Barabas and Shylock

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As a student of cultural diversity, I have long been interested in post-structural interpretations of texts; the field is potentially most rewarding, but it is also problematic in that one can easily distort a text in order to justify one's agenda for it. Such interpretations also involve generalizations about the nature of the culture a text comes from, the relation of the text to what we know of that culture, the extent to which we agree that the apparent original meanings of a text should form a canonical interpretation, and the extent to which we can justify reinterpretation of a text to suit the needs of our own age. Beyond these, there is the problem of the indeterminacy of language itself. These problems can be observed quite clearly in the various interpretations of The Jew of Malta and The Merchant of Venice, texts which involve the problems of prejudice, stereotypes and the oppression of "outsiders," as well as arguments about conflicting economic theories.

My focus is on prejudice and stereotypes. Economic interpretations of the plays interest me to the extent that they bear on the problem of prejudice; I will not focus on interpretations that reduce characters to types representing economic theories. I tend to agree with Lyon when he concludes that "the Shakespearean text may prove something of a Trojan horse in any single political citadel, not because Shakespeare transcends history and politics, but because his works problematise them" (141). Shakespeare and Marlowe have left us with plays wherein terrible wrongs are committed by Christian oppressors and Jewish avengers. We are shown societies in which there are no simple answers, no characters who are "noble" in the old sense; further, each character seems to have ample
justification for his or her behaviors.

The blockage that so many critics experience with these plays may center on the fact that we are accustomed to searching for themes and answers in texts; here, there are no tidily developed themes, and we are presented instead with numerous disturbing questions about the nature of society. At first, there are the simpler questions: what, for example, is Ferneze to do in his land of limited resources but tap his richest citizens to pay a longstanding debt and avoid dissolution of the whole society? Why didn't he pay that debt over a period of time and thus avoid the conflict with Calymath? Why should Jews be the only ones to pay? Why the business of forcing a Jew to turn Christian?

Larger questions follow these and involve the problem of the "outsider" in any society, the nature of stereotypes and the oppression of one group of people by another. In exploring the problem exposed in these plays and the questions it raises, I intend to grasp as fully as I can the characters of Barabas and Shylock, as well as explore their relationship to the world they inhabit. First, I will explore the way Jews were presented in literature, and their brief history in England. This will illuminate the nature of the stereotypes and myths about Jews as well as provide keys to many of the passages in the two plays. After this, I will explore several important passages in the two plays. I do not intend to seek answers to the problem, but rather would explore the extent to which Barabas and Shylock may confirm— or rise above— the stereotype of "the Jew"; I will also examine their Christian opposites. Too often, these Christians have been neglected and it seems to me that our understanding of any oppressed person's behavior should be tempered by learning about the forces with which they had to contend. Once all these explorations are complete, I will come to some conclusions, keeping in mind Lyon's warning that "we are all— of necessity and for good or ill— prejudiced, predisposed, fore-knowing" (131).
In his introduction to *The Merchant of Venice*, G. B. Harrison claims that "in Shakespeare's time a Jew, especially on the stage, was a monster, capable of any cruelty toward a Christian" (582). Bernard Grebanier disputes this kind of claim, citing several English and continental texts to show that Shakespeare's contemporaries "by no means all shared the cramped bigotry of the medieval mind" (34); he singles out Holinshed's 1577 accounts of the expulsions of the Jews from England as an example of an author's compassionate treatment of their plight (29-30), and explores tales from *The Decameron* to show how a great mind can rise above typical prejudices of the day (36-39). He also quotes extensively from Robert Wilson's *The Three Ladies of London* (1583), in which the Jewish character, Gerontus, is clearly seen as virtuous when juxtaposed to Mercador-us, his Christian antagonist, a man who lies, cheats, and will even change his religion to avoid paying his debt (39-43).

Grebanier balances his account by citing many of the anti-Jewish texts of the day, notably *The Jew*, a play now lost, but which may have been one of Shakespeare's sources for *The Merchant* (44), as well as Greene's *The First Part of The Tragicall Raigne of Selimus, Emperor of the Turks* (1594), and *The Orator* (1596), by Lazarus Piot. This last was a series of discourses, one of which contained the story of a Jew who desired "a pound of flesh from a Christian in payment of a debt" (45). Grebanier's account of Christians and Jews presents no problems as long as he limits his claim to the apparent fact that antisemitism was not an universal characteristic of the age. Of course, it does not follow that a particular mind is not bigoted because some others are not; nor does the fact that one great mind rises above an age's prejudices mean that another necessarily does so. Grebanier does not make such claims, but he is often uncomfortably close to doing so.
Further, while it may be helpful to correlate utterance in a text with the culture and literature of an author's times, that correlation entails no necessary logical connections. Shakespeare and Marlowe must live first in their characters' own speech. Perhaps Grebanier's most dubious claim is that the lack of Jews in Elizabethan England may have led to "the word 'Jew' being used loosely for anyone outside the pale of accepted respectability—dissenters, foreigners, Christian usurers" (31). There can be no doubt that Barabbas and Shylock are specifically Jewish; yet earlier playwrights had confused Jews with Muslims. In the Wakefield Pageant's fifteenth century miracle play, *Herod the Great*, the Jewish messenger opens the play by saying "most mighty Mahoun meng you with mirth!" (Cawley 111), and Herod himself swears by "Mahoun in heaven" (115). Analyzing the image of the Jew during this period, Leon Poliakov comments that

if the Jew no longer dwelt there, he was invented; and if the Christian population came into less and less conflict with Jews in daily life, it was increasingly obsessed with their image, which it found in reading, saw on monuments, and contemplated at plays and spectacles. These fictitious Jews were obviously and specifically those who were supposed to have put Jesus to death, but the men of the Middle Ages ultimately failed to distinguish between the mythical Jew and the contemporary Jew, and anti-Jewish feeling derived additional nourishment from this confusion. (122)

These attitudes are preserved in *The Resurrection*, a fifteenth century play from the York Pageant of the Carpenters. Here, Caiaphas, the Jewish accuser, says that

Jesus said even openly
A thing that grieves all this Jewry,
And right so may--
That he should rise up bodily
Within the third day.  (Cawley 177; lines 134-38)

Later in the play, Salome speaks to Mary Magdalene, saying that "withouten skill the
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Jews ilkone that lovely Lord have newly slain, and trespass did he never none" (Cawley 180; lines 205-08). Mary Magdalene answers by saying that she has brought ointments to anoint the wounds that "Jews him wrought" (line 216).

Public performances of plays such as this reinforced the image of the Jew as the murderer of Christ, and as Poliakov claims, created a mythical Jew in many Christian minds. Yet there is more to the study of Christian-Jewish relations in England than is contained in this claim. First, Jews lived on the island up to 1290; the rest of this section will concentrate on several "red-letter" dates in that history and also focus on the literature and cultural events associated with it.

Father Edward Flannery's account of Jewish life in England points out that the Jewish presence was of "the briefest span in medieval Jewish history" (117), and that the English example may be among the best to explore "the instability of the position of the Jews . . . and of the part their economic function played in their plight" (117). Jews had entered England before 1066, but William the Conqueror brought them with him in greater numbers. William Rufus, his son, would later "farm out bishoprics" to them (Flannery 117), and Henry I made them the sole moneylenders to the nation. Charles Patterson summarizes the curious beliefs of these Christians:

The Church forbade Christians from engaging in moneylending because of the belief that it endangered Christian souls. But since Christians regarded the souls of Jews as lost, it was left for them to provide this service, which was especially necessary due to the expanding commercial life of Europe.

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These moneylenders became wealthy in this position, and for the next two centuries, kings would extort their wealth; nobles and clergy would resent them for their proximity to the crown and their own indebtedness to the moneylenders, and the common people
would envy them (Flannery 118). The relationship of Jews to these Christians had a much more sinister aspect as well; this can be clearly seen in recounting the events in the years of 1122, 1189-90, 1222, 1255, 1275 and 1290.

The first of these events involves a supposed "ritual murder" of a Christian child by Jews in Norwich. The charge of ritual murder—the sacrifice of a non-Jewish child in order to incorporate its blood in the unleavened bread (Poliakov 57) or for some other religious purpose—was already an old one, dating back at least as far as the third century B.C.E. Then, Apion of Alexandria claimed that Jews annually kidnapped a Greek child, fattened him up and killed him (Patterson 5). In the Norwich case, Jews had supposedly tortured a child "with all the tortures visited upon Jesus, and then to have buried their victim" (Grebanier 23). Jews were blamed for this death on the basis of testimony by a converted Jew, and riots followed; a cult formed and "the relics of this Saint William, the young apprentice, were a goal of pilgrimage" for centuries thereafter (Poliakov 58). Similar charges of ritual murder would be repeated later at Gloucester, Bury St. Edmunds, Bristol and Winchester (Flannery 98), fanning English hatred for Jews to a fury that exploded in 1189 and 1190.

When Richard I was crowned in 1189, Jews bringing gifts for the new king were stopped by officials and stoned by mobs of Englishmen. Rumors that the king wanted them killed led to anti-Jewish riots (Grebanier 22; Flannery 118) involving murders and the burning of Jewish homes. Richard repudiated these rioters, ordered that Jews should be allowed to live in peace and set about to tax them heavily, even establishing an Exchequer of the Jews to control their transactions (Poliakov 78). When Richard left for his crusade in 1190, more anti-Jewish riots occurred in Lynn, Bury St. Edmunds, Norwich, Stamford and York.
The York riots followed the typical continental pattern of departing crusaders using the pretext that Jews were "infidels" as an excuse to rob, pillage and murder them (Poliakov 39-50). In the York case, the rioters drove their Jewish victims into York Castle, where the warden gave them refuge. Flannery asserts that many of the rioters were in debt to these same Jews (118); Grebanier notes that the leader of the Christian mob, Richard Malebys, also owed them a great sum (23). As the story goes, a monk came to the castle to celebrate Mass each morning, urging the mob to "destroy the enemies of Christ" (Flannery 118); someone threw a stone from the castle and killed this monk. As a result, the mob stormed the castle. Most of the Jews committed suicide; others surrendered, begging to be converted. They too were killed. After this, the mob went to the Cathedral and burned the records of debts to Jews (Flannery 119).

Later, King John came to power; he imprisoned and tortured many Jews, hoping to extort even more money from them. Poliakov recounts the story of one of these Jews, Abraham of Bristol, who was "jailed in a dungeon where one of his teeth was torn out every day" until on the eighth day he committed suicide.

The next major event concerning Jews in England transpired in 1222; this was the Council of Oxford, which not only put the decrees of the Fourth Lateran Council into effect, but also added restrictions of its own. The Fourth Lateran Council had established new Church policy concerning Jews in 1215 (Flannery 102). Jewish usury was to be put under stricter surveillance; when property passed to a Jew, a tithe was allotted to the Church. Baptized Jews could no longer practice Jewish customs; no Jews could appear in public during the Easter season, and they were barred from public office. The church also placed a moratorium on any crusader's debt to Jews and prescribed dress for Jews and Saracens, establishing an official "badge of shame" for them (Flannery 102-03).

The Council of Oxford confirmed that the English would enforce these rules, but
also forbade the "commingling" of Jews and Christians. The Council's decrees also regulated construction of synagogues and prescribed limits for the "vocal volume" of Jewish services. Further, Jewish blasphemy against Christianity would be punished by death (Flannery 120). These decrees thus effectively circumscribed what remained of Jewish life in England; their position became ever more precarious. Henry III would follow John, taxing the Jews even more heavily, and when they asked to leave England because of these taxes, the government refused to let them go.

The next major event in the English story occurred in 1255; this was the "murder" of Hugh of Lincoln, an eight-year-old boy found dead in a well. Jews were blamed for the death; ninety of them were sent to the Tower, and eighteen were eventually put to death. The story, as reconstructed by Grebanier, is as follows: little Hugh chased his ball into a cesspool on Jewish property and drowned. He had been missing for twenty-six days when Jews gathered in the town for the marriage of the rabbi's daughter. On the day after the wedding, the child's body rose to the surface of the cesspool; finding it, the Jews were "only too well aware of what havoc that little corpse could cost them" (Grebanier 24), and tried to hide the body. The Christians would later find it and accuse the Jews of ritual murder.

The story gained so much notoriety that at least twenty-one versions of it exist in ballad form (Poliakov 125); Hugh became the focus of a cult, and pilgrimages were made to Lincoln in his honor for centuries (Flannery 121). The most famous version of the story is to be found, transmuted, in The Prioress's Tale of Geoffrey Chaucer. Chaucer's penchant for irony is well known and need not be documented here; his Prioress is "ful symple and coy" (Prologue, line 119) and "al was conscience and tendre heart" (150). She is motivated by two contradictory impulses—excessive praise for Mary, the "blisful Queene" of heaven, and a corresponding scorn for Jews, who were "sustened by a lord of
that contree for foul usure and lucre of vileyne, hateful to Crist and to his compaignye"

(*Tale 1680-83). The child in her tale is a little Christian boy who loves to sing *Alma redemptoris* as he goes through the streets. This angers the Jews:

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    Our firste foo, the Serpent Sathanas,
    That hath in Jues herte his waspes nest,
    Up swal, and seide, "O Hebrayk peple, allas!
    Is this to yow a thyng that is honest
    That swich a boy shal walken as hym lest
    In youre despit, and sing of swich sentence,
    Which is agayn youre lawes reverence?  *1748-54)
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The Jews then capture the child, cut his throat and cast him into a pit. The mother learns he was last seen "among the cursed Jues" (1789); when she seeks him there, the Jews claim not to have seen him. At this point, the corpse in the pit "with throte ykorven lay upright" (1801) and began to sing *Alma redemptoris* loud enough to make the place ring. The Christians discover the corpse, and the provost sentences the Jews to be drawn and hanged. The dead child then explains that he loves Jesus and Mary so much that even death will not prevent him from singing "in honour of that blisful Mayden free" (1854); he is properly buried and the tale ends with the Prioress's request that

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    O yonge Hugh of Lincoln, slayn also
    With cursed Jewes, as it is notable,
    For it is but a litel while ago,
    Preye eek for us . . . (1874-77)
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The final major events in the history of the Jews in England begin in 1275 and culminate with their expulsion from the island in 1290. Edward I's *Act Concerning Jews* of 1275 prohibited them from practicing usury and encouraged them to learn trades and cultivate the land (Flannery 119). The guilds wouldn't let them enter, however, and after years of working as moneylenders and businessmen, they were hardly suited to the hard labor of cultivation. An apparent solution appeared for them shortly thereafter; the Third Statute of Westminster, *Quia Emptores*, commoditized certain lands that previously had
been settled via "sub-infeudation" among the Lords (Churchill 289), and the "land began to pass into the hand of Israel" (290). It was not long before the lords became aware that they "had parted permanently for fleeing lucre with a portion of English soil large enough to be noticed" (290). The Jews had found a way to circumvent the restrictions of the 1275 act, but in doing so they had incensed the aristocracy who had been foolish enough to sell them their land and later regretted it.

Though the Jews could no longer lend money—the practice was now in the hands of Italians—many Englishmen still owed them; these people, as well as the angry lords noted above, united against them. Edward "saw himself able to conciliate powerful elements and escape from awkward debts, by the simple and well-trodden path of anti-semitism" (Churchill 290); he expelled them from the kingdom in 1290, confiscating all but those goods they could carry. Many died on this forced journey (Flannery 119-20). Poliakov notes that

the exact fate of the lost tribe of English Jews is unknown: doubtless the majority of the survivors merged with French and German Jews. But their memory remained sufficiently vivid to nourish many literary themes throughout the Middle Ages and to induce Shakespeare, three centuries later, to create the unforgettable prototype of the usurer, Shylock, whose origins have so often been debated. Perhaps in the tragic theme of the "pound of flesh" there is a transposition, with diametrically reversed poles, of the Abraham of Bristol episode. (78-79)

In the next three centuries, the stereotype of the Jew as a money-crazed businessman and usurer, Christ-killer, ritual murderer, poisoner of wells and—if he was a doctor—poisoner of his patients, would grow and become a major substratum of English prejudice. As Poliakov has noted, the absence of actual Jews only made the perpetuation
of myths about them that much more of an obsession: Jews were those who had damned themselves in *Matthew 27* when they released Barabbas, shouted for Jesus to be crucified, and said "His blood be on us and on our children" (*Matt. 27: 25*).

Such portrayals of Jews would recur again and again in literature, and especially on religious stages, where dramatists needed villains to create conflict in plays about the birth, life, trial and death of Jesus. Given the way they appeared in the gospels of *Matthew* and *Mark*, Jews would appear to fill that requirement well. In these earlier portrayals, the pattern is generally one of innocent Christians being savaged by satanic Jews; the satanic stereotype is reinforced even further in their portrayal as money-hungry usurers—Avarice in the moralities. Thus, as we come at last to Marlowe's Barabas and Shakespeare's Shylock, the major questions can be posed: what truly are the characters of Shylock and Barabas? How do they reflect this stereotype, and when do they rise above it? How innocent are the Christians in these two plays? If the Christians are not innocent, how does that contribute to the *problem* at the heart of each drama?

**Barabas**

Critics have disagreed not only about the character of Barabas, but also about the nature of this play. J. B. Steane lists the categories critics have used to describe *The Jew of Malta*: it is "tragedy, comedy, melodrama, farce, tragical-comical, farcical-satirical, 'terribly serious' or 'tediously trivial'" (166). Rowse notes that the play owes much to the old moralities, with Barabas "taking the place of Vice, slapped down by fate in the end" (85); he insists that it is melodrama imbued with sensationalism and crude farce—"a sort of savage humor, Marlowe's sardonic twist" (84). Bloom seems the play as a "ferocious farce" that "exposes the madness and hypocrisy of Jew-baiting, even though its Machiavel, Barabas, is the Jewish monster or Devil incarnate" (51).
The play does seem to defy any neat category, yet two general statements may initially be made about it. First, whatever his other qualities, Barabas is the stage descendant of the Devil or Vice in the morality tradition; he is the welcome villain who "affords the audience much amusement," who "stands for values we deplore, but excites a minimum of fear or revulsion because dramatic convention dictates that he must not enjoy a final triumph" (Masington 58). That he is such a character makes it easier for some to dismiss him, yet his case nakedly shows the oppression of Jews by Christians and his references to the long history of that oppression cannot but turn the sympathetic and sensitive head. Secondly, most of the other characters in the world Barabas inhabits are at least as reprehensible as he is; Barabas is only the most interesting character, notable because he is an outsider in a world of Machiavellian villains. He is the one who has been energetic in his career of successfully pursuing wealth, and who, when cheated by Christians and Muslims, revenges himself on them with the same energy.

We first meet Barabas immediately after the Machiavellian prologue; he is in his counting house, pleased that his ships have brought him good returns, meditating on the fact that poor men "would make a miracle of thus much coin" (1.1.13) while a rich man would be weary of counting it. Wealth is his main thought, and in a passage later echoed by the likes of Jonson's Volpone, Barabas swells in his apotheosis of it, dreaming of "bags of fiery opals, sapphires, amethysts, jacinths, hard topaz, grass-green emeralds, beauteous rubies, sparkling diamonds" (1.1.24-26). Such wealth may "ransom great kings" (32) and "men of judgment" might "frame their means of traffic" to get "infinite riches in a little room" (35-37). The merchants enter, bringing news of Barabas's fortunes; after they depart, we first encounter his bitterness: his wealth is the one blessing "promis'd to the Jews" (107) in a world where men hate others for nothing more than their "happiness" (114).
His mind has quickly turned and now centers on an indictment of Christian falsehood and hypocrisy:

Rather had I, a Jew, be hated thus
Than pitied in a Christian poverty;
For I can see no fruits in all their faith,
But malice, falsehood, and excessive pride,
Which methinks fits not their profession.

(116-20)

Barabas then meditates on the great and wealthy Jews of Greece, Bairseth, Portugal, Malta, Italy and France. The speech reveals that he is no ordinary usurer, but one of the great businessmen of his race; yet the comparisons between his own race's great ones and "those that brag of faith" (125) betrays the double-consciousness that DuBois would later characterize as typical of the wounded psychology of African Americans at the turn of this century (8-9). This double-consciousness—this need of oppressed people to confirm their own identities in relation to those of their oppressors—is typical in any such situation. The speech reveals much more than anger or bitterness, then; it is the revelation of a personality wounded many times before the action of the play begins to unfold.

The speech rises to a curious note, given the earlier assertion that Barabas is a "sound Machevill" (Prologue Spoken at Court, line 8). Barabas confesses that "we come not to be kings" (131) because Jews are few in number and people either come to kingship by succession or force. A true pragmatist, he does not hope to rule but only hopes for peace, allowing principalities to Christians who thirst for them. Barabas is not ambitious for the rule that should be the goal of the true Machiavel. The Prince was written either as a manual for those who would govern efficiently or as a satire of the cruelties of such rulers; in either case, its subject is political rule, to which Barabas does not aspire. One could claim that Machiavelli's ethic is situational, pragmatic; given that supposition, perhaps Barabas is a true Machiavel, recognizing the limits of what is possible to him.
Barabas ends his soliloquy with an irony as characteristic as his name. He speaks of Abigail, his daughter, whom he loves "as Agamemnon did his Iphigen" (140). The reference is to the daughter Agamemnon had to sacrifice to Artemis in order that his expedition against Troy might succeed. The statement not only implies the ironies of the conflicts between love and ambition, but also foreshadows Abigail's own death. At this point, three Jews enter the room, announcing to Barabas that all the Jews have been called to the Senate house, that a Turkish fleet has landed its embassy to collect an overdue tribute from Malta.

In scene two, Calymath and his bassoes demand ten years' worth of tribute. Ferneze, the governor, pleads for time to collect this money, and in a move typical of Christian rulers throughout Europe, calls the Jews together and demands that they provide the money for this tribute. We are next treated to an exhibition of the Christian "malice, falsehood, and excessive pride" Barabas has prepared us for; Ferneze will take the money "for through our sufferance of your hateful lives, who stand accursed in the sight of heaven, these taxes and afflictions are befall'n" (1.2.66-69). The conditions are then read to the Jews. Each is to pay one-half of his estate; those that refuse shall be forced to turn Christian, and those that refuse this will lose everything. Stung by these decrees, Barabas denies all his wealth to them, summoning all his will to ask, "is theft the ground of your religion?" (1.2.99). Because he is obstinate, the Christians take everything from him and convert his mansion into a nunnery. Ferneze rationalizes his decision, calling it the means "to save the ruin of a multitude" (101). He goes on to pontificate:

If thou rely upon thy righteousness,  
Be patient, and thy riches will increase.  
Excess of wealth is cause of covetousness;  
And covetousness, O, 'tis a monstrous sin! (125-28)
Thus, within the first two scenes of the play, we are already exposed to a world unlike that of most earlier English works involving Jews and Christians. At the outset, Barabas may fit the stereotype of the money-hungry Jew, but he also makes us acutely aware of the oppression of his people and the hypocrisy of Christians. When we meet these Christians, they are exactly as Barabas has foretold—greedy, rapacious, hypocritical and self-important. Marlowe shows us a world where right and wrong cannot be simply categorized; he involves us in a problem that requires an attentiveness and sensitivity far more developed than the simple lessons derived from the moralities that preceded this play.

The entire plot of the play springs from this initial injustice. Barabas will use his daughter to recover some of his fortune and later, in his anger will present her as bait to trap and kill the young Christians, Lodowick and Mathias. His anger will know no bounds, springing both from his own immediate ruin and his knowledge of and bitterness over the long history of oppression his people have experienced. We already know what will happen to this "Devil," but it will be instructive to examine the slave market scene, where a further lesson awaits us.

The slave market scene (2.3) follows the deal between Ferneze and Del Bosco in which the vice-admiral of Spain agrees to defend Malta from the Turks if Ferneze will allow him to sell captured slaves there. Barabas enters, cursing "swine-eating Christians" (2.3.7). He has his new mansion, swears he will get revenge, and remembers how he has had to degrade himself in order to survive:

> We Jews can fawn like spaniels when we please,  
> And when we grin we bite; yet are our looks  
> As innocent and harmless as a lamb's.  
> I learn'd in Florence how to kiss my hand,  
> Heave up my shoulders when they call me dog,  
> And duck as low as any barefoot friar.  

(2.3.20-25)
Lodowick and Mathias present themselves as his first victims, and that portion of the complication begins here. More importantly, Barabas buys Ithamore, a Thracian muslim whom he will use to "do much villainy" (139). Once Barabas and Ithamore are left alone on the stage, they present us with an exchange of black humor, cataloging many of the crimes infidels were supposed to have committed against Christians and claiming these crimes as their own. Barabas says he has killed "sick people groaning under walls" (180), poisoned wells, set up Christian thieves to steal his goods so he might enjoy seeing them "pinion'd by my door" (185). He has studied physic so he could enrich the priests "with burials" (186-88) and became an engineer so he could kill both friends and enemies:

Then after that was I an usurer,  
And with extorting, cozening, forfeiting,  
And tricks belonging unto brokery,  
I fill'd the gaols with bankrupts in a year.  
(195-98)

Not to be outdone, Ithamore speaks of "setting Christian villages on fire" (208), of cutting travellers' throats and crippling pilgrims to Jerusalem with a powder he strewed on the marble where they knelt.

This catalogue of Christian prejudices against Jews and Muslims has two functions. First, Barabas is sounding out Ithamore to discover whether he may make use of him, and secondly, it is a supreme example of the black humor characteristic of the despair among oppressed groups: one *claims* the stereotypes that have limited one's place in society as a way of deflating accusations implicit or explicit in those stereotypes. That Barabas could not have been all those things he claims is obvious—and he must be laughing darkly as he reels off stereotype after stereotype, claiming them all as his own.

Yet these speeches also present the audience with a concise illustration of the indeterminacy of language, for in interpreting the words we are faced with the problem of the listener's own prejudices. To one who has experienced oppression and the stereotyp-
ing of oppressed groups, Barabas and Ithamore are indeed indulging in black humor. A Christian audience that hates "infidels" might, on the other hand, see a confirmation of the stereotypes in the same speech; the humor would escape them, and they would point to the speeches as signs of the true character of Jews and Muslims. There is a further irony in that Barabas has been driven to madness by the Christians, and in his madness he will confirm the vicious stories these same Christians believe.

To summarize, then: we have seen in Barabas the presentation of a Jew who is more than a stereotyped Devil. While his concern for wealth fits the stereotype, he also appears to be an upright businessman. He is aware of—and makes us aware of—the long history of the oppression of his people, but only seeks revenge when the Christian rulers steal his money for their own purposes. The play presents us with a problem: if Barabas's revenge is unjust, it may be said that its source is in a long history of injustice practiced upon him and his people by men whose religion appears to be grounded in theft. A proud man, Barabas goes out as a great flame; the play ends in immense irony, as Ferneze orders that "due praise be given, neither to Fate nor Fortune, but to Heaven" (5.5.129-30).

Shylock

The critical literature surrounding Shylock is more extensive and more contentious than that concerning Barabas. A.D. Nuttall, for example, claims *The Merchant* is about the "low Jewish justice of an eye for an eye . . . and the way this justice is transcended by Christian charity and mercy" (283). Wertheim echoes this when he claims the treatment of Shylock is "not excessive but very much in keeping with the idea of Christian mercy" (75), while Bloom knows "of no legitimate way in which *The Merchant* ought to be regarded as other than an anti-semitic text" (1). Armin-Gerd Kuckhoff, speaking of performances in post-Nazi Germany, feels *The Merchant* can "only be played
in the absence of anti-semitism," citing the fact that the Nazis would not allow the play to be performed because it was too sympathetic to the Jew. Kuckhoff argues that Shylock should be played with "great dignity" as a character who is "both victim and the cause of the problem" simultaneously; he cites Heine's view that Shylock was wronged by the Christians and sees Shylock as an "alienated character" in the vein of Brecht.

Brown presents an overview of many earlier critical positions: Stoll's 1911 view that Shylock is a comic character, Cardozo's argument that Shylock is a "fabulous bogey," based on his view that "Shakespeare had never seen a Jew," and C. J. Sisson's refutation of this belief, demonstrating that Jews did indeed live in London during the renaissance (5). In 1929, A. Tretiak would see Shylock in the light of the 1595 anti-alien riots, finding a plea for toleration in the play. J. W. Draper would argue in 1935 that Shylock should be hated "as a villainous usurer," and Tannenbaum would dispute Draper's claim on the grounds that "Shakespeare left money for Judith at interest and that usury is not a dominant theme in the play" (Brown 6).

Many critics argue from history, biography or culture beyond the play, yet others cite the structure of the play itself, or aspects of its rhetoric, as a way to get at Shylock and his Christian adversaries. Frye presents this approach succinctly:

Comedy often includes a scapegoat ritual of expulsion which gets rid of some irreconcilable character, but exposure and disgrace make for pathos, or even tragedy. The Merchant of Venice seems almost an experiment in coming as close as possible to upsetting the comic balance. If the dramatic role of Shylock is ever so slightly exaggerated, as it generally is when the leading actor of the company takes the part, it is upset, and the play becomes the tragedy of the Jew of Venice with a comic epilogue.

(73)
This view presumes that Shakespeare's intentions lay within the general structure of romantic comedy as a genre, that he was not utilizing the form to get at something beyond the form itself. The fact that Shakespeare broke the conventions of structure whenever it suited his purpose is well-known and need not be documented here; the point is that in finding answers in the conventions of form, we sidestep the problem: the good characters who will make up the play's final society, heralding a new beginning, are not good. Antonio and his friends are abusive anti-semites; Portia dismisses her Moroccan suitor with a caustic phrase—"let all of his complexion choose me so" (2.9.79), and proves to be devious both with Shylock in the trial scene and later with her own suitor, Bassanio.

Bloom has taken a different tack, pointing to the fact that none of the characters in the play has anything good to say about Shylock--even those of his own house. He further shows that the two speeches supposed to arouse sympathy for Shylock both end "in such a fashion as to alienate the audience" (11). His argument regarding the "sufferance" speech (1.3.107-38) is a curious one; Shylock's defense against Christian hypocrisy angers the "virtuous" Antonio to the point that he "is just as like to spit on him and spurn him again" (Bloom 11). Bloom presents this as the evidence that alienates the audience from Shylock. I would assert the contrary—it is evidence that should show us the hidden cruelty of Antonio and arouse our sympathy for Shylock. The most curious part of Bloom's argument is that he ignores the pound of flesh bargain that immediately follows; there is indeed the evidence that might "alienate the audience" from Shylock. The second speech—"Hath not a Jew eyes?"—ends in true alienation, for there Shylock claims his human rights "not to respect or compassion, as the critics for a century have had it, but to revenge" (Bloom 1).

After considering all these positions, I conclude that the play presents a problem, not a solution, and that the language itself is amazingly indeterminate. Shylock is either
comic, villainous or "wronged" depending on the actor's or the critic's interpretation of him; further, the audience may find him as they interpret the interpretation. Much depends on their prejudices as well. Lyon says it well: "the critical heritage of *The Merchant of Venice* is less the story of disinterested description of the play and its workings than of energetic—and sometimes very odd—reactions to it" (4). Unlike *The Jew of Malta*, the play is complicated by its double plot; Shylock is not the main character, though he is pivotal in the development of both of these plots. The play is indeed "The Most Excellent Historie of the Merchant of Venice with the extreame crueltie of Shylocke the Jewe towards the sayd Merchant, in cutting a just pound of his fleshe and the obtayning of Portia by the choyse of three chests," as the title page of the quarto (Q1) states (Shakespeare, plate 14). Taking all these perceptions into account, I proceed to my reading of three key scenes in the play: the bargain (1.3), the taunting (3.1) and the trial (4.1).

*The Bargain*

As the play opens, we learn that Antonio is a generous man to those he loves; he asks the needy Bassanio to "try what my credit can in Venice do" (1.1.180) to raise the money necessary to Bassanio's hope of marrying Portia. We meet Shylock in the third scene; he is bargaining with Bassanio and Antonio, and shows himself to be a hardheaded businessman, reminding Antonio that ships can sink, sailors can prove to be thieves, and "there is the peril of waters, winds and rocks" (1.3.24-25). When Bassanio asks Shylock to dine with him, the Jew declines; he won't eat pork. Shylock's first aside follows: he hates Antonio because he is a Christian, but also because "he lends out money gratis and brings down the rate of usance" (45-46). Further,

I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him.
He hates our sacred nation, and he rails,
Even there where merchants most do congregate,
On me, my barains, and my well-won thrift, 
Which he calls interest. 

(48-52)

We see in this speech the "wounded intensity" Bloom finds in Shylock (1-2); the pattern of wounded psychology is similar to that of Barabas in the opening scene of Marlowe's play, where contact with one's oppressor reveals the Jew's pain and at least implies the long history of oppression behind that pain. Antonio next claims that he neither lends nor borrows, but "to supply the ripe wants" of his friend, he'll "break a custom" (63-64). Shylock and Antonio argue about the morality of usury; Antonio concludes that

The devil can cite scripture for his purpose. 
An evil soul producing holy witness 
Is like a villain with a smiling cheek, 
A goodly apple rotten at the heart. 

(99-102)

Stung, Shylock lectures Antonio on hypocrisy:

Still have I borne it with a patient shrug, 
For sufferance is the badge of all our tribe. 
You call me misbeliever, cutthroat dog, 
And spit upon my Jewish gabardine, 
And all for the use of that which is mine own. 
Well, then, it now appears you need my help. 
Go to, then, you come to me and you say "Shylock, we would have moneys." You say so, 
You that did void your rheum upon my beard. 

(110-18)

Antonio's self-righteousness elicits this response pointing out the oppression Shylock and other Jews have suffered. Once Shylock has named the cruelty and hypocrisy of Christians, Antonio betrays that side of himself—vicious and unyielding to those not of his ken: "I am as like to call thee so again, to spit on thee again, to spurn thee too" (131-32). Yet Antonio does need the money, and the bargain follows. Shylock will lend him the sum at no interest, but on condition that if he forfeits the bond, he will have to pay with a pound of his own flesh. The bargain is curious: after maintaining his right to practice
usury, Shylock agrees to terms that give him no gain if Antonio succeeds; the penalty, on the other hand, reflects Shylock's rage at the oppression he has had to endure from the likes of Antonio. There is mercy for Antonio if he succeeds, but an awful vengeance if he fails. Further, the penalty of the pound of flesh is undoubtedly meant to horrify the audience, and yet it should be remembered that Antonio knowingly enters into and agrees to the terms.

The Taunting

In the second act, Launcelot Gobbo, Shylock's servant, has deserted him for Bassanio, and his own daughter has run off with a Christian, Lorenzo. Bassanio has sailed for Belmont, where Portia has already successfully evaded two suitors, who have chosen the wrong chests. The third act begins with Salanio and Salario discussing the news of Antonio's losses; Shylock enters, and they taunt him as the Devil "in the likeness of a Jew" (3.1.25), calling him "old carrion" (38) and claiming there is more difference between Shylock's flesh and that of his daughter "than between jet and ivory, more between your bloods than there is between red wine and Rhenish" (41-43). When they ask him about Antonio's losses, Shylock mutters that the merchant is "a beggar that was used to come so smug upon the mart. Let him look to his bond" (48-49). He claims Antonio's losses will "feed my revenge" (56) and launches into a tirade against the Christian's scorn and laughter, ending with what appears to be a plea:

He hath disgraced me, and hindered me half a million, laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned 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.

(56-76)

This, perhaps the most famous speech on prejudice in all literature, has been cited countless times as the signature of Shakespeare's sympathy for those outside the pale. Bloom, already cited, feels that revenge is the human right Shylock claims here; if this is the case, the speech hardly qualifies as a plea for tolerance. However one sees it, the language displays the wounded psychology, the double-consciousness of the oppressed man; it implies a whole history of suffering experienced because one is different, displaying the intense anger of one who has been struck one time too many.

After this speech, Tubal enters, bringing Shylock news that he can't find Jessica, that Antonio has lost an argosy from Tripolis, that Jessica spent "in one night fourscore ducats" (113-14) in Genoa, and that she sold Shylock's ring "for a monkey" (124). During this dialogue, Shylock quickly passes from cursing his daughter and wailing his losses to ecstacy that Antonio has had losses, and then to anger that his daughter has wasted great sums of money—but when he learns of the ring, Shylock displays a deep sadness for a lost companion, Leah. He is suddenly more than a Jew baited by Christians: "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" (126-28). This short passage is more telling than the more famous pleas that precede it, for here we discover intimations of a past love, the soft, sad heart of the man—and perhaps for the first time, realize the enormity of Jessica's betrayal. Thus, the taunting scene not only reveals the idle cruelty of Salanio and Salario, who mock Shylock's pain at the loss of his daughter, but we also sound the depth of his rage and, in this brief passage, see the intimacy of his suffering.
The Trial

Act Four opens with the famous trial scene, which contrasts "the quality of mercy" with Shylock's demand for "judgment." The Duke tells Antonio that he can't save him; Antonio and Bassanio slander Shylock and then offer him double his bond. Proud and angry, he refuses this offer. Portia enters, disguised as Balthasar, and delivers the famous "quality of mercy" speech (4.1.184-205). When this does not move Shylock, she outwits him by demanding the absolute letter of the law:

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 of it if thou dost shed
One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods
Are, by the laws of Venice, confiscate.
(4.1.306-11)

When Shylock sees that he has been tricked, he says he will take the Christians' second offer, but Portia stops him: "Soft. The Jew shall have all justice" (320-21). Within a short time, they confiscate his goods and sentence him to death if he cuts "more or less than a just pound" (326-27); when he refuses this gambit, they strip him even of the principal of the loan. Next, Portia cites a law against alien sedition that allows them to strip him of all his goods. One half is to go to the injured party—Antonio—and the other half is for the state. Antonio then begs the court:

To quit the fine for one half of his goods,
I am content, so he will let me have
The other half in use, to render it,
Upon his death, unto the gentleman
That lately stole his daughter.
(381-85)

Antonio offers this "mercy" on the condition that Shylock turn Christian and that he make Lorenzo and Jessica his heirs. Shylock has no other way out; he is "content" (394) and departs the stage, a beaten man.
The trial scene treats us, then, to the sort of deception Christians practiced on Jews throughout Europe for centuries; the Christian's claim to right or justice rests solely on the barbarous conditions of the bargain he himself agreed to, and the plea for mercy must surely have sounded hollowly in the ears of one whose people had been denied mercy or even simple kindness for centuries. The scene is also notable for its curses—Bassanio calls Shylock "thou unfeeling man" (63), Antonio asks "what's harder?  His Jewish heart" (79-80), and Gratiano calls him "thou damned, inexecrable dog" (128), claiming later that

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Thy currish spirit} \\
\text{Governed a wolf who, hanged for human slaughter,} \\
\text{Even from the gallows did his fell soul fleet,} \\
\text{Infused itself in thee, for thy desires} \\
\text{Are wolvish, bloody, starved and ravenous.}
\end{align*}
\]

(133-38)

Rarely, too, is Shylock referred to by name, but becomes "Jew," "the Jew," "this devil" (287), and "infidel" (333).

Shylock may indeed be the blocking figure in Frye's vision of romantic comedy, for the play continues for another act without him. The remainder of the play features Portia's and Nerissa's deception with the rings, their upbraiding of Bassanio and Gratiano for parting with these rings, and the "happy" ending, the prospect of a triple marriage and the investing of Lorenzo and Jessica. Yet if these Christian couples are indeed the new society announced in the format of romantic comedy, they are a troublesome lot, conniving and deceptive among themselves and especially when dealing with outsiders. Shakespeare has not solved a problem in this play; he has presented us with one—and no appeal to form or format can obscure this fact.
Conclusion

My conclusion is fairly simple; I have presented an overview of the long history of Jew-baiting, both historically and in the literature of England, and I have shown that while such references are not universal, they do present a disturbing picture of attitudes that most would now be ashamed to claim. I have also shown that earlier portrayals usually showed innocent Christians (or Christ himself) bedeviled by evil Jews; in both Marlowe and Shakespeare, however, we see corrupt Christians who slander and steal from Jews when it suits their needs, Jewish characters who fit the money-hungry stereotype of the Jew, yet who consciously present and refer to the long history of the oppression of their people—who are human in that they find their position intolerable despite having to bear it. The two characters react somewhat differently when their great troubles come. Barabas is true to his grandiose personality, scheming the deaths of his oppressors. Each apparent betrayal spurs him to greater revenges, driving him to an anger that only flickers at the play's beginning. In contrast, Shylock is a wounded character who appeals to the letter of the law in order to uphold his rights; if Barabas goes out as a great torch, Shylock smolders, accepts fate, and lives.

Beyond these observations, we come to the problem itself. The situations of both plays involve wounded people responding to oppression; each character has ample justification for his or her actions, and the language of their utterance allows for a wide variety of interpretations. The indeterminacy of the language is furthered in each actor's interpretation of it, and when the audience and the critics interpret that interpretation. Beyond that, this is compounded when we argue on the basis of past history or culture, when we call an interpretation more correct because it conforms to our vision of what Shakespeare's contemporaries might have seen in it. As Lyon so effectively pointed out, we bring our own prejudices to these plays, and the fact that they are such complex arti-
facts makes it that much easier to find what we are looking for in them. In the end, we are left not with answers, but with the problem: in most societies, those who are different will often be mistreated and abused. When they react to that abuse and fight back, their oppressors will use that reaction as a justification to oppress them even further. These plays open the long, sad, ancient wound that still infects humanity as a whole; their story is that unfinished history that haunts us long after we leave the theater and look into each other's eyes.
Works Cited


