

USURY AS A HUMAN PROBLEM IN SHAKESPEARE'S *MERCHANT OF VENICE*

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Usury as a Human Problem in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*

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ABSTRACT

Shakespeare's Shylock from the *Merchant of Venice* is a complex character who not only defies simple definition but also takes over a play in which he is not the titular character. How Shakespeare arrived at Shylock in the absence of a Jewish presence in early modern England, as well as what caused the playwright to humanize his villain when other playwrights had not is the subject of much debate. This thesis shows Shakespeare's humanizing of Shylock as a blurring of the lines between Jews and Christians, and as such, a shift of usury from a uniquely Jewish problem to a human problem. This shift is then explicated in terms of a changing England in a time where economic necessity challenged religious authority and creating compassion for a Jew on the stage symbolically created compassion for Christian usurers as well.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

In several of his plays, Shakespeare refers to Jews as despised figures and perpetuates common myths about them without any moral reservations. In *Much Ado About Nothing* Benedick exclaims of Beatrice “If I do not love her I am a Jew” (2.3.231-2), meaning, like a Jew, he is lacking in Christian charity if he does not love her. Likewise, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* uses “Jew” as a term of abuse as Launce says to Speed, “If thou wilt, go with me to the alehouse; if not, thou art an Hebrew, a Jew, and not worth the name of a Christian” (2.5.44-5). Again, the term “Jew” is used as a term of abuse to belittle someone for a lack of charity. The play further disparages Jews by implying that they lack pity, and by comparing them to dogs, as Launce says, “He is a stone, a very pebble stone, and has no more pity in him than a dog. A Jew would have wept to see our parting” (2.3.10-11). This is to say that their parting was so sad, even an unfeeling and pitiless Jew could not have helped but wept at it.

I Henry IV characterizes Jews as being without valor or honor as Falstaff swears, “You rogue, they were bound every man of them, or am a Jew else, an Hebrew Jew” (2.5.164-5). By his exclamation, Falstaff attempts to gain credibility by contrasting himself, who has no credibility, with those who unjustly have none. He claims he is a liar, as all Jews are, if his statement is false. *Richard II* refers to Jews as more than just uncharitable and lacking pity or valor, and suggests that they commit the greatest offense possible by denying Christ: “As is the sepulchre, in stubborn Jewry, / Of the world’s ransom, blessed Mary’s son” (2.1.55-6). By using the word “sepulchre” the line implies that the Jew’s “stubborn” denial of Christ will be their undoing, and just as England makes a conquest of itself through the ensuing action of the play, Jews make a conquest of themselves through their “stubborn” denial of the Messiah. Finally, the witches of *Macbeth* add “Liver of blaspheming Jew” (4.1.26) to their list of items going into a

viscous gruel that will serve to further grieve Macbeth. This line enforces the idea of Jews spreading false beliefs, while other items on the list such as “Nose of Turk, and Tartar’s lips” (4.1.29) effectively associate Jews with other perceived pagans.

While there is a “Jew as evil”-discourse present in *The Merchant of Venice* as it is in its source texts and the texts that preceded it, the play also presents a noticeable departure from this tradition. Unlike Marlowe’s Barabas from *The Jew of Malta*, which preceded Shakespeare’s play, Shakespeare’s Shylock is a complex character whose pledge for vengeance reverberates with fear, antipathy, and humanity: “There is a strong, quick, and deep sense of justice mixed up with the gall and bitterness of his resentment” (Hazlitt 270). It is this sense of justice that is explicated and laid bare before an audience that separates Shakespeare’s play from Marlowe’s. *The Merchant of Venice*, while certainly perpetuating the “Jew as evil”-discourse, also redirects the audience’s attention away from the stereotypical evil of Judaism and instead exposes usury as a human problem rather than as one that is uniquely Jewish. The play thus speaks directly to the usury debate that was taking place in early modern England at the time of the play’s composition and its contemporary, early modern performances.

CHAPTER 2. *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE* AND THE EARLY MODERN USURY DEBATE

A study of 16th-century England is a study of a country experiencing significant and rapid religious and economic change. England had become an officially Protestant country by the time Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice*, but it still had a significant Catholic contingent, and tensions between the ruling Protestants and the Catholic minority were always present just below the surface. The religious controversy that had largely defined the previous decades and rulers stabilized somewhat under Queen Elizabeth when she rose to the throne in 1558 and moved policy toward locating a middle ground between the majority Protestants and the minority Catholics.

At the same time, the economic depression that had begun her reign progressively reversed through thriving commerce and industry, and for many, private wealth increased considerably (Lunt 352). The new prosperity, while certainly good for England, also caused conflict between religion and the demands of the new economy. Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* exists as both a product of and a comment on this conflict. Its treatment of usury through Shylock and his actions, as well as the actions of those around him blur the lines between Jews and Christians, and in doing so, shift usury from a Jewish problem to a human problem.

"The Jew" in the Play

The Merchant of Venice was written sometime between 1596 and 1598 and first appeared in print with the *First Quarto* of 1600. The title of Shakespeare's play suggests it is a play about a merchant, who subsequently appears in its opening lines as a sad and senseless character who hardly knows himself and whose sadness wears on those around him, "In sooth, I know not why I am so sad. / It wearies me, you say it wearies you / . . . And such a want-wit sadness makes of

me / That I have much ado to know myself” (1.1.1-2,6-7). From the onset of the play, its titular character is portrayed as weak, indecisive, and wavering in both his thoughts and affections. His vague sadness distracts him and makes him unsure of himself, and as a result, the audience is unimpressed. Later in the scene Antonio says the world is “A stage where every man must play a part,/ And mine a sad one” (1.1.77-8), but again his mood is without expressed cause. This is contrary to Shakespeare’s other notable leading characters whose first appearances are marked by melancholy. Hamlet appears on the stage amidst a cloud of gloom, and his first line is spoken with biting sarcasm. But it is clear that he is lamenting his father’s death and his mother’s consequent actions. Likewise, Romeo’s walks onto the stage in a dismal state of mind, but it is immediately made clear that he is out of favor with Rosaline, whose love he seeks. In both cases, the expressed reason for the character’s sadness is not only justified but also creates an opportunity for the plays action to bring the character out of their sorrow while at the same time advancing the plot. However, in the case of Antonio, audiences are left looking for a strong character who will carry the action of the play forward. This character is the Jew.

In contrast to Antonio, Shylock’s appearance in the play shows him confident, in control, calculating, and even cunning:

SHYLOCK: Three thousand ducats. Well.

BASSANIO: Ay, sir, for three months.

SHYLOCK: For three months. Well.

BASSANIO: For the which, as I told you, Antonio shall be bound.

SHYLOCK: Antonio shall become bound. Well.

BASSANIO: May you stead me? Will you pleasure me? Shall I know your answer?

SHYLOCK: Three thousand ducats for three months, and Antonio bound.

BASSANIO: Your answer to that.

SHYLOCK: Antonio is a good man. (1.3.1-11)

Shylock plays with Bassanio, repeating Bassanio's words while offering him no new information. He holds him in suspense, all the while making him wait to be answered. Finally, instead of answering, Shylock makes a vague statement about Antonio, causing Bassanio to misunderstand him. From his very opening lines, the Jew takes command of Bassanio's attention and emotions, and then holds them firmly throughout the scene.

In the same way, Shylock hijacks the audience's attention and emotions and steers them confidently until his final moments on the stage. He commandeers the play and makes it his own. A reading of the play or the viewing of a performance will inevitably leave the audience with an image of Shylock-the Jew and moneylender, not Antonio—or Bassiano for that matter—the Christian and the merchant. At the end of the play, Shylock is punished with the forfeiture of his goods and forced into Christian conversion. But he also walks away, asking for privacy so that he may recover from the trial and surrender his goods and, perhaps, his soul away from the public gaze and the humiliation he suffered at court: "I pray you, give me leave to go from hence. / I am not well. Send the deed after me, / And I will sign it" (4.1.390-2). Most importantly, we see him exit an act before the play's end, yet his presence lingers, and it is he we wonder about even as the final act shows as a fairy tale scene of young couples in marital bliss: Was Shylock justified in demanding the return of Antonio's bond in the merchant's flesh? Was he wronged more than he was committing wrong? Will he, indeed, practice the Christian faith, or will he refuse and die alone and miserable in his defeat? These are the questions audiences ask themselves as they depart, an act after Shylock does, with little to no thoughts for Antonio's or the couples frolicking on Portia's island. The Jew, and whether he was wronged or committed

wrong is what occupies audience's minds. Structurally, of course, it is Shylock who undergoes dramatic change, be it forced or otherwise, making him the round, evolving character and protagonist while Antonio remains flat as the play's merchant of Venice and *per factum* Christian. And it is Shylock then, not the merchant, who has made his presence felt throughout and become the focal point of a play named for his counterpart.

"The Jew" in Early Modern England

The fact that Shylock holds a central position in the play makes the question of how Shakespeare arrived at Shylock an important one. Shakespeare's portrayal of Shylock is complicated due to the fact that there were no visible, practicing Jews in England during his lifetime. "A population map of the Jews in Christian lands in the year 1500 would reveal a striking fact – namely, that in vast areas of Christendom there were no Jews. Practicing Jews were permitted to live in only three regions of Europe: the Italian states, the Holy Roman Empire, and Poland-Lithuania" (Bodiam 485). Jews had been forcibly expelled from England by Edward I in 1290 in an act that exceeded most of Europe's in its reach and severity (Wistrich 101). *Holinshed's Chronicles* refer to Jews as "auoid out of the land," elaborating that "so heervpon were the Iews banished out of all the kings dominions, and neuer since could they obtain any priuilege to returne hither againe" (492). Raphael Holinshed, writing in 1577, thus highlights how the consequences of the mass expulsion were still in effect in 16th-century England, and literary critic Stephen Greenblatt concurs that by the time Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice* in 1596-8 "the Jewish population of England was ancient history . . . the Jewish community in England had long vanished, and there were no Jews who openly practiced their religion" (258). The obvious question then is on what or on whom did Shakespeare base Shylock? Without a visual template or a live model, how did Shakespeare sketch his Shylock?

What's the cloth from which he stitched his money-lending Jew, the clear and visible protagonist of his misnamed play?

The only Jews who would have been allowed in England after the expulsion were converters who had been baptized and acclimated into Christianity, and these could not have served as a basis for the cunning and defiant Shylock who struts across Shakespeare's stage. English Jews would not have resembled Shylock; they did, however, represent everything Shylock resisted and despised. The forced expulsion of 1290 had erased both the Jew and Jewish culture from England, but what remained in the absence of Jews was a culture of medieval anti-Semitism. To some extent, Shakespeare bases Shylock on this medieval tradition and, in doing so, effectively sheds a light on the "Jew as evil"-discourse that dominated medieval England and that continued well into the early modern period.

"The Jew" in Medieval England

The "Jew as evil"-discourse is a discourse that takes part in and actively advances anti-Semitism through the promotion of negative stereotypes. These stereotypes as discussed here in relation to *The Merchant of Venice* include Jews as greedy, Jews as usurers, Jews as hateful towards Christians, Jews as associated with the devil, and Jews as murderous.

It is interesting to note then that, unlike the "Jew as evil"-discourse that existed in 16th-century England, the medieval discourse was based on an actual Jewish presence, which was defined largely by usury. Jews in medieval England were not allowed to own land or businesses and were, therefore, forced into the practice of usury as their last resort and in order to survive. But the fact that usury provided a lucrative income also backfired and directed an astonishing amount of new enmity towards them.

Jews were seen by Elizabethans as the first usurers, and as such, as deviating from the laws of God. In one of his many 16th-century pamphlets condemning usury, clergyman Henry Smith says of Jews and their lending practices: “First, they did lend upon Usury to Strangers, after they began to lend upon Usury to their Brethren: and now there be no such Usurers upon the Earth, as the Jews which were forbidden to be Usurers” (6). Smith’s argument is that Jew’s lending practices devolved from what had at first been allowable to what was not allowed, and as a result, “you may see how the Malice of Man hath turned Mercy into Cruelty” (6). The “malice” is in reference to usury displacing surety, as allowed and ordered by scripture however this is problematic in two points. First, it was the Christian’s failure to lend at surety that created a need for Jewish usury and second, as noted, Jews practiced usury not out of malice, but rather out of necessity and a lack of other options because of Christian laws imposed on them. It was a circumstance of Jews being forced into an action and then maligned for it. The resulting negative image of the Jew as a usurer is much of what is continued in the negative discourse that later defined them in their absence.

The English viewed the usury Jews practiced as a sin against both God and man, and penalties in medieval England for associations with Jews were harsh. The medieval law textbook *Fleta* declares, “Those who have a connexion with Jews and Jewesses or are guilty of bestiality or sodemy [sic.] shall be burned alive in the ground” (90). The ruthless anti-Semitic fear and hatred expressed in *Fleta* that equates Jewishness with bestiality and sexual deviance was prevalent in medieval England, and it is what survived and was perpetuated through medieval texts where “the Jews, like wolves in modern children’s stories, played a powerful symbolic role in the country’s imaginative economy” (Greenblatt 259). Greenblatt explains that much of this symbolic role was carried forward into 16th-century England through sermons, religious

literature, and plays such as *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Jew of Malta*, which feature Jews as usurers. Through texts such as these, Elizabethans of all religious persuasions adopted the medieval image of the “Jew as evil”-discourse, and the word “Jew” itself “carried connotations of scorn and contempt” (Westrich 101). These stereotypes and prejudices are present in both Shakespeare’s play and the plays and historical texts that preceded it.

Importantly, the “Jew as evil”-discourse began with and centered on the Jew as a usurer. Despite all of the other evils that may have been associated with a Jew in a given text (hating Christians, ritualized murder, associating with the devil, etc.) usury was the evil most consistently associated with Jews. Clergyman Thomas Wilson expressed perceived reasons for this hate in his *Discourse upon usury*, first published in 1572: “What is the matter that Jewes are so uniuersallye hated wheresoever they come? For soothe, usurie is one of the chief causes, for they robbe all men that deale with them, and undoe them in the ende” (38). It was also the reason frequently given to justify their oppression at the hands of Christians: “And for thys cause, they were hated in England, and so banyshed worthelye” (38). Given such clear anti-Semitic sentiments, it is interesting to note that the concept of lending and borrowing underwent rapid changes during the 16th-century, suggesting perhaps that English portrayals of Jews as usurers may have been largely projections and skeptical portrayals of a changing world in which usury gradually transcended religious demarcations. By the time Shakespeare put his quill to paper, it was the English themselves who were lending at interest but blaming the long absent Jew for their own sins. As a result, the English were able to “imagine a villainous moneylender whose fictional excesses overshadowed their own very real acts of exploitation” (Shapiro 99). But the fact remained that a culture of usury was evolving in early modern England, with Christians lending money to other Christians at interest.

A Need for Usury

An emerging capitalism appeared at varying levels in early modern England, with *The Merchant of Venice* reflecting the country's burgeoning internationalized commercialism rather than the lending at interest that took place between peasants in England. Shakespeare's London was increasingly becoming an international city as it recognized that "commerce would be the indispensable lifeblood of England and the world" (Lim 363). Shakespeare incorporates the emerging economic development occurring around him into his play through the character of Antonio and his activities, as Shylock notes of him: "He hath an argosy bound to Tripolis, another to the Indies. I understand, moreover, upon the Rialto, he hath a third at Mexico, a fourth for England, and other ventures he hath squandered abroad" (1.3.14-6). These types of broad business ventures would have been familiar to an English audience aware of an emerging early modern English capitalism taking place all around them. A theme of international trade echoes in Marlowe's *Jew of Malta* as well, only here it is the Jew himself who is the merchant with ships trading abroad throughout the Mediterranean: "Thine argosy from Alexandria, / Know, Barabas, doth ride in Malta-road, / Laden with riches, and exceeding store / Of Persian silks, of gold, and orient pearl"(1.1.87-90). Each of these plays, despite being set in Italy, reflects the economic expansion and social change occurring in England at the time of their composition.

Despite an emerging international trade, most of the lending at interest in early modern England occurred on a much smaller and local scale. Much like today, farmers borrowed between planting and harvest and to survive bad seasons, corn dealers would buy from farmers on advance, and young tradesmen would start businesses with borrowed funds and continue to borrow in order to cover losses or to expand. Casual credit was ubiquitous amongst the lower classes, which made up nearly three-quarters of the population, and in the absence of an

organized lending system or class of moneylenders, borrowing and lending was done by both peasant and small master one to another. In his introduction to Thomas Wilson's *Discourse Upon Usury* R.H. Tawney notes, "Borrow they must: they will lend – for a consideration - if they can . . . Money lending is not a profession, but a bye employment" (21). The practice of lending by commoners is evidenced by the amount of lay people appearing in court for offenses: "In country districts the character most commonly found advancing money is a yeomen, and next to him probably comes the parson; for both are slightly, if only slightly, better off . . . than the humbler cottagers" (22). Tawney suggests that the lending at usury that occurred in Shakespeare's England was largely "spasmodic, irregular, unorganized, [and] a series of individual and sometimes surreptitious, transactions between neighbors" (22). Lending and borrowing at interest was a necessary part of life for the peasantry and was largely a circumstance of those that had excess funds available to lend at interest to those who did not. These changing views on usury in England were evidence that "its existence was indispensable to the larger economic health of the nation" (Lim 356).

The Usury Bill of 1571

In 1545, Henry VIII had passed an act allowing money lending with an interest to be taken at 10%. However, when his son Edward VI repealed the act in 1552 once again all usury was forbidden in England. It was not until 1571, when Henry VIII's third child, Queen Elizabeth I, "utterly abrogated, repelled, and made voyde" (Acte Par.1) her brother's act of 1552 with her own Usury Bill of 1571, commanding that her father's act of 1545 be "revived and stand in full Force Strength and Effecte" (Par.1). Elizabeth's bill further specified that any usury "reserved or taken above the Rate of Tenne Pound for the Hundred for one yre, shallbe utterly voyde [*sic*]" (Par. 2). Interesting here is that Elizabeth did not say that she was *allowing* usury up to 10%, but

rather, declared that she was *limiting* usury to 10% or less. Through her wording, she appeared to be limiting a necessary evil rather than reinstating a forbidden practice. Indeed, Elizabeth's Usury Bill had been debated in the House of Commons in April of 1571 where the idea of permitting some usury for the greater good of all had been addressed: "And better may it be born to permit a little, than utterly to take away and prohibit Traffick; which hardly may be maintained generally without this" (Journal Par. 4). The same idea is seen in the title of the bill as well, which is called *An Acte agaynst usurie*, when in all actuality it was a law for usury at ten percent. Elizabeth's bill then might be read as an attempt to limit damages caused by usury by setting a cap on it, while at the same time sanctioning it and maybe even offering it as an incentive to people who needed to borrow money in order to do business. As such, Elizabeth's law appealed to the merchants, while her wording at the same time appealed to the Church. She illustrates her contempt for usury by saying "And forasmuch as all Usurie being forbidden by the Lawe of God is synne and detestable; Bee it enacted . . ." (Par.5), and whether her contempt was genuine or not, it was congruent with the feelings of many of her subjects.

While Christian usury might still have been a relatively new and largely invisible practice until 1571, most often conducted on a small scale and at a personal level, the English were intimately familiar with it, and "a great deal of the debate revolved around the compatibility of perceived scriptural injunctions with the demands of social practice" (Lim 356). People knew usury was necessary and practiced it by both charging and paying interest, but they consistently argued about how it should be defined and what actually constituted it, even as they felt that usury, in its very nature, was immoral, unchristian, and potentially evil.

Early Modern Perceptions of Usury

The persistent perception of usury as evil was in part due to preachers who continued to rally against it even after Elizabeth's ruling. The fact that a sovereign had made allowance for it made no difference in their minds: "Lastly, they alledge the Law of the Land for it, and Say the Queen's Statute doth allow us to take upon Usury ten in the Hundred . . . This is the poorest Defence of all the rest: for if God's Law forbid thee, can any Law of Man excuse thee?" (Smith 17). Smith's argument exposes the risk taken by Elizabeth in playing to both sides and the unwillingness of some to take part in her compromise, and scholars have suggested that usury had been made legal in order to restrict it and to suppress predatory lending that had occurred outside of the law (Hawkes 67). But regardless of the case, Elizabeth's ruling was indeed necessary and proved a viable solution in a circumstance where she seemingly lost no matter which direction she followed.

The following quote appeared on the title page of an anti-usury pamphlet published in 1591, twenty years after Queen Elizabeth's Bill and several years prior to Shakespeare's play: "Of all Men, Usurers are not the least accurst, / They robb the Spittle, pinch the afflicted worst : / O how unjust a Trade of Life is that, / Which makes the Lab'ers lean, the Idle fat?" (Smith 1). The quote is an apt summary of the prevailing perception of usurers in early modern England. While many Elizabethans practiced usury out of necessity, the common perception held by those who preached against usury was more in line with the medieval "Jew as evil"-discourse, echoing that of a rich lender who practiced nothing else and lived only from interest taken from borrowers. Wilson, along with other 16th-century clergy also felt that usury had displaced mercy and, in the process, had made ruthless gain people's paramount concern: "Men have all together forgotten free lending, and have geven themselves wholye to lyve by fowle gayning, makinge the

lone of monye a kinde of merchandize” (176). In the context of Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*, Wilson’s use of the word “merchandize” assumes perhaps special significance, as it casts doubt on the identity of the titular merchant of his play: when money is merchandize, a moneylender can surely be called a merchant. When Smith’s pamphlet goes on to define usury as “the Gain of any Thing above the Principle, or that which was lent” (Smith 24), the idea of usury extends beyond money and finances to include goods and other tangible items. Any amount taken in excess of what had been lent then constituted usury and this, we find, was a belief held by most and preached by many, even as Elizabethans, like their predecessors, “were brought up to think of lending money at interest – any interest – as a grievous sin. The whole weight of Christian teaching was against it, from the Gospels onwards” (Gross 48). However, as usury became related to other items and practices, it also became further distanced from the type of usury commonly associated with Jews, gradually morphing into lending practices more unique to the English usurer.

In 1595 Miles Mosse preached: “Usurie is a kinde of lending of money, or corne, or oile, or wine, or of any other thing, wherin upon covenant and bargaine we receive againe the whole principall which we delivered, and somewhat more for the use and occupying of the same” (31). By 1595 then, beyond currency and goods, usury could and was applied to the use of land, livestock, or even the labor of family members until the loan’s principal was paid in full. Unpaid labor done by borrowers themselves was also a common practice considered by many as usurious, while pawning items was commonly practiced and derided as usury, as was price fixing and the offering of goods gratis, with a greatly inflated price to be paid later. Often borrowers would lend for planting grain with an agreement to share in the harvest; however, sharing would

not apply in the case of a loss of crops, so that the principle with interest (in lieu of a gain in yields) was fixed in its stead.

John Shakespeare and Usury

The difficulties of a transition to capitalism, as well as the needs, fears and potential declines related to it, are things that would have been very real to Shakespeare due to his own father's experiences as a merchant. Shakespeare may not have been exposed to practicing Jews, "but would certainly have known usurers, beginning with his own father" (Greenblatt 271). In the early 1570s, John Shakespeare faced four charges in the Exchequer, two for usury in 1571, and two for illegal wool dealing in 1572. In the first instance of usury, no record beyond the accusation survived, and it is assumed that Shakespeare compounded with his accuser outside of court to save court costs to both parties. In the second instance, Shakespeare appeared in court and denied his guilt, yet requested that he be allowed to pay a reasonable fine to avoid further court appearances and expenses. There is no proof in either case that Shakespeare was actually guilty of usury, but in the second it is obvious that he was willing to pay in order to put the matter to rest.

It is also worth noting that in the same year that Shakespeare was charged with usury, he also was elected to the position of High Bailiff in Stratford-upon-Avon, the highest appointment in civic government at the time. Despite the stigma attached to usury and the preaching that took place against it, there are no indications that Shakespeare was derided for it and, to the contrary, it is known that he enjoyed continued success despite the charges.

The charges of usury as well as those of illegal wool trading in the Exchequer are most useful in the information they provide regarding the scale of John Shakespeare's business operations. Informers had claimed that in 1568 he had made loans in the amount of £180, while

in 1571 he had bought 8,400 pounds of wool costing £210 (Thomas 317). While these claims are unsubstantiated, they certainly can attest to the scope of Shakespeare's business operations. However, it is generally assumed that England's transition to capitalism and the complications and difficulties it presented ultimately claimed John Shakespeare as a victim. Between 1596 and 1598 his fortunes changed drastically for unknown reasons, and he largely withdrew from public life presumably "for feare of processes" (Fripp 148), that is, of debt.

Christians Practicing Usury

The allegations of usury brought against John Shakespeare in 1571 attest not only to the prevalence of the practice of usury in 16th-century England, but also to the good standing of many who participated in it. In his 1591 anti-usury pamphlet, clergyman Henry Smith writes, "Many Times have I thought to speak of this Theme, but the Arguments which are alleged for it, have made me doubtful what to say on it" (3). The fact that Smith hesitates to speak out against usury because of the arguments alleged for it suggest that despite its designation as evil, usury was practiced and defended by many. It also suggests that Smith had usurers within his own congregation as he says, "if any here have favoured this Occupation before, let him now submit his Thoughts to God's Thoughts" (3). While by no means defending usury, Smith does openly acknowledge its existence among his parishioners, wishing however they subsist and turn to prayer instead—for the purposes of forgiveness, redemption, and refinement one presumes.

In his 1572 essay *A Discourse upon usury*, clergyman Thomas Wilson referred to usury as "one especial mischief as yll, nay woorse than anye plague . . . I do meane that ouglie, detestable and hurtefull synne of usurie" (176), while in 1584 the English physician and author Thomas Lodge proclaimed in his pamphlet *An Alarum against Usurers*, "more are eaten out with usury, then anye other abuse whatsoever" (17). A sentiment of usury as an endemic problem is

one that is continually repeated by 16th-century clergy. The extent to which it brought people to poverty as well as causing them to condemn their conscience and, as a result, to ignore both God's law and the government's is also a theme repeated again and again. Also repeated is the purported evil intent of the usurer: "Consider y end of all these practises by which the usurers doe put in use, forsooth it is to make you beggers [*sic*], where now your supplies be plentiful, & to emptie your purses" (18). Usury in other words is hostile in its very nature and both its practice and its condemnation can be traced back to scripture. In Deuteronomy, usury was characterized as "an act of murderous hostility, warfare by other means, licensed against the peoples who the Israelites were attempting to destroy, but unthinkable among people who had to live amicably together" (Hawkes 63). It was often argued that God allows some types of interest due to the verse, "You may charge a foreigner interest, but not a brother Israelite" (Deut 23:19), but the argument was countered with the idea that God only allows for interest so that the Jews may destroy their enemies financially through it. The same argument was then applied to England and the idea that Englishmen were now destroying one another by a means God had permitted so that the Jews might exact retribution upon their enemies. Usury then is always hostile, always vengeful, and always calculated and aimed at destruction.

That usury was lucrative in 16th-century England is undeniable, and its potential for making profits was a large part of the problem faced by those who preached against it. Lodge complained, "They crie out continually against all usurers with open mouth, and in all their sermons, and yet, what avails it? nothing at al [*sic*]" (18). The more money people made through usury, the more they attempted to justify it—regardless of whether the pulpit forbade it or not. Accordingly, the more prevalent usury became, the harder it was to defeat: "This is the Nature of Pleasure and Profit, to make Sins seem no Sins, if we gain any Thing by them; but the

more gainful Usury is, the more dangerous it is” (Smith 4). The clergy was attempting to convince usurers who were making money that their practices were wrong, but in the end, it was the need for credit that proved the church wrong, showing them old-fashioned and out of touch with current economic needs.

Something that is strikingly absent in early modern English polemical texts is the “Jew as evil”-discourse that was so ubiquitous in medieval texts and on the Elizabethan stage. One reason for this might be that in reality it was Christians who practiced usury while the Jews that appeared on stage or in texts were merely projections of Elizabethan’s own perceived evil. As Elizabethans gradually increased their borrowing and lending at often excessive rates of interest, “it was reassuring to learn that they were not as bad as Jews” (Shapiro 100). The projecting of their practice was not limited to the stage or polemical texts however; Christians who practiced usury were frequently decried as Jews, labeling them with the mark of Judaism and as unworthy of membership in the sanctity of Christianity.

In his *Discourse upon usury* published in 1572, Wilson allows that the Jews had license from the King to practice usury, but then also notes, “These Jewes are gone. Would god the Christyans remayninge, and our countrymen at this time dyd not use theire fashyons [*sic*]” (99). Christians who did practice usury rather than lending out of mercy were labeled as “Christians onelie in name, Bastardes, and no sonnes of God. For none are the sonnes of God, but sutch as imitate the vertues of their father [*sic*]” (Caesar 20). The connotation of Christian usurers as “bastards” makes sense in this context as they would no longer be considered Christian born or part of the Christian family: “And howe can these men be of god, that are so farr from charitie, that care not howe they get goods so they may have them” (Wilson 38). Finally, many who preached against usury considered Christians who practiced usury as corrupt, morally

deteriorating, and moving down the path toward total and utter condemnation: “For I take them to be no better than Jews. Nay, shall I say? they are worse than Jews” (38). Wilson’s statement makes sense from his Christian standpoint because, as previously mentioned, usury was arguably allowed to Jews in certain contexts by biblical law, whereas in no biblical context is it allowed to Christians.

CHAPTER 3. *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE* AND THE “JEW AS EVIL”-DISCOURSE

In early modern England, the prevalence of “the Jew as Evil”-discourse in legends, myths and polemical texts had led to deeply ingrained, cultural prejudice and scapegoating. In the absence of practicing Jews, anti-Semitism evolved into something that “no longer required any connection with real human relationships, indeed it no longer needed the presence of Jews at all. The stereotype had acquired a cultural dynamic of its own” (Wistrich xx). Anti-Semitism, in other words, was no longer a response to an actual Jewish presence, but, rather, a response to the “Jew-as-evil”-discourse that had been handed down to early moderns. Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* pays tribute to this cultural prejudice through the words and actions of its characters. The play is indicative of how early modern English citizens would have perceived Jews and how Jews would have been treated by them. The hatred of Jews, even in their absence, is also evident in the fact that Shakespeare’s play was only one in an entire tradition of anti-Semitic works produced within the period.

Source Texts and Earlier Texts

Common stereotypes put upon Jews in medieval texts and source texts that are evident and continued in *The Merchant of Venice* are: Jews as greedy, Jews as usurers, Jews as hateful towards Christians, Jews as associated with the devil, and Jews as murderous. The texts that will be examined in the following pages all predate *The Merchant of Venice* but are relevant to it either as source texts—as in the cases of *A new Song*, *Il Pecorone*, and *The Jew of Malta*—or as earlier texts that promote some aspect of the “Jew as evil”-discourse—as in the case of “The Prioress’s Tale” and “Hugh of Lincoln.”

“A New Song: Shewing the Crueltie of Gernutus a Jew” is a poem arguably credited as one of the source texts Shakespeare used for *The Merchant of Venice*. Its author and date of

composition are unknown. “A New Song” features a Jew who is despised as a usurer as well as a merchant who, like Antonio, negotiates for a pound of flesh as forfeiture for money borrowed. “Il Pecorone” is a collection of short stories written at the end of the 14th century by Giovanni Fiorentino. Broken up into days, the first story of the fourth day is the source text Shakespeare’s play most closely resembles. It does not mention usury, but features a Jew bent on destroying a Christian. It also features a rich merchant who weighs a pound of meat in security of a loan, and here, too, it is borrowed for a friend who wishes to woo the Lady of Belmonte.

The Jew of Malta (1589-90) is a play written by Christopher Marlowe and warrants special consideration because it was written in the same city and at roughly the same time and under the same circumstances as *The Merchant of Venice*. In many ways, the play is a continuum of the medieval “Jew as evil”-discourse, but also perhaps a caricature; it is habitually considered to have influenced Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* and will be discussed in depth here. “The Prioress’s Tale” is one of the stories relayed in Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (1345-1400); it has been selected for discussion here because it is an earlier text featuring a Christian child murdered by Jews who associated with the devil, which was a common theme in medieval Christianity. By the same token, “Hugh of Lincoln,” a ballad from *The Annals of Waverly* (1255), is another earlier text that features a child murdered by a Jew with allusions to the devil. Unlike the fictional texts, this was chosen for discussion here because it is based on an actual case of a missing child where it is likely that anti-Semitism caused innocents to be executed for the crime.

Jews as Greedy

Maligning Jews as greedy was a common aspect of the “Jew as evil”-discourse promoted by earlier texts. “A New Song: Shewing the Crueltie of Gernutus a Jew” describes the life of a

Jew who is completely obsessed with making and retaining money, willing to exploit the poor for his own gain beyond what is needed for his own use: “His heart doth thinke on many a wile, /how to deceive the poore: / His mouth is almost ful of mucke, / yet still he gapes for more” (17-24). Here the Jew’s gain is associated with “mucke,” which he consumes until his mouth is full, yet he still desires to take more. The same stereotype of insatiable greed is seen in *The Jew of Malta* as stage prompts show “Barabas discovered in his counting house, with heaps of gold before him” (348). In the very first line of the first scene Barabas is found figuring, thinking, and counting money: “So that of thus much that return was made” (1.1.1). In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock appears in much the same way thinking and repeating while speaking of money: “Three thousand ducats. Well . . . Three thousand ducats for three months, and Antonio bound” (1.3.1,7). This character introduction is directly in line with the texts that preceded it and continues the Jew as greedy stereotype as they did.

In Act 2.2 of *The Merchant of Venice* Lancelot says of his master, Shylock: “My master’s a very Jew” (2.2.93). That is to say, he is a veritable Jew, or the epitome of all Jewish stereotypes. Lancelot exclaims that he is “famished in his service. You may tell every finger I have with my ribs” (2.2.94-5), and then states that he wants to serve Bassanio, “Give me your present to one Master Bassanio, who indeed gives rare new liveries. If I serve not him, I will run as far as God has any ground” (2.2.96-8). Being a Christian, Lancelot is sure that Bassanio, as a fellow Christian, is the more desirable master, and that is despite the fact that Bassiano is the one borrowing money and, furthermore, needs Antonio to stand security for him, as he himself owns less than nothing:

But my chief care is to come fairly off from the great debts wherein my time, something to prodigal, hath left me gaged. To you, Antonio, I owe the most in money and in love,

and from your love I have a warranty to unburden all my plots and purposes how to get clear of the debts I owe. (1.1.127-134)

It is Shylock's Jewishness and his own cultural prejudices then that inveigh Lancelot against his current master, driving him to beg employment of the impoverished and greatly indebted Bassiano. The same type of stereotyping can be seen in the labeling of the Jew as a usurer.

Jews as Usurers

"The Prioresses Tale" describes Jews as usurers by featuring a Jewish community living within a Christian city in Asia and "Sustened by a lord of that contree / For foule usure and lucre of vileynye" (490-1). Likewise, the source text "A New Song" features "a cruell Jew . . . / Which lived all on Usurie (Par. 1). What is not shown however is the fact that Jews practiced usury out of necessity rather than choice. As in England, which is, of course, the place of publication for the source of the text, Jews had been forced into practicing usury "as their principle means of support in the early Middle Ages, as trade and other occupations became closed to them . . . A dubious privilege: it left them in a more precarious situation than ever" (Gross 54). In both the text and the culture from which it emerged, Jews were hated and condemned for what they were forced to do out of necessity by Christians.

Alternately, the tradition of the Jew as a usurer is not present in "Il Pecorone". Despite numerous similarities in the stories, "Il Pecorone" makes no mention of usury throughout the entire text, despite the fact that the villain is a Jew, has money readily available for loan, and does in fact loan it in the story. This fact is significant because "Il Pecorone" is widely credited as the work that *The Merchant of Venice* most clearly emulates. The fact that usury is not mentioned in "Il Pecorone" suggests that Shakespeare did not merely draw upon usury for his play because it prevailed in his source texts, but rather, introduced usury deliberately because it

was relevant to his story, to his audience, and to his own business of playwriting and creating plays that critically engaged with the culture that surrounded him.

Contrary to “Il Pecorone”, but similar to other earlier texts, Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta* depicts Barabas as a self-declared usurer, “BARABAS: I must needs say that I have been a great usurer” (4.1.41), although he is never actually portrayed charging interest. In his “I walk abroad a-nights” speech, Barabas speaks of his activities, “Then after that I was a usurer, and with extorting, cozening, forfeiting, and tricks belonging unto the brokery, I fill’d the gaols with bankrupts in a year” (2.3.195-8), but is never shown practicing them. Also, the result he speaks of, bankruptcy and arrests, never factor into the play. Likewise, in *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock incriminates himself as a usurer as he says that Antonio “brings down the rate of usance here with us in Venice” (1.3.39-40) and then proceeds to argue with Antonio regarding the treatment of usury in scripture. Later in the text, Shylock bemoans how Antonio has “hindered me half a million; laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, healed mine enemies” (3.1.46-9). Antonio’s hatred of Jewish moneylending has impacted Shylock’s business practices negatively in the past; it is with great reluctance and some malice perhaps that Shylock eventually agrees to strike a deal with his Christian antagonist.

Jews Hating Christians

In both literary and historical texts, Jews are frequently portrayed as moneylenders and usurers and are resented as such. However, the “Jew as evil” - discourse is not limited to greed, money, and interest alone. It includes a deep fear of Jews as hateful towards Christians. *The Prioress’s Tale* shows how characters take offense at a Christian child who sings Christian songs in the Jewish quarter: “Fro thennes forth the Jewes han conspired / This innocent out of this

world to chace. / An homicide therto han they hyred [*sic*]” (565-7). This line suggests not only that Jews hated Christians, but that they hated them to the extent of being willing to murder a child simply for his or her faith.

In *The Jew of Malta*, Barabas uses Jewish stereotypes to create a bond with fellow villain and Jew, Ithamore; “We are villains both, both circumcised. We hate Christians both” (2.3.219-20). Here in just ten words, Marlowe uses the word “both” three times to show sameness amongst Jews. His choice of stereotypes is interesting as well, connecting circumcision, a religious custom, with prejudices brewed up by Christians against Jews, that is, innate villainy and a hatred of Christians that remains without justification or context; Marlowe’s Barabas hates Christians as a matter of fact, and so, he assumes, must his Jewish associate, Ithamore.

The theme of hatred towards Christians is echoed in the source text “Il Pecorone” as well, where the Jew denies payment of a Christians debt only so that he can kill a Christian: “And divers traders made a partnership together to pay the money, but the Jew would not take it, being minded rather to do this bloody deed, so that he might boast that he had slain the chief of the Christian merchants” (54-5).

The same circumstance occurs in *The Merchant of Venice*, with Shylock refusing to be paid a greater amount in exchange for sparing Antonio’s life. When offered six thousand ducats as payment for the three thousand he lent, Shylock answers, “If every ducat in six thousand ducats were in six parts, and every part a ducat, I would not draw them. I would have my bond” (4.1.84-6). Shylocks insistence on the penalty rather than re-payment or payment in excess of the original loan shows “a surprising lack of business acumen” (Bailey 1) for a character as obviously shrewd as Shylock is, but his refusal speaks volumes in regards to his hatred for Antonio: “his craving for vengeance has overtaken his desire for profit” (1). Finally, Shylock

vocalizes his hatred as he says of Antonio, “How like a fawning publican he looks. I hate him for he is a Christian; but more for that in low simplicity he lends out money gratis” (1.3.36-9). This vocalization of hatred comes in the third scene of the play and immediately after Shylock encounters Antonio on the stage for the first time. Spoken as an aside, it suggests that his hatred lies beneath the surface, and as such, presents an even greater danger and foreshadows disaster. This vocalization and its outcome is typical of a Shakespearean aside or soliloquy where the internal thoughts of a character are expressed aloud in order to create a sense of intimacy between character and audience. The result is a sense of anticipation of what is inevitably to come and a feeling of responsibility on the part of the audience when it does.

In the opening lines of *Richard III*, Richard confides in his audience that since he is deformed, cheated of happiness, and “cannot prove a lover” he is “determined to prove a villain” (1.1.28,30). He then proceeds throughout the course of the play to have one of his brothers wrongly executed by the other, execute his young nephews, and have his wife (whose first husband he’d killed in battle) murdered so he can marry his niece for political gain. Throughout all of this, there is a nagging sense of culpability experienced by audiences because of the words spoken in confidence to them at the play’s opening. They have been made aware of the villain stalking the stage, but are powerless to stop him or to warn others of him.

It is in Act 3 of *The Merchant of Venice*, where Shylock again gives voice to his hatred as he sinisterly indulges the prospect of vengeance when he hears of Antonio’s misfortunes at sea. He expresses joy and anticipation at Antonio’s “ill luck” and promises to “plague” and “torture” him as a result of the bond being forfeit. Despite his earlier “Hath not a Jew eyes” speech, it is at this point that an audience becomes fully aware of the depth of Shylocks hatred for Antonio and the danger that it poses for him.

Ironically, in Act 4, after much of the action surrounding Shylock and Antonio has unfolded—let’s remember that Shylock is not part of the play’s final act—Shylock refuses all justification, owning his hatred toward Antonio as a fact, nothing more and nothing less: “So I can give no reason, nor I will not, / More than a lodged hate and a certain loathing / I bear Antonio, that I follow thus / a losing suit against him. Are you answered?” (4.1.58-61). By making reference to a “losing suit,” Shylock admits that he stands no chance of success in a Christian court; he argues on principle and responds in kind. He is also aware of the fact that if the circumstances were reversed, there would be no questioning, nor cries for mercy; his answer reflects this. Shylock is not there to make friends; he knows he is amongst his mortal enemies, and his attitude during the trial garners him no sympathy but serves to confirm all he knows they already believe and suspect him of: he is the devil come to claim his wager, signed in the blood of the Christian borrower.

Jews as the Devil

Chaucer’s Prioress is quick to associate Jews with the devil in her tale, and it is Satan’s prompting that brings the Jewish community to commit the murder of the young Christian child:

Oure firste fo, the serpent Sathanas,
that hath in Jewes herte his waspes nest,
Up swal, and seide, ‘O Hebrayk peple, allas!
Is this to yow a thing that is honest,
That swich a boy shal walken as him lest
In youre despyt, and singe of swich sentence,
Which is again oure lawes reverence.’ (558-64)

The metaphor of a wasp's nest is used to show how, when moved by something like a Christian child, Satan will rise up in the hearts of Jews and overcome them like wasps swell up and overcome their victims. Also notable within the metaphor is the fact that a wasp's nest can go unnoticed and cause no problems until provoked.

Associations with Satan are made in the medieval ballad, "Hugh of Lincoln" as well, although there they are more subtle and symbolic, as a young Jewish girl tempts a Christian boy with an apple:

'Throw down the ba, ye Jew's daughter,
Throw down the ba to me!'

'Never a bit,' says the Jew's daughter,
'Till up to me come ye.'

'How will I come up? How can I come up?
How can I come to thee?
For as ye did to my auld father,
The same ye'll do me.' (13-20)

The "auld father" here is Adam who was tempted by Satan through Eve. The allusion to Genesis is made clearer as the girl reacts; "She's gane till her father's garden, / And pu'd an apple red and green; / 'Twas a' to wyle to him sweet Sir Hugh, / And to entice him in" (21-4). The allusion is completed in the ballad's final line: "An neer was such a burial / Sin Adam's days begun" (69-70). There can be no mistaking the biblical allusion, as it not only establishes the extent of the ceremony, but also makes reference to Adam.

The Jew of Malta has Barabas and Ithamore doing the will of the devil as Ithamore explains how they came to cause the deaths of two Christians; "Why, the devil invented a

challenge, my master writ it, and I carried it, first to Lodowick, and *imprimis* to Mathia[s]” (3.3.20-1). Marlowe here has a Jew not only admitting his association with the devil, but gloating about the association as well. Along similar lines, in Act 2 of *The Merchant of Venice*, Lancelot establishes a direct association between Shylock and the devil when he proclaims, “Certainly the Jew is the very devil incarnation” (2.2.21), that is, to him Shylock represents Satan in the flesh. Likewise, in Act 3, Solanio marvels at Shylock, “Never did I know a creature that did bear the shape of a man so keen and greedy to confound a man” (3.2.273-5). Shylock, in other words, is something other than a man, and something that seeks to deceive man, a demon in disguise. Finally, after losing hope during the trial Bassanio says to Antonio, “But life itself, my wife, and all the world / are not with me esteemed above thy life. / I would lose all, ay, sacrifice them all / here to this devil, to deliver you” (4.1.279-82). There are multiple, religious connotations in this line, first with Shylock as the devil, but then alternately with Bassanio as Christ, offering self-sacrifice in hope of deliverance and salvation for Antonio.

Jews as Murderous

Portraying Jews as capable of and actively seeking to murder Christians is another “Jew as evil”-tradition common in medieval and source texts. Once more “The Prioress’s Tale” might serve as an example as Chaucer tells of Jews hiring a murderer to kill a young Christian boy who sings to the Virgin Mary:

An homicide therto han they hyred,
That in an aley hadde a privee place;
And as the child gan forby for to pace,
This cursed Jew him hente, and heeld him faste,
And kitte his throte, and in a pit him caste. (567-71)

The first of these lines says “they” hired a murderer, which shows murderous intent agreed upon by a group. The fourth line then exposes the actual murderer as a Jew, a single murderer chosen from among a group of murderous Jews.

In contrast, in the case of “Hugh of Lincoln” the Jew’s daughter acts alone as she lures the young Christian Hugh into her father’s castle for the purpose of murdering him:

She’s led him in through ae dark door,

And sae has she thro nine;

She’s laid him on a dressing-table,

And stickit him like a swine.

And first came out the thick, thick blood,

And syne came out the thin,

And syne came out the bonny heart’s blood;

There was nae mair within. (25-32)

Here, there is no motive offered for the murder and the action is only seen as reasonable because of the “Jew as evil”-discourse from which it emerges.

Shakespeare’s immediate source texts follow the same theme of Jews ready to murder Christians that was prevalent in other medieval texts. In *The Jew of Malta*, Barabas is shown as willing and ready to murder Christians, and then does so on multiple occasions. He tricks Lodowick and Mathias into killing one another in a duel over his daughter, and when, as a result she converts and enters a nunnery, he poisons all the nuns including his own daughter. He then remarks at the sound of bells, “There is no music to a Christian knell! / How sweet the bells ring now the nuns are dead, / That sound at other times like tinkers’ pans!” (4.1.1-2). The bells ring a

death knell to his Christian enemies and confirm that his poison was effective; as such, they are music to his ears. Ithamore then murders a priest, before being killed by Barabas himself, who soon after falls victim to his own plot to kill a Christian and a Turk and dies at his own hand.

“A New Song” has the merchant sign a deed for a pound of flesh, and when the bond is forfeit, the Jew demands payment: “The bloody Jew now ready is, / with whetted blade in hand, / To spoyle the blood of Innocent, / by forfeit of his Band” (113-16). “Il Pecorone” also has the merchant forfeit and the Jew prepare the knife, and similar to both “A New Song” and “Il Pecorone”, stage directions in *The Merchant of Venice* include the line, “Shylock whets his knife on his shoe” (4.1), exemplifying his readiness to commit bloody murder.

When implored for mercy, Shylock declines and states that he is willing to take responsibility for his actions: “My deeds upon my head! I crave the law, the penalty and forfeit of my bond” (4.1.201-2).

Importantly, *The Merchant of Venice* and its most quoted source texts differ from “The Prioress’s Tale” and “Hugh of Lincoln” in that its villain does not actually commit murder. In the earlier texts, the Jew is shown as willing and capable of murder, yet no murder is ever accomplished. Despite this fact, in the case of all of the texts, the theme is the same regardless of different preceding circumstances or outcomes. The texts repeatedly portray Jews as willing to and even actively seeking to murder Christians simply for their faith.

CHAPTER 4. *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE* AND SHAKESPEARE'S HUMANIZED JEW

The Merchant of Venice first appeared in print in a quarto edition in 1600. The title page of this *First Quarto* describes the play as: "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 flesh : and the obtaining of *Portia* by the choyse of three chests" (1). That the cruelty of Shylock is extreme and the innocence of Antonio absolute is something that has been and continues to be assumed about the play, due largely because of the above cited source text and contextual literature. However, much within the play itself fights this assertion, this rough casting of Shylock and Antonio as black and white or evil and good. Shakespeare's selection of source texts, as well as the material he borrows and ignores, begs for a reexamination of this too simple description.

The second chapter of this paper sought to establish the circumstances that *The Merchant of Venice* emerged from by considering Jews in medieval and early modern England, as well as usury as practiced in early modern England. The third chapter of this paper then discussed the "Jew as evil"-discourse that impacted *The Merchant of Venice* by looking at source texts and earlier texts as well as how the play takes part in and perpetuates the "Jew as evil"-discourse by portraying Shylock as greedy, a devil, a usurer, and as hating Christians. While the "Jew as evil"-discourse has undoubtedly found its way into *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare's play also exhibits a noticeable break from the tradition and the cultural prejudices that noticeably prevailed in early modern England.

The fourth chapter of this project will then build upon what has already been established regarding where the play emerged from and the discourse the play continues by discussing ways

Shakespeare complicates the “Jew as evil”-discourse and how these complications effectively shift usury from a distinctly Jewish problem to a human problem. This will be done by discussing how Shakespeare complicates the discourse by blurring the lines between Jews and Christians by building compassion for Shylock by establishing Jews and Christians as the same both physically and emotionally, by expounding on the reasons for the hate Shylock expresses, and by establishing Shylock’s right to revenge. Finally, an examination of Act 2 scene 2 of *The Merchant of Venice* will illuminate how Lancelot blurs the lines between Jew and Christian as well by exhibiting the ease of switching masters within the play. By complicating the “Jew as evil”-discourse and shifting usury from a distinctly Jewish problem to a human problem, the play speaks directly to the usury debate that was taking place in early modern England at the time of the play’s composition and its contemporary, early modern performances.

Reasons for the Hate

Understanding the enmity that existed between Jews and Christians in the texts is crucial to understanding how *The Merchant of Venice* complicates the “Jew as evil” - discourse. Religious differences are the most obvious and frequently cited reason for the hate between Jews and Christians in the play, and the non-acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah by Jews was a reason commonly associated with anti-Semitism: “Even in the wake of the Messiah’s presence in their midst, Jews stubbornly and perversely clung to their old beliefs, beliefs that could not cleanse and hence ransom them from sin” (Greenblatt 259). The Jews refusal to accept Christ as the Messiah was an affront to Christians, and was used as justification for both Christian anti-Semitism and Jewish suffering caused by anti-Semitism: “The papal argument was that an unhappy, impoverished, weak, and insecure remnant was a useful reminder of the consequences of rejecting Christ” (261). However, while this rejection certainly occurred, it seems insufficient

and lacking as justification for the treatment that Jews suffered from the standpoint of *The Merchant of Venice* as well as *The Jew of Malta*.

Act 1 scene 2 of *The Jew of Malta* offers the only example of Christians offering something close to a reason for the hate that the Jews suffer from them.

For through our sufferance of your hateful lives,
who stand accursed in the sight of heaven,
these taxes and afflictions are befall'n,
and therefore thus we are determined. (1.2. 66-9)

Here it is the Jew's money the Christians seek, and they feel they deserve it for allowing Jews to live in their city. No direct reason is given for why they hate the Jews except that they must tolerate them.

By contrast, *The Merchant of Venice* outlines Antonio's hate, and it does so in Shylock's own words: "Signor Antonio, many a time and oft / in the Rialto you have rated me / About my moneys and my usances" (1.3.102-4). Antonio, Shylock claims, has called Shylock a "misbeliever," a "cutthroat," and condemned him for his profession as a moneylender. Antonio does not refute it, but rather says he is likely to accuse Shylock again. Antonio hates him and persecutes him for being a usurer; his hypocrisy, as Shylock points out, lies in his own request for a loan:

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,
And foot me as you spurn a stranger cur
Over your threshold. Moneys is your suit. (1.3.111-15)

Act 3 then has Shylock offering a list of Antonio's wrongs against him in the famous "Hath not a Jew eyes" speech, but no clear reason, beyond being a Jew, is given as a reason for the wrongs he suffers: "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" (3.1.46-9). Shylock's lack of explanation may be due in part to the broad acceptance of anti-Semitism at the time, and to articulate reasons might have been redundant. Alternately, Marlowe's explanation, offered by the Christians who exploit Barabas, seems an apt summary of what cultural texts offer regarding Jewish scapegoating and stereotyping. However, the resentment that Shylock feels in these lines is obvious. It is what drives his revenge. It is why in court he refuses three times the amount agreed to. It is why he seeks to kill Antonio. Contrary to the "Jew as evil" - discourse and its stereotypes, "he is driven by resentment and a perverted sense of justice rather than greed" (Gross 50). Ultimately, it is Shylock's resentment against his treatment by Christians that fuels his hatred for Antonio.

The Jewish hatred of Christians that is ever present in earlier texts is further developed and is finally vocalized in *The Merchant of Venice* as a reaction to the mistreatment of Jews at the hands of Christians. As the play progresses, Shylock's hatred for Antonio becomes less and less shocking and repulsive, and instead, more understood as a result of what he and his nation have suffered. This becomes evident as Shylock first speaks of his hatred for Antonio:

I hate him for he is a Christian;
but more, for that in low simplicity
he lends out money gratis, and brings down
the rate of usance here with us in Venice.

If I can catch him once upon the hip,

I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him. (1.3.37-42)

Here, as expected, Shylock first lists religion as a reason for his hatred, but then states that his hatred is “more for” the fact that Antonio’s borrowing brings down interest rates. While this is certainly true, it is “the ancient grudge” that is most interesting in these lines. The hatred Shylock bears Antonio goes much deeper and further back than the actions of either character in the play. It is however, always usury that is named by both Jew and Christian as the reason for the hate.

Antonio’s lending “in low simplicity” is lending in Christian courtesy, which Shylock considers to be humble foolishness. After Antonio’s ships are lost, Shylock further rails upon the point, and again, it is the lending without interest that is singled out as a reason for the hate; “He was wont to call me usurer: let him look to his bond. He was wont to lend money for a Christian courtesy: let him look to his bond” (3.1. 40-2). And then later in Act 3, “Jailer, look to him. Tell not me of mercy. This is the fool that lent out money gratis. Jailer, look to him” (3.3.1-3).

Antonio himself later restates and reaffirms the reason for Shylock’s hate of him as he expresses to his friends the futility of the circumstance he finds himself in:

I’ll follow him no more with bootless prayers.

He seeks my life. His reason well I know:

I oft delivered from his forfeiters

Many that have at times made moan to me.

Therefore he hates me. (3.3.20-4)

Through each of these statements hate is recognized, but a theme emerges as well. The hatred Christians and Jews show towards one another in *The Merchant of Venice* is the result of an “ancient grudge” perpetuated by earlier texts. This ancient grudge is veiled in a cloak of race and

religion, and surfaces through money and usury. The hatred evident in *The Merchant of Venice* rests on usury, Shylocks practicing of it and Antonio's sabotage of it. In recognizing this, the characters both become culpable and the complication of the "Jew as evil"- discourse intensifies, as does the possibility of an audience forming empathy for Shylock.

Humanizing the Jew

Shylocks "Hath not a Jew eyes" speech contains some of the most noted lines in *The Merchant of Venice*, and while the speech is certainly about justifying his revenge, it also does much to humanize Shylock by causing an audience to sympathize with him. When rumors of Antonio's fleet being lost begin to circulate, two of his friends question Shylock. "Why, I am sure if he forfeit thou wilt not take his flesh. What's that good for?" (3.1.43-4). Shylock's answer is the first revelation of the depth of his hatred for Antonio and of the lengths that he is prepared to go to in getting his revenge. "To bait fish withal. If it will feed nothing else it will feed my revenge" (3.1.45-6). Shylock then proceeds to list the reasons for his hatred of Antonio, each of which has to do with his business: "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" (3.1.46-9). These words reek of raw emotion: "They are wrenched from Shylock; they have the stamp of anger and spontaneity" (Gross 67). By offering an inside view of the prejudices suffered by all Jews, as well as a list of the ways Antonio has wronged him, compassion is effectively shifted from Antonio, the Christian, to Shylock, the Jew. In doing this, Shakespeare moves beyond merely participating in the "Jew as evil" - discourse as his predecessors and contemporaries have done.

Shakespeare builds on compassion created when he has Shylock detail his Jewish humanity more generally:

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? (3.1.49-55)

These lines effectively humanize Shylock and, building on the lines that preceded them, transform him from a villainous monster to a mortal human who is capable of hurt and injury. These lines complicate the “Jew as evil” - discourse by bridging the gap between Jew and Christian and forcing audiences to see Shylock as a human as well. Shakespeare then returns to revenge in the context of what has been shown, and suggests it, too, be considered in a new light:

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. (3.1.56-61)

The strength of these lines is in their circumstance and delivery. This is not a speech that Shylock had premeditated in order to scold Antonio’s friends. These are not sentiments he had wished to share with Christians. Shylock loses his temper and his control, and in the process, gives audiences a glimpse of a wounded man.

Samuel Johnson claimed “Other dramatists can only gain attention by hyperbolic or aggravated characters, by fabulous and unexampled excellence or depravity” (375). In *The Jew*

of *Malta*, Marlowe makes unabashed use of such hyperbole as his Jew, Barabas, becomes a Punch-type caricature, personifying and exploding all Jewish stereotypes in one fell swoop. He is a villain that is almost beyond belief and certainly beyond what is realistic. His depravity, however, clearly stems from the “Jew as evil”-discourse: he is a greedy, murdering, demonic Jew, bent on killing Christians and especially children. Alternately, “Shakespeare has no heroes; his scenes are occupied only by men, who act and speak as the reader thinks that he should himself have spoken or acted on the same occasion” (375). Revenge is then no longer seen as a monster preying on the innocent, but rather, as the act of a human who has been continually wronged and who has the right, based on Christian precedent, to avenge himself. By humanizing Shylock, Shakespeare allows audiences to see him as “only a man” who acts and speaks as readers themselves would in the same circumstance.

Shylock and Barabas were both wronged by Christians, but the difference in characters is how they react to being wronged. Barabas is abhorrent, while Shylock is humanized and worthy of sympathy. Shakespeare’s character is completely contrary to *The Jew of Malta*, where there is no humanizing of Barabas and no expounding of the evils wrought upon him, and therefore, no sympathy created for him. The audience is made aware on multiple occasions of how Shylock has been wronged, and then, of how Christians revenge when wronged, and finally of how, logically, Jews have a right to exact the same revenge when wronged. Because of this awareness, audiences are conflicted as to how to feel about Shylock as a character. What was simple in the beginning of the play becomes complex as the action moves forward. In making his character a man rather than a monster, Shakespeare ultimately complicates the “Jew as evil”-discourse by making audiences question if the villain is even a villain at all.

The Right to Revenge

The “right to revenge” is a complication of the “Jew as evil”-discourse in that, while it is certainly present and acted on by Jews in other texts, it was never justified in the way it is in *The Merchant of Venice*. The “gaping pig” speech at Antonio’s trial, as Shylock answers questions about his perceived cruelty toward, and lack of mercy for, Antonio, reiterates Shylock’s humanity and his human right for just retribution:

You’ll ask me why I rather choose to have
a weight of carrion flesh than to receive
three thousand ducats. Ill not answer that,
but say it is my humor. Is it answered?
What if my house be troubled with a rat,
and I be pleased to give ten thousand ducats
to have it baned? What, are you answered yet?
Some men there are love not a gaping pig,
some that are mad if they behold a cat,
and others when the bagpipe sings I’th’ nose
cannot contain their urine: for affection,
mistress of passion, sways it to the mood
of what it likes or loathes. Now, for your answer:
as there is no firm reason to be rendered
why he cannot abide a gaping pig,
why he a harmless necessary cat,
why he a woollen bagpipe, but of force

must yield to such inevitable shame
as to offend himself being offended,
so can I give no reason, nor I will not,
more than a lodged hate and a certain loathing
I bear Antonio, that I follow thus
A losing suit against him. Are you answered? (4.1.39-61)

Unlike Marlowe's Barabas, Shylock is a man who has been wronged more than he is wrong. As such, he gives frivolous answers to those who have wronged him and refuse to understand his offense at what they've done to him. He begins by saying, "it is my humor," and then, "is it answered?" In Shylock's mind, his answer should suffice. It is their humor to hate him without reason, so they should certainly understand his humor in pursuing revenge rather than profit, or, his hate without reason. He makes his answer clearer by offering a metaphor of the circumstance they find themselves in. In the metaphor, Shylock compares his losing suit against Antonio to the circumstance of a man being willing to pay an exorbitant amount to rid his house of a rat, and then again asks "What, are you answered yet?" Now, he is asking if they understand the metaphor and are connecting it to current circumstances. He then offers mundane examples of common things commonly hated, a "gaping pig," a cat, and the sound of a bagpipe, and gives them their answer, "Now, for your answer," by qualifying his hatred for Antonio as being as mundane and common to himself as any of these other things are to other people. Finally, Shylock returns to where he had begun his speech, with the losing suit, hate, and loathing. Once more by offering them "no reason," he states his final answer. Shylock's tactic of answering their question by first not answering, then offering a metaphor, then a vague comparison, and then again not answering, all the while asking if "they are answered" suggests that the answer is

obvious, and the question need not be asked at all. Shylock offends through his actions because he himself has been offended. This is something his questioners should see, but cannot, as shown by Bassanio as he responds “This is no answer, thou unfeeling man” (4.1.62). Bassanio refuses to understand Shylock’s explanation, and in doing so, refuses to acknowledge any culpability in the tradition of hate that is playing out before them in the courtroom.

Alternately, audiences that had been privy to both scenes and conversions would understand the implications of what Shylock is saying. Again, the theme of creating empathy for Shylock by showing him to be acting as any other person would act in the same circumstance is conjured, and in doing so, the image complicates the “Jew as evil”-discourse that was Shakespeare’s blueprint.

Forced Conversion

Shakespeare’s final complication of the “Jew as evil” - discourse can be seen in Shylock’s forced conversion. “England’s fascination with the conversion of Jews had begun in earnest in the late 1570s and early 1580s and was quite well established by the time that Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice*” (Shapiro 134). Forced conversion is a topic breached in both *The Jew of Malta* and in *The Merchant of Venice*, and in both plays Christians use it as a method of manipulation rather than for saving souls. However, forced conversion is a starting point for Marlowe and an ending point for Shakespeare.

When faced with forced conversion in *The Jew of Malta*, “he that denies to pay, shall straight become a Christian” (1.2.74) Barabas first says, “I will be no convertite” (1.2.86), but later toys with the idea of conversion in order to set a trap; “Is’t not too late now to turn Christian?” (4.1.53), and then, “I know that I have highly sinn’d: / You shall convert me, you shall have all my wealth” (4.1.83-4). Marlowe’s Jew is frivolous with his faith. He is persecuted

for it, yet he is enough of a Machiavellian to use it to his advantage or to leave it as it benefits him:

And thus far roundly goes the business:

Thus, loving neither, will I live with both,

Making a profit of my policy;

And he from who my most advantage comes,

Shall be my friend.

This is the life we Jews are us'd to lead;

And reason too, for Christians do the like. (5.2.112-18)

This is not the case in *The Merchant of Venice*. Shylock is true to his tribe, and as such, it kills him when his religion is taken from him. It is obvious to all that he holds his faith dear, and it is for this reason it is stripped from him as a final punishment. Marlowe uses forced conversion as a part of the trigger that sets his murderous Jew loose on his victims, whereas Shakespeare uses it as the final injustice suffered by a Jew, and in doing so, creates a begrudging and reluctant but inevitably compassionate audience for him. It should be noted that the Duke did not order Shylock's conversion, but rather, it was a supposed mercy rendered to him by Antonio at Portia's prompting, "What mercy can you render him, Antonio?" (4.1.373), to which Antonio replies "that for this favour he presently become a Christian" (4.1.381-2). Antonio's request is the humiliation of a Jew who tried to humiliate him, and a supposed mercy extended to a man who would extend him none. However, in reality it is Shylock's final defeat and undoing. It is cynical malice cloaked as kindness on the part of Antonio. The forced conversion, while a final defeat for Shylock, is also Shakespeare's final attempt to humanize him and create sympathy for him, and as such, is the final complication of the "Jew as evil"–discourse.

Blurring the Lines

The result of Shakespeare's complication of the discourse is two-fold. First, it serves to blur the lines between Jew and Christians, and second, blurring the lines shows the ease of switching masters. Interestingly, it is a switching of masters, as seen in *The Merchant of Venice*, that serves as a catalyst in the play and that shifts usury from being viewed as a Jewish problem to a casting of it as a human problem.

In Act 1 of *The Jew of Malta*, Barabas attempts to defend himself from the Christians who seek to extort money from him by saying "Some Jews are wicked, as all Christians are" (2.2.116). He claims that the tribe that he descended from were "all in general cast away from sin" (2.2.118), and then proceeds to show exactly how wicked "some Jews" can be through his revenge on Christians. Despite the hypocrisy of these lines, they are true as well, and serve to blur the lines between Christian and Jew by expressing that wickedness is not implicit to one race or religion, as is evidenced in the action of the play as well, with Jews and Christians wronging each other in turn.

In Act 4 Portia enters the court and asks "Which is the merchant here, and which the Jew" (4.1.169). This question is odd due to the fact that at this time in Venice Jews were marked as "different, ideologically and often literally through clothing" (Loomba 141). This difference in attire is noted by Shylock himself as he says to Antonio "[you] spit upon my Jewish gabardine" (1.3.108). Here Shylock labels his gabardine as distinctly "Jewish," and the fact that this incident occurred "in the Rialto," or, the financial center of Venice suggests that Shylock would have regularly worn this type of attire in public. In a historical context, Shylock's clothing "complicates the characters' situation as well as relationship in the play since clothing may result

in a gap between classes or between races” (Chung 77). This complication also suggests that Portia would have been able to distinguish between Antonio and Shylock immediately.

In the much broader context of the Jew representing usury, Portia’s question would have illustrated to Elizabethan audiences the degree to which the lines between Christians and Jews were being blurred by the acceptance and practice of usury by Christians in early modern England. This type of “blurring of the lines” is something not present in a majority of the texts here previously discussed. In earlier texts and in source texts, lines between Jews and Christians were very clear. Blurring these lines was dangerous, as shown in “The Prioress’s Tale” and “Hugh of Lincoln,” where merely living in close proximity to Jews was depicted as potentially fatal.

Switching Garments

The willingness to blur these lines and to accept the practice of usury by Christians in early modern England shows the willingness to switch masters, in this case, out of economic necessity, and the relative ease with which it is done. Both *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Jew of Malta* show not only the harshness of Jews and Christians towards one another, but also that there is little difference between the Jewish and Christian master. In the play, people switch masters like garments, and in doing so, expose their Christianity or Jewishness as more of a garment that can be cast off or worn as needed more than an actual identity.

In *The Jew of Malta*, Barabas refuses to convert, but then is willing to feign switching masters in order to set a trap for Christians. The fact that his trap was effective shows the ease and acceptance of switching garments as well as the necessity at times to do so. Barabas’ daughter Abigail switches garments as well. She twice converts to Christianity, first at her father’s prompting in order to deceive Christians, and second--“BARABAS: What, Abigail

becomes a nun again!” (3.4.1)--out of grief for Mathias: “But now experience, purchased with grief, has made me see the difference of things” (3.4.68-9). Abigail’s conversion is undoubtedly sincere, and after he murders his daughter Barabas explains that he doesn’t have sorrow over her death, but rather, grieves “because she liv’d so long, / An Hebrew born, and would become a Christian: *Cazzo, diablo!*” (4.1.19-20). Abigail’s switching of garments is naturally rejected by her father; it is an example of a willing casting off of garments that occurs in the play.

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock, too, switches garments, but it is through a forced conversion that contrasts as a complete reversal from Marlowe’s play. *The Jew of Malta* begins with Barabas forced to pay a Christian debt--“BARABAS: You have my goods, my money, and my wealth” (1.2. 142)--in order to avoid forced conversion. Alternately, *The Merchant of Venice* ends with Shylock forced to pay a penalty to the Christians: “DUKE: For half they wealth, it is Antonio’s. / The other half comes to the general state, / Which humbleness may drive to a fine” (4.1.365-7). He is then further forced, as a mercy, to convert to Christianity in exchange for half of the fine being relinquished. In both plays, money and forced conversion are used together. In *The Jew of Malta*, Barabas paid not to convert, whereas in *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock converted in order to retain half of his wealth. In both cases, it is switching garments that is forced and either accepted or avoided for monetary reasons, and in both cases, it is the Christians who retain both their own faith and the Jew’s money.

This scenario is best substantiated through the character of Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice*. If viewed as a contest, Antonio would be the clear winner in the play. He defeats and humiliates his enemy, takes his money, and at the same time retains his life, standing, and fortune; and all of this despite the fact that he gambled and lost. Antonio knew the risk of what he was doing, “But lend it rather to thine enemy, / who if he break, thou mayst with better face /

exact the penalty” (1.3.130-2), but proceeds, confident in a Christian privilege that protects him. It is this privilege that saves his life, standing, and fortune, and it is because of his privilege that he has no need to switch garments.

Shylock’s daughter Jessica, however, does have a need to switch garments, and whether it is out of love, rebellion, salvation, or a combination of the three, her changing masters brings her into the circle of Christian privilege. Much like Abigail from *The Jew of Malta*, Jessica switches garments for love, but there is rebellion in her switching garments as well: “Alack, what heinous sin is it in me to be ashamed to be my father’s child! But though I am a daughter to his blood, I am not to his manners” (2.3.15-8). She is ashamed of her father, not because he is a Jew in blood, but rather, because he is a Jew in actions. He is the invariable representation of the “Jew as evil”—discourse in the play, and as such, is disgraceful even to his own daughter. She leaves her father and marries a Christian out of love, but also to remove herself from her difficult circumstance: “O Lorenzo, / if thou keep promise I shall end this strife, / become a Christian and thy loving wife” (2.3.18-20). It is also notable that, in this line, becoming a Christian is mentioned before becoming a wife. This was done to form a rhyming couplet at the scenes end, of course, but it still causes one to consider Jessica’s motivation in marrying and the extent to which seeking Christian privilege played a part in her actions: “I shall be saved by my husband. He hath made me a Christian” (3.5.15). However, conversion is again tied to money, even in the case of true love, as shown by Solanio’s telling of Shylock’s rant as he learns of his daughters flight: “A sealed bag, two sealed bags of ducats, / Of double ducats, stol’n from me by my daughter! / And jewels, two stones, two rich and precious stones, / Stol’n by my daughter! Justice! Find the girl!” (2.8.18-21). Conversion, be it forced or voluntary, costs a Jew, and a Christian privilege is one that needs to be bought.

Lancelot's struggle with conscience as he switches masters in Act 2 is the final and perhaps most comical example of switching garments in *The Merchant of Venice*, and significant in that it can be taken to represent the usury debate occurring in early modern England at the time the play was written. Act 2.2 of *The Merchant of Venice* is one of the few scenes in the play that is not derived from any known source material. This fact in itself is unremarkable, but what does deserve consideration is why Shakespeare made the choices that he did with the scene.

It is obvious that Act 2.2 is much needed comic relief, coming after Antonio and Shylock's fateful bargain and directly after the first of four strangers makes an unsuccessful bid for Portia's hand, and the scene has been described as "exquisitely humorous" (Hazlitt 274). But as comic relief, the scene begs the question of what the joke is. The entire scene is based on Lancelot's struggle with his conscience over leaving his Jewish master. By serving the Jew, Lancelot fears he is physically (based on the appearance of stereotypical physical characteristics) turning into a Jew. Lancelot is an example of the fools from Shakespeare's midcareer who were moving away from physical comedy and towards verbal humor (Rasmussen Par.9). Earlier clowns had moments of realization where their foolishness was exposed for them and the audience to see, whereas later clowns such as Lancelot blundered through scenes without ever recognizing their folly.

In early modern performances, Lancelot would have likely been costumed with a beard to resemble a Jew, and his line "I am a Jew if I serve the Jew any longer" (2.2.99) would have been an allusion to physical humor that was physically evident as well as making broader implications. Symbolically Lancelot's struggle can be taken to symbolize England's struggle with conscience over its acceptance of usury, and that by accepting and practicing usury, the people of England themselves become Jews.

The scene begins with Lancelot saying, “Certainly my conscience will serve me to run from this Jew my master” (2.2.1). In this line, the Jew is already his master, and at the time the play was written, usury up to ten percent was allowed in England. The Jew that is his master could then be interpreted as usury in England. Lancelot’s conscience tells him it is wrong to leave one’s master, but a fiend is at his elbow at the same time prompting him to run: “Away!’ says the fiend.’ For the heavens, rouse up a brave mind,’ says the fiend, ‘and run.’” (2.2.9-10). The fiend that prompts him “for the heavens” is divine if symbolism is considered, and this fiend, depending on one’s feelings regarding the usury debate, may or may not be a fiend at all. Lancelot then recalls the “Jew as evil”-discourse by aligning his master the Jew, or usury itself, with the devil: “‘Conscience,’ say I, ‘you counsel well;’ ‘Fiend,’ say I, ‘you counsel well.’ To be ruled by my conscience I should stay with the Jew my master who, God bless the mark, is a kind of devil” (2.2.16-19). He then points out that the fiend prompting him to run (disobedience) is the devil as well; “And, to run away from the Jew I should be ruled by the fiend who, saving your reverence, is the devil himself” (2.2.19-21). Finally, Lancelot concludes that while the fiend that prompts him to run is the devil himself, the Jew is the embodiment in the flesh of the devil, as is usury, and he should therefore flee; “Certainly the Jew is the very devil incarnation; and in my conscience, my conscience is but a kind of hard conscience to offer to counsel me to stay with the Jew. The fiend gives the more friendly counsel. I will run, fiend. My heels are at your commandment. I will run” (2.2.21-5). Lancelot’s fleeing from the Jew, his master, can be seen as symbolic of a need for England to flee from its master, usury, or The Usury Bill signed into law by Elizabeth I in 1571, which allowed interest to be charged at up to ten percent per year.

Finally, in Act 2.4 Lancelot leaves one master for the other. He literally leaves Shylock for Bassanio, and in doing so, leaves the Jew for the Christian: “Marry, sir, to bid my old master the Jew to sup tonight with my new master the Christian” (2.4.17-18). Lancelot’s transition from one master to the other can be traced in the stage directions given in the play. Act 2.2 begins with “*Enter [LANCELOT] the clown*” (268). Similarly, Act 2.3 begins with the stage direction “*Enter JESSICA and [LANCELOT] the Clowne*” (272), as Lancelot is still in the service of Shylock. Finally, Act 2.5 offers the stage direction, “*Enter [Shylock the] Jew, and his man that was, [LANCELOT] the clown*” (274). This shows Lancelot’s transition as complete, and interestingly, also suggests that because of his choice he is no longer the clown, but still the Jew’s man. Shylock’s opening lines in the scene suggest the opposite however. He sees Lancelot as no longer his man, but one who is with a new master who is no better. “Well, thou shalt see, thy eyes shall be thy judge, / The difference of old Shylock and Bassanio” (2.5.1-2). These lines insinuate, and rightly so in terms of the preceding arguments, that there is little difference between the Jewish and Christian master.

Act 2 scene 2 also provides what could be taken as an interesting parallel to the usury debate and Elizabeth’s Usury Bill of 1571. As Antonio’s trial progresses, Shylock refuses mercy and demands his bond. Bassanio then pleads with Portia to use her authority to bend the law just once to right this wrong against Antonio: “And, I beseech you, / wrest once the law to your authority. / To do a great right, do a little wrong, / and curb this cruel devil of his will” (4.1.211-12). Arguably, Bassanio is asking Portia to do exactly what Elizabeth had done with the Usury Bill. By allowing usury at ten percent Elizabeth had done a little wrong according to scripture, but had done it to do a great right by encouraging practical lending. In doing so, she had effectively “curbed the cruel devil” (usury) of his will. While this seemed a practical solution for

Elizabeth at the time, it is not one that Portia will consider, and her answer causes one to reconsider the Usury Bill of 1571 and the precedent it set: “It must not be. There is no power in Venice / can alter a decree established. / ‘Twill be recorded for a precedent, / and many an error by the same example / will rush into the state. It cannot be” (4.1.214-7). While this seems to be a hard line taken by Portia, it can be argued that she did have another option available that she was waiting to use. Elizabeth, alternately, did not. Her decree set a precedent of economic need trumping religious authority, and can be seen symbolically as a transition from spiting on the gabardine as Antonio did to wearing it as Shylock did.

Through her actions, Elizabeth distanced England from the medieval mindset that had served to hinder its progress, as “once the majority of the traditional ruling class had adapted to capitalism, the issue of usury faded away” (Cohen 768). This “fading away” pertains to usury as an “issue,” or as a source of contention as its practice became common with no stigmas attached to it. A change in the perception of usury had already largely occurred in England, that is to say, the English people had already switched garments; they just needed approval from authority to justify their actions, and the needed approval came with the Usury Bill of 1571.

CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION

As shown in Chapter 2, early moderns were blurring the lines between Christians and Jews and usury had emerged as a human problem rather than a Jewish problem long before *The Merchant of Venice* was written. But it is Shakespeare's portrayals of these circumstances that would have caused Elizabethans to consider them and cause us to consider them yet today: "Even as the Elizabethans have something to tell us about the Jews, their obsession with Jews tells us even more about the Elizabethans" (Shapiro 87). The Elizabethans tell us through source texts and other earlier and early modern texts, that the Jew is an evil and unfair usurer and a sinner. However, by combining all of these texts into one study centered on *The Merchant of Venice*, the Elizabethan's obsession with Jews can be seen as a projection of their own questionable actions onto an absent villain as a way of minimalizing their own genuine dealings.

We are all "the evil Jew" to some extent, and Shakespeare shows us this as he complicates the "Jew as evil"-discourse by blurring the lines between Christians and Jews on the stage. At the same time that he did this, Christians were practicing usury on the streets outside of the theatre and all over England, and exploiting and condemning one another just as Shylock and Antonio did on the stage. By humanizing the Jew and thus blurring the lines between Jews and Christians the play shifts usury from a Jewish problem to a human problem and would then have had the effect on an early modern audience of causing them to question not how they treated Jews, but rather, how they were treating one another. By creating compassion for the Jew, Shakespeare creates compassion for the usurer, and in doing so, addresses a real world problem occurring all around him.

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