently throughout the years of the Third Reich, reaching a climax in 1942–43 with seventy-two productions. Strengthening the anti-Semitism of the play spurred alterations to its text. Jessica was made into Shylock’s foster daughter or even an illegitimate child born of an affair between Leah and a Christian love in order to remove her Jewishness in light of Nazi racial laws prohibiting miscegenation that forbade her marriage to Lorenzo. Texts that might arouse audience sympathy for Shylock were eliminated, including, at times, his famous speech in act 3.1: “Hath not a Jew eyes?” Nazi use of the play for propagandistic purposes reached its pinnacle when German radio broadcast it shortly after Kristallnacht, the Reich pogrom that brought about the end of viable Jewish life in Germany, on November 9–10, 1938. Hitler and his propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels, obviously knew how to manipulate master narratives, and the play was employed not to stimulate the pogrom but to calm moral qualms after it had taken place.

Depictions of Shylock over the past three hundred years have altered considerably, from the seventeenth century’s subservient buf-
foon portrayed by Richard Burbage to Edmund Kean’s terrifying, noble, and malicious figure in the eighteenth century to a tragic Shylock of the nineteenth century. Nineteenth-century historicism had cultivated a lachrymose Jewish experience, with the Jew as victim of Christian persecution, so that the ugliness of Shylock came to be seen as not his fault. The shifts are reflected in Shylock’s famous speech, “Hath not a Jew eyes,” which aroused belly laughs in seventeenth-century audiences, especially when it came to his line “and if you prick us, do we not bleed.” with its allusion to circumcision. The speech initially reinforced rather than refuted assumptions about Jews: what is most human, according to Christian humanism, is the soul, not the body, but there is no soul in Shylock’s speech, as if to demonstrate that Jews do not value the soul. The speech took on pathos only after the Enlightenment convinced audiences that Jews and Christians do indeed have the same body and that the body, not only the soul, is constitutive of the human. Yet the pathos of the speech can only be conveyed by underscoring Shylock’s links to the devil; in many productions he wore a red wig, linking him to Judas.

Shylock has also been depicted in a large number of counternarratives, plays and novels that propose to retell the story from his perspective. The most significant of these is Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s *Nathan the Wise* (1779), the classic work of the German Enlightenment. Lessing wrote *Nathan the Wise* with *The Merchant of Venice* in front of him, and he intended the noble Jew Nathan to be a refutation of Shylock. Lessing had launched the quest for the historical Jesus through his publication in 1774 and 1777 of the *Anonymous Fragments* written by Hermann Samuel Reimarus. For Reimarus, Jesus was an enlightened religious teacher who had no intention of abandoning Judaism, and Reimarus argued that Christianity was the invention of Jesus’ disciples after his death as an attempt to win power for themselves. Lessing’s Nathan was similar to Jesus; modeled on Lessing’s close friend, the Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, Nathan is a wise, kind, and generous, but deracinated, Jew whose ethnicity was nowhere depicted or performed in the play. Like Shylock, Nathan was also a widower, perhaps as reassurance to an audience nervous about Jewish men’s erotic preferences.

*Nathan the Wise* was a huge success in Germany, quickly becoming one of the most frequently performed German plays. The play’s success also altered productions of *The Merchant of Venice*; Johann Ferdinand Fleck, one of Germany’s leading actors in the late eighteenth century, elevated Shylock to a figure of profound depth, idealized on par with Nathan. His portrayals were not successful among German audiences, who expected a demonic Shylock in accord with the de-
monic images of Jews that prevailed. Offering a philosemitic portrayal and an optimistic portrait of Jewish assimilation, *Nathan the Wise* was also a kind of amulet for German Jews, who viewed it as a promise of the goodness that lay at the heart of German culture. Indeed, Lessing’s play was performed by Jews during the Third Reich as a gesture of hope, to remember what Germany might be, and it is often invoked when the evils of Nazism are remembered, as a hope for what Germany might become. Yet the specter of a philosemitic play about an enlightened Jew never erased the imagined presence of the Jew Shylock as a predatory figure of danger to Christian Europe.

What about Jewish portrayals? The first Yiddish translation of *The Merchant of Venice* was published in the United States in 1899. On the New York Yiddish stage during the twentieth century the play was extremely popular among Jewish audiences, for whom it was a chance to speak back to Christianity. The most famous Yiddish actors sought the role and portrayed a quiet Shylock, loyal to the memory of his wife and filled with love for his daughter, whose suffering at Christian hands brought him not resentment but dignity. In each of these cases, we see Shylock as the figure around which Jewish identity can be renegotiated. The implied impotence or castration of Shylock at the end of act 4 was turned in the Yiddish versions into rage against the non-Jewish world, at the same time that the Jew’s dignity was asserted. In the Yiddish plays, Shylock, despite his bitterness, does not take revenge.

In 1901 Jacob Adler starred in the first Yiddish production of the play and made a big impression; he portrayed Shylock as a patriarch, a higher being, as grandeur, a triumph of long suffering, of intellect, of character, and of spiritual sufferings. Adler saw Henry Irving’s portrayal of Shylock and thought it was a caricature—Irving had called Shylock a bloody-minded monster, but in order to retain the audience’s sympathy for Shylock’s fate, Irving modified the monster. Adler wanted to create a sympathetic Shylock who was well dressed, proud, and not cringing. Shylock’s insistence on the pound of flesh was not bloodthirsty but a demand for justice. Adler also cut the script to heighten the character’s prominence in the play and highlighted the drama of Shylock returning home to find Jessica gone in order to explain his transformation into a vengeful figure. In act 1, after making the contract with Antonio, Adler remains on stage alone; as the curtain falls, he raises his handkerchief and points with his staff, then twists his purple handkerchief. His face turns cunning. When he realizes Jessica is gone, he tears his garment, sighs, sinks to the ground, and sighs: “Oy, oy.” In the next scene, with Tubal, he is in a fury of rage and revenge: no more dignity and self-restraint. He remains this way
at the start of the trial, beginning the courtroom scene like a cornered animal and leaping at Antonio until forcibly restrained. Adler said that Shylock knew no court would uphold him, but he wanted to show that his revenge was not to take the pound of flesh but to show that his ducats have purchased it. He whets his knife sardonically. One note: Adler refused to play Shylock in English on Broadway after a tour to Philadelphia, Baltimore, Boston, and New York because his performances evoked anti-Semitic, mocking reviews in the press.\textsuperscript{13}

How could Shylock be portrayed after the Holocaust? A 1948 Yiddish production starred the great Yiddish actor Maurice Schwartz. Some of Shakespeare’s language was there “Hot nit a yid . . .” (“Hath not a Jew . . .”) but the plot had some key changes. In the climactic courtroom scene, Portia’s sophistries are answered by a bright young Talmudic student. Reluctantly, the judge tells Shylock to take his pound of flesh. Shylock takes his knife, raises it above Antonio, and then, Maurice Schwartz’s shout reverberating through the theater, calls out: “Ikh ken nit, ikh bin a yid” (“I cannot, I am a Jew”), and he drops the knife.\textsuperscript{14} European Christians, by contrast, had not dropped the knife, as the audience well knew.

In Israel, productions of the play in the Yishuv were quickly politicized. Supporters of the Irgun emphasized Shylock’s vengeance, while those who supported the Haganah emphasized his ethical behavior as the triumph of Judaism over its enemies. For the newly emerging Hebrew culture, \textit{The Merchant of Venice} was suspected of challenging Zionist values: why should Jews produce an anti-Semitic play? Indeed, when the play was produced by the Habima Theatre Company in 1936, it was followed by a mock trial in which Shakespeare was accused of having written an anti-Semitic play.\textsuperscript{15} Most productions of the play in the State of Israel were undertaken by non-Jews from Europe. The noted Irish director Tyrone Guthrie produced \textit{The Merchant of Venice} in Israel in 1956, where the theme was revenge against the Diaspora mentality of Jews.\textsuperscript{16} While the Yiddish productions stressed the suffering and pathos of Shylock at the hands of Christians, a figure who embodied two thousand years of Diasporic anguish, the Israeli productions followed the Zionist insistence on negating the Diaspora. The Jew was no longer a figure of pathos, a victim of Christian persecution.

Within the State of Israel productions of the play have tended to be critical failures for a range of reasons. The context of Christian theological nuance is foreign to Israeli audiences, and the pathos of Jewish experience is uncomfortable both for the Zionists, who repudiate Diasporic suffering, and for the leftists, who use Shylock as a political critique of Jews. In a 1994 production by Israeli director Omri Nitzan,
Shylock was presented as a Jewish terrorist. And the Israeli film *Avanti Popolo* (1988) shows a group of Egyptian soldiers captured in the Sinai Desert by Israeli troops begging for mercy by reciting a variation of Shylock’s famous “Hath not a Jew” speech. Joshua Sobol’s notorious play *Ghetto* (1984) presents Shylock-like Jewish council leaders in Nazi ghettos using their power against other Jews. The associations of *The Merchant of Venice* with the Holocaust seemed all too obvious.

**What Is Christianity?**

In interrogating the nature of the Christian, the text of the play raises the question of what constitutes the blood of Christianity, its authenticity and distinctiveness, in light of its Jewish patrimony. Can Shylock or Jessica become a true Christian? The anxiety over their conversion points to a deeper aporia of Christian theology: Is Jesus a Jew or a Christian? What marks Jesus’ Christian identity—does he undergo a conversion from Jew to Christian? Not surprising, then, that Shylock’s demand of Antonio’s Christian flesh should arouse so much anxiety—will he circumcise the breast or the foreskin, the site that Judaizes or Christianizes? In some productions of the play, including Michael Radford’s 2004 film, Shylock murmurs a Hebrew prayer as he takes up his knife, as if he were a *mohel* (ritual circumciser) about to circumcise Antonio and forcibly to Judaize him by converting him into the covenant. Similarly, Anthony Sher’s 1987 Shylock on the London stage, produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company, donned a *talit* to cut his pound of flesh in order to make certain that the audience understood that the Jew, whether engaging in circumcision or ritual murder, was performing a religious act.

In Shakespeare’s time, as Lynda Boose has pointed out, nation and race were used interchangeably, but the latter was used to characterize not necessarily someone of “foreign” appearance but someone of a different nationality and religion. The Marranos accomplished a shift in Christian identity from an acquisition through baptism to an acquisition through a performance dependent on proper hermeneutics, as Lisa Lampert writes. To be a Christian meant the ability to interpret as a Christian, and the play emphasizes that only those of proper nationality and race possess such a talent; the Catholic Spaniard and Muslim Moroccan are unable to interpret the three caskets properly and thus lose the chance not only to win Portia but to marry at all. Christianness requires both nationality and race, which together create the peculiar combination of physical beauty and moral acuity demonstrated by Bassanio’s correct interpretation of the caskets. Race is marked not only by distinctive physical appearance but by a concern
with incarnation, which means seeing beyond the external physical to perceive the internal spiritual. If, as Carolyn Dinshaw has argued, proper Christian exegesis is linked to erotic desire, then racialist thinking also acquires its appeal through its erotic wish to read the body and find the moral and spiritual potencies incarnate within it. Bassanio, like all the suitors, must divine the true, inner meanings of the caskets to win Portia, and Portia must see through the letter of the law and find its implied meaning in order to thwart Shylock; such talents are not given to the Spanish (Catholic) or Moroccan (Muslim) suitors, nor to Shylock himself.

Jessica enacts the promise of the conversion of the Jews to Christianity, but she also demonstrates its failure; her actions spell disaster for her father, grave threat to Lorenzo, and misery for herself. Shylock pays for his conversion with his wealth and possessions, while Jessica’s price is the love of her husband. As an alluring, exotic beauty who is a seduced seductress, her disconnection between outer facade and inner essence threatens a nationality based on appearance and a theology based on faith. Jessica is clear that her conversion is motivated by eroticism, not faith, reinforcing the classic aporia of Jewish conversion: in light of the Christian claim that there is no faith in the Jew, the Jew’s conversion would have to be unfaithful, simply a ticket of admission into European society, as Heinrich Heine put it. Christianity becomes a stepping stone to Europe rather than coeval with it.

Jessica’s seduction by Lorenzo represents a motif typical of colonialist fantasy, the seduction of the alien female, joining the play’s concerns with the alien Jew living in Christian Venice and the dangers of miscegenation. The Jewess, as a figure who stands literarily between Jew and Christian precisely because of her femaleness, represents a more specific problem to the Christian seducer. As Miri Rubin argues, the host desecration accusations require a male Jewish perpetrator because only male Jews, unlike women, could be seen as fully moral agents; females are pliant and lack reason and moral faculties. The conversion of a Jewish woman thus carries a different resonance reinforced by rabbinic anxiety, that a man’s maleness is fragile and easily lost if, for example, he walks between two women, and a woman’s Jewishness is similarly fragile and easily robbed by a seductive Gentile. Similarly, while Shakespeare’s Othello can imagine the marriage of a black man and a white woman, Othello and Desdemona, virility and beauty, The Merchant of Venice can imagine only a Christian man and Jewish woman; the gender politics of race are inverted with Jewishness. A Jewess may be easily divested of her Jewishness by marriage to a Christian man, whereas the marriage of a Jew to a Christian woman renders him emasculated without losing his racial markers.
Jessica’s flight from her father’s home is invariably interpreted as further evidence of Shylock’s degeneracy; in most interpretations and productions of the play, Jessica herself is held blameless, a victim who flees her abusive father. Audience identification with her is taken as least problematic, given the unpleasant characters surrounding her in the play. By contrast, Jewish productions of the play signal Jessica as the villain. Her elopement is key to her father’s misery and transformation into an angry, vengeful figure; in some Yiddish revisions of the play, Jessica realizes her wickedness and commits suicide. She thus gestures to Jewish audiences that she did not abandon her Judaism for another religion but rather abandoned her father for the sake of her eroticism; internally and spiritually, she remains a faithful Jew.

**Christian as Jew**

Yet a counternarrative also prevails in the play. Not only does the play recapitulate Christian attitudes toward Jews and Judaism; it also provides a searing critique of those attitudes. That counternarrative is suggested, first of all, by Shakespeare’s use of cross-dressing, a common technique of his plays that is rendered all the more ironic given that only men were allowed on stage in his lifetime, so female characters were portrayed by male actors playing women who were in turn often dressed up as men. The particular use of Portia’s cross-dressing in the courtroom scene, act 4.1, calls our attention to the nature of the religious arguments she is making on behalf of Christianity, which sound closer to rabbinic Judaism.

Shakespeare’s magnificent rendition of the courtroom scene pits Portia, disguised as a man, speaking the logic of Talmudic casuistry disguised as Christian mercy against Shylock, whose Jewishness she pretends not to immediately recognize. “Which is the merchant here, and which the Jew?” she asks as she enters the courtroom, as if Jewishness could be concealed in Christian attire, appearance, and bearing. As Balthasar, the male jurist, she conceals, meanwhile, that she is not defending but defeating Antonio (and Venice) to become the real merchant of the play, here to gain control of the wealth and its dispersion. Shylock is the old law; she represents herself as the young dispensation. The mercy that Portia invokes—“The quality of mercy is not strain’d, It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven”—is juxtaposed to Shylock’s insistence on the literal words and legality of his bond with Antonio, and yet it is ironically Portia’s literalism and legalism that triumphs over Shylock. It is her insistence on vengeance that brings about his ruin, all for the sake of protecting Christian blood; the female Christian “out-Jews” the male Jew in the rabbinic pilpul he has
developed and “out-Jews” him in his capitalism, decircumcising him by forcing his baptism. Her words, evoking those of Jesus and Christianity, ironically rest on the literal-mindedness that Christians claim of Jews and also claim to have rejected and purged in their supersession of Judaism:

This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood,
The words expressly are “a pound of flesh”:
Take then thy bond, take thou thy pound of flesh,
But in the cutting it, if thou dost shed
One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods
Are (by the laws of Venice) confiscate
Unto the state of Venice.
(4.1.301–8)

Portia’s defeat of Shylock transpires through her employment of the methods of rabbinic pilpul and also through her cross-dressing as a man. Here, the male is Jewish, the female is Christian, and supersessionism is a form of transgendering: the Jew becomes Christian, the male becomes female—or does it? Portia as Balthasar demonstrates that just as she is disguised as a man, Christianity is ultimately nothing more than Judaism in drag.

Shakespeare is not being theologically didactic but uses irony to call the categories of Christian theology into question. Portia, the advocate of mercy, is the figure who becomes the clever, legalistic Jew—but only transvestially dressed as a man. Jesus too by analogy can only become the one who dispenses with the law if his teachings are read through a Christian lens; the Jewish reading of his teachings places him squarely within Pharisaic hermeneutical tradition. Shylock’s Jewishness is signified in the play not through his faith or practice but as constructed by a Christian theological narrative that is dedicated to its eradication—and he knows it well: “You call me misbeliever, cutthroat dog, And spit upon my Jewish gaberdine,” he says to Antonio (1.3.102–3). In the Christian mirror, Shylock recognizes, the Jew is not an unbeliever but far worse, a misbeliever, a misreader of the Scriptures that prefigure Christ, and a dog who, in Christian exegesis, is the figure of the Jew, who is not to receive “that which is holy” (Matthew 7:6). The denigration results not in Shylock’s self-contempt but in his contempt for the Christian Antonio, who knows to spit on a Jew but not how to receive the kiss of divine revelation and to suckle the breast of Torah, as do Jews. When Shylock is said to want to carve a pound of flesh from Antonio, it is from his breast, reiterating the Christian distinction between Judaism’s circumcision of the foreskin and Chris-
ianity’s self-understanding as circumcision of the heart. According to that distinction, Jews do not know how to circumcise their hearts, only to stab the heart. The play enacts the Christian projective fantasy of the Jew stabbing Christ in the heart rather than sucking from his breast and wanting his blood rather than his milk. 

“I hate him for he is a Christian,” Shylock says (1.3.32), fulfilling the old Christian assumption of Jewish hatred, the justification for Christian persecution of Jews.

The presence of Jews within the Christian realm of Venice evokes an anxiety with a long heritage in Christian self-consciousness. Will the Jews be converted to Christianity, or will the Christians become Judaized? Launcelot expresses that fear when he tells his blind father, “I am a Jew if I serve the Jew any longer” (2.2.106–7). If converted, will Jews become authentic Christians, and if Judaized, will Christians lose their morals and their families? Antonio comments sarcastically, “The Hebrew will turn Christian: he grows kind” (1.3.175). The implication becomes clear: however kind Shylock may appear, he can never be a real Christian. The gnostic of the play is that its Christians are hardly kind.

Portia disposes of the threat of Shylock by invading the old, male, Jewish order and turning Shylock into a Christian and an endowing father of the newly baptized Jessica whom he had renounced as his heir. Portia forces Shylock to become the willing father by turning over his heritage to his daughter who has become what Jews should be, a Christian. Shylock becomes a father by being forced to become a Christian, metaphorically representing the effort by early Christians to force Judaism to become the willing parent of the emergent Christianity. The punitive conversion of Shylock demanded at the end of act 4 is an eradication of his very existence, taking away his livelihood, his home, his property, his ability to earn an income, and he disappears from the play. Jessica, in turn, has been the erotic Jewess who takes the family jewels when she leaves her father’s home and then discovers she is isolated and unwanted as Lorenzo’s new bride in act 5. Shylock’s emasculation occurs in collusion between Portia, who takes his money, and Jessica, who takes “two stones, two rich and precious stones, Stol’n by my daughter” (2.8.20–21). If conversion is a kind of marriage, then Shylock’s forced conversion is effeminizing; it is like a woman forced into marriage.

The impossibility of converting a Jew into a Christian throws open the question not only of Jesus’ own identity but also of key doctrines of the church. Within the play, a central question is transubstantiation: If Protestants have rejected the literal transubstantiation of wine and wafer into blood and flesh, can the Jew truly be transformed
into a Christian? Is it possible for Christianity to emerge from Judaism? The play raises the question of what constitutes the authentic patrimony, or bloodline, of Christianity. Can Shylock or Jessica become a true Christian? What of the Jewish blood that she will bring to the offspring of Lorenzo, a concern emphasized by Jessica’s assertion that she is Shylock’s daughter by blood and not by heart? The jewels and money she brings from her father’s home clearly do not suffice to erase anxieties over her race: nor does her money buy her love. That is not the result of her gender but of her Jewishness, since the play makes Portia’s negotiation of finances and love far more successful. Indeed, the play conflates money, blood, and faith, as Shylock’s conversion is not the transubstantiation of his Judaism into Christian faith but the liquidation of his business and its transfer to Portia’s Christian realm, the island of Belmont, along with his daughter, Jessica, and his bloodline. Portia, who acquires and showers wealth where she pleases, demonstrates that “money . . . is the true spirit of capitalism made flesh, the incarnation and liquefaction of flesh and blood,” as Gil Anidjar has written. Faith is translated into money, not for the Jew Shylock, but for the Christian Portia.

The Jew in the Christian

The difficulties in assimilating large numbers of baptized Jews into the church had become so fraught in Spain during the fifteenth century that scholars have recognized that the religious issue was infused with racial concerns: does baptism transform a Jew into a Christian, or does a Jew always remain a Jew, even when baptized? Such questions grew stronger as converted Jews—“New Christians” or, in hostile terms, “Marranos”—merged into western European society, including sixteenth-century England. Race has for too long been mistakenly understood as a modern invention and as a repudiation of religion. The presence of the Jew as Christian, the Jew within the Christian, not only became the basis for modern racial theorists to reject the possibility of Jewish assimilation, which had been the promise of the Emancipation era, but reflected a theological problem for Christian self-understanding. Had Jesus, in fact, fully transformed himself from Jew to Christian? Would his own transformation offer a legitimizing basis for the transformation of all Jews into citizens of European society? At stake was the rivalry between religion and race, both as a basis for the nation-state and as the basis for personal identity.

Yet Christianity also created its own ineradicable theological trap: the religion of mercy and forgiveness came into being through a sin that Christian culture considered unforgivable, the Jews’ act of
deicide. No repentance is possible, since the Jews cannot acknowledge the act of deicide without acknowledging Jesus as Christ, itself an act of conversion, not atonement. To explain the Jews’ sinfulness, Christians have to define them as degenerate by nature. However, their degeneracy means they have acted not in sin but in accordance with their nature—hardly satisfying to a Christian theology of sinful deed. It is a terrible dilemma, almost comic, had not the historic punishments of the Jews for that sin been so harsh. Here too the play recapitulates the problem of forgiveness as Shylock reenacts the crucifixion scene, raising the knife above Antonio, who speaks of himself as a Christ figure, “a tainted wether of the flock, meetest for death” (4.1), a lamb of God, ready for death. As Theodor Reik pointed out, Antonio’s opening lines of the play declare his sadness and weariness echo those of the gospels: “He was despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief . . . . He hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.” While contemporary scholars have argued that Antonio’s melancholy derives from his frustrated homosexual love for Bassanio, Reik sees him as a Christ figure.24 What Reik does not note is the position of Shylock, reenacting the Jew as the Christ-killer who enables the conversion of Jesus the Jewish messiah into Christ the redeemer of Christians. That which the Christian cannot forgive of Jews becomes the foundation of Christian faith, the moment that can never be forgotten, the Eucharist taken in memory of that conversion, an inversion of Lear’s comment to Cordelia, “Forget and forgive” (4.7.84), as Henry Smith has pointed out.25

After all, what sort of mercy and forgiveness does the Christian court offer Shylock? As punishment for his refusal to convert his alleged vengeance into forgiveness, his property is confiscated and he is offered the alternative of death or conversion to Christianity, itself the death of his identity and spirit. Conversion comes to him as the climax of a scene of protracted verbal sadism on the part of Portia, who clearly knows in advance the trap she is setting as she presents her prosecution, always addressing him as “Jew,” not “Shylock.” Even when he finally agrees to accept the money instead of Antonio’s flesh, Portia continues:

Soft!
The Jew shall have all justice; soft! no haste:
He shall have nothing but the penalty . . .

Therefore prepare thee to cut off the flesh.
Shed thou no blood, nor cut thou less nor more
But just a pound of flesh: if thou cut’st more
Or less than a just pound, be it but so much
As makes it light or heavy in the substance,
Or the division of the twentieth part
Of one poor scruple, nay, if the scale do turn
But in the estimation of a hair,
Thou diest and all thy goods are confiscate . . .

Why doth the Jew pause? take thy forfeiture . . .

He hath refused it in the open court:
He shall have merely justice and his bond . . .

Thou shalt have nothing but the forfeiture,
To be so taken at thy peril, Jew . . .

Tarry, Jew:
The law hath yet another hold on you.
It is enacted in the laws of Venice,
If it be proved against an alien
That by direct or indirect attempts
He seek the life of any citizen,
The party ’gainst which he doth contrive
Shall seize one half his goods; the other half
Comes to the privy coffer of the state;
And the offender’s life lies in the mercy
Of the duke only, ’gainst all other voice.
In which predicament, I say, thou stand’st;
For it appears, by manifest proceeding,
That indirectly and directly too
Thou hast contrived against the very life
Of the defendant; and thou hast incur’d
The danger formerly by me rehearsed.
Down therefore and beg mercy of the duke . . .

Art thou contented, Jew? what dost thou say?

For the court of Venice, getting rid of Shylock (excising Judaism) was not so simple. Converting and accepting him into Christian society would violate the longstanding Christian wish to eradicate the Jew from within itself. The dilemma points to the desire that can never come to fruition without destroying the foundations of Christianity’s legitimacy as fulfilling the divine promises of the Old Testament. While the courtroom scene on one level concerns Venetians’ dislike of Jews,
on another level, it is also an intratheological Christian conundrum. Shylock, after all, is reenacting the Christian story: Jesus’ sacrifice of his flesh as an act of atonement for the world.

Conclusion

Shakespeare confuses categories in order to call them into question, particularly Christian categories of anti-Judaism. While audiences of the play may find easy confirmation of their biases toward Jews, both the subversion of the play’s pieties and the transvestial presentation of its characters suggest that Shakespeare’s sophistication is mustered to undermine a theology of Christian anti-Judaism. Within the play, Christian mercy and forgiveness disguise the weapons of legalism and forced conversion. Those “Judaizations” actually occur through the machinations of Christians in their application of the law to Shylock in order to liquidate his assets and transfer his wealth to Portia’s island of Belmont. Belmont exists as a ghetto of Christians who practice not the universalism that is said to characterize their religion but the kind of particularistic, ethnic exclusiveness long said to characterize Jews. Portia, the Christian, governs not by mercy but by stern and relentless law. “Which is the merchant here, and which the Jew?” indeed; which is the Christian, which the Jew? To read the play as anti-Jewish is to read it as Lorenzo reads Portia, as a “sweet lady” who drops “manna in the way of starved people” (5.1.294–5), a reading of Christian naiveté but certainly not the way Shylock experienced Portia nor how he would read the play.

The anxieties surrounding Christian theological origins, differentiation, and conversion are reflected not only in the historiographies produced in the early modern era but in the popular imagination as well. In The Merchant of Venice, Shylock, who appears in only five of its scenes, looms as its major character because he is a polysemic figure; as a tragic, ridiculous, threatening, and unfathomable person, he is an emblem of the complexity of the Jew in both Jewish and Christian imaginations. He symbolizes both Jew and Christian because he portrays himself as a Jew and, at the same time, mirrors the projected “jew” of the Christian imagination. The Jew as the haunt of the European Christian imagination has become a common theme in contemporary theory, Jean Francois Lyotard, for example, distinguishes between Jews and “jews,” the latter referring to the imagined figures who are often evasive, fluctuating, and enigmatic. For Slavoj Žižek, Jews are a “symptom” of society, representing a fantasized barrier to an ultimate apotheosis. As such, the Jew is a hermeneutical device central to Christian theology, which also insists that Jews possess a
unique, carnal hermeneutics considered different and inferior to the spiritual hermeneutics of Christians. In the figures of Jesus and Shylock, two specters are evoked: the Jew as redeemer, Jesus, and the Jew as curse and cursed, Shylock. The horror underlying *The Merchant of Venice* is the church’s failure to have converted the Jews, but that horror is also fed by a belief that conversion will not eradicate what is repellent about Jews and will open Christian society to them. Race remains ineradicable even in the presence of the baptismal sacrament.

Shylock is not so much an anti-Christ as an anti-Jesus: Jesus is generous, but Shylock is usurious; Jesus preaches, but Shylock rages; Jesus offers his body, but Shylock demands the flesh of another. Jesus lost his life due to the unbelieving Jewish judges who tried him in their religious court according to Jewish law, while Shylock loses his existence at the hands of Christian judges bent on vengeance. Both men are religious martyrs and martyrs to their sex and gender. Neither has a wife; neither leaves a bloodline. Like the synoptic gospels, which have been read both as anti-Jewish and as Jewish texts, *The Merchant of Venice* can be read as anti-Jewish or as anti-Christian, critical of Christianity’s anti-Judaism. The play accomplishes an exploration of the extraordinary, complex resonances that result from the idiosyncratic theological configurations of Christian supersessionism. Shakespeare has written a masterpiece because it resonates so strongly with western culture’s master narrative of Jesus and his relationship to Judaism.

**Notes**

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3. Ibid.
10. Ibid., 246.
11. Ibid., 248.
19. Carolyn Dinshaw, Chaucer’s Sexual Politics (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989); cited by Lampert, Gender and Jewish Difference, 156.


