

Shakespeare and the Limits of Cosmopolitanism

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Abstract: The first mention of The Merchant of Venice appears in 1598, when a publisher announces that he is about to publish “a booke of the Marchaunt of Venyce, or otherwise called the Jewe of Venyce.” And the first mention of Othello appears in 1622, when another publisher announced his intention to print “The Tragoedie of Othello, the Moore of Venice.” Shakespeare, thus, writes two plays whose titles seemingly claim something about the inclusiveness of the Venetian Republic: its ability to allow a conspicuous outsider to be “of” the very city that was known as the most sophisticated, commercial, and cosmopolitan community in Italy, indeed in all of Europe. In each, of course, the character discovers how provisional and vulnerable his existence is. The essay, therefore, looks at how Shakespeare understands the possibilities and challenges of cosmopolitanism, in ways that may help us understand something about Shakespeare’s world and perhaps something about our own.¹

Though Protestantism in the England in which Shakespeare lived was a state religion and church attendance was mandated by law, it would have been difficult for English people not to know that this religion was but one of many religions in the world. That fact was made clear by the often violent conflicts of Protestants and Catholics, from the sharp divisions within Protestantism itself, and mainly from the growing awareness of a multitude of non-Christian beliefs, as trade and colonization brought Europeans in contact with more of the rest of the world (Harrison, Smith).

But this knowledge did not produce some generous idea of religious difference, some comfortable notion of these multiple religions as evidence that, as Jesus says, “[i]n my Father’s house there are many rooms” (Luke 14:2). It is not that a generous

¹ Some of the material in this essay appears in chapter 4 of my *A Will To Believe: Shakespeare and Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

and inclusive idea of “religion” could not have formed: it just *did not* form. There are indeed many religions, as people increasingly were aware, but only one was thought to be true; that is, only one was thought really to be religion. Those other religions were inevitably seen as a mere “superstition” or a “false religion,” and thus not really “religion” at all. An extraordinary history of travel and exploration, written by Samuel Purchas and published in 1613, called *Purchas His Pilgrimage: or, Relations of the World and the Religions Observed in all Ages and Places Discovered*, insists that “the true Religion can be but one.” But he admits as his very subject the multiple “other Religions” of the world. These, however, he sees as “but strayings” from the “true Religion,” forms of what he calls “irreligious religion” in which “men wander in the dark, and in labyrinths of error” (sig. D4r).² Of course, considered in terms of European history, Protestantism was the “straying” from the Catholicism that was the original form of Christianity; but, in any case, irreligious religions clearly do not deserve the noun. It is a paradox: a phrase that is self-contradictory and self-cancelling.

It would still be another 150 years before anyone in the west thought differently about religion: they knew of others but their own was the one true one. Slowly it would change. In 1787, Thomas Jefferson, the third American President and one of the authors of the American *Declaration of Independence*, could say that there are “probably a thousand different systems of religion,” and “ours is but one of that thousand.” He cheerfully admit that “it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg” (Jefferson 267, 265). That is perhaps what most of us think now, in a world where religion seems more or less optional. But Samuel Purchas did not think this way. No one in Shakespeare’s England did.

We are, however, used to seeing Shakespeare in his exceptionalism. We have come to think of him and his values as universal and timeless. We believe that he imagines what has been unimaginable and his imaginings help bring it about. “He wrote the text of modern life,” said Emerson (721). But in this case, I am not so sure; or if it is true, it is not in the sense that Emerson intended.

In this essay, I want to think about Shakespeare in relation to the “other religions” that Purchas saw as “but strayings” from the true one, but not, of course, in relation to all of “the thousand different systems of religion” that Jefferson would admit,

2 Here and throughout the spelling of quotations has been modernised.

but just the two, Judaism and Islam, with which Christianity shares a common culture as the Abrahamic peoples of the book.

It does not seem to me an accident that the two plays of Shakespeare that most urgently raise the issue of religion are both set in Venice: The first mention of *The Merchant of Venice* is in 1598, when a publisher announces that he is about to publish “a booke of the Marchaunt of Venyce, or otherwise called the Jewe of Venyce.” And the first mention of *Othello* was in 1622, when another publisher, Thomas Walkely announced his intention to print *The Tragoedie of Othello, the Moore of Venice. The Jew of Venice and The Moor of Venice*: two plays whose titles seemingly claim something about the inclusiveness of the Venetian Republic, the most cosmopolitan city in Italy then, an international trading centre, not unlike modern Shanghai. But it may not be quite as happy a story as this suggests.

The printed title of the 1600 quarto of *The Merchant of Venice* is somewhat less generously cosmopolitan in its imagination of the story:³ *The most excellent Historie of the Merchant of Venice. With the extreame crueltie of Shyllocke the Iewe towards the sayd Merchant* (London, 1600). Indeed both plays, with their exotic outsiders, raise complex questions about how (or if) cultures can create forms of community that can successfully include the alien presences that the cultures seem to both to require and resist. They ask if that presence can really be *of* Venice as the play titles say rather than merely resident *in* it.

Venice was widely recognised as the most cosmopolitan of European cities. Thomas Coryate, a seventeenth-century English traveller, almost literalises this in his account of the Venetian marketplace: “a man may very properly call it rather *Orbis* than *Urbis forum*, that is, a marketplace of the world, not of the city . . . Here may you both see all manner of fashions of attire, and hear all the languages of Christendom, besides those that are spoken by barbarous Ethnics” (sig. O7r). Wonderfully cosmopolitan—perhaps, but lurking in that phrase “the barbarous ethnics” is a problem.

It is not a neutral, merely descriptive phrase. “Barbarous” is a word derived from a Greek word meaning “stammering,” and it originally meant probably only

3 I am using “cosmopolitan” in a sense derived from the modern social sciences to define a political entity that recognises the rights of individuals above considerations of nationality, ethnicity, or religion. Other forms of the word (“cosmopolitic” and “cosmopolitical”) are commonly used in early modern English, usually, however, to refer to individuals without strong “national attachments or prejudices” (OED), though there are usages not cited in the OED where it means something very much like this modern sense. William Barlow, for example, can imagine a “[c]osmopolitical union of humane society” in his *The Navigators Supplie* (London, 1597), sig. b.2r.

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that the speaker did not speak Greek, but it quickly came to mean something else, something worse: first it meant foreign, and then it came to mean uncivilised, and then it came almost to mean inhuman. And “ethnic” derives from a Latin word that also means foreign, specifically pointing to a difference of religion. So if Venice was multicultural and cosmopolitan, there was, nonetheless, a recognition that some of the residents could never really be residents *of* the city.

Shakespeare’s Venice plays raise this issue explicitly and in ways that are troubling. They engage the question of whether the cosmopolitanism of the city can provide an answer to linguistic, national, or religious difference. Cosmopolitanism is the recognition of the dignity of the individual over any divisive considerations of nationality, ethnicity, or religion. This is not, of course, the place to consider that claim, nor do I want to claim Shakespeare as somehow anticipating this idea.

He does not. But sixteenth-century Venice was a city that embraced difference, perhaps even a city that was defined by it. It was a city of contradictions beginning with its mix of land and sea. It was a living paradox (Platt 57–94, Gillies). And this fact was widely known and celebrated: Venice was a cosmopolitan city that included people from everywhere, which created the context for Venice’s international trade and commercial success. But Shakespeare’s two Venice plays are more sceptical about what this might mean. The action of both plays might be understood as the discovery of the limits of the City’s proud cosmopolitanism by its prominent outsiders, Shylock and Othello.

Let us start by looking at *The Merchant of Venice*. In Britain and America, many people wonder if it should be taught or performed; sometimes they succeed in removing it from classroom syllabi or from the repertory of local theatres, or, less hysterically, they frame the performance in discussions about the problems the play raises in playbills and theatre talkbacks. The source of the anxiety is clear enough. It is the worry that the play is anti-Semitic or could seem so. It is the worry that maybe Shakespeare, whom we habitually celebrate as the voice and guarantor of our best moral and emotional lives, in fact endorses values we have come to find unacceptable or, worse, endorses values that some might *not* find unacceptable.⁴

4 Of course, there are other plays that might suggest the distance between our culture and Shakespeare’s complicating our conviction that Shakespeare was “not of an age.” *The Taming of the Shrew*, for example, produces a similar concern that Shakespeare might be thought to endorse female submission to patriarchy, but less cultural anxiety surrounds this possibility, maybe suggesting that we find it less offensive to coerce women than Jews.

We have found some predictable ways to ease our anxiety. Often we appeal to the play's subtlety of focus and design. We point, for instance, to the Christian community's inability to live up to its own professed ideals in the play; observe, too, that if Shylock hates the Christians, his hatred is little different from the Christians' no less reflexive hatred of the Jews. And perhaps we insist that there is more than just an *even* balance: as Hazlitt noted in the nineteenth century: "our sympathies are much more often with [Shylock] than with his enemies" (31).

Or, if we refuse that easy sentimentalizing of the role, we can appeal to history. We can tell ourselves (more or less factually) that there were no Jews—at least no outwardly practicing ones—in Shakespeare's England, the Jewish community having been banished by Edward I in 1290. So, if that looks bad for England, thus being the first European country formally to expel its Jewish population and only welcoming them back and allowing them to live openly in their faith about forty years after Shakespeare's death (Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews* 55–76), it takes Shakespeare off the hook.

In the absence of a visible Jewish population in his England, we can tell ourselves that, whatever Shakespeare was doing in the play, it could not have been intended as an expression of a social prejudice, or imagined as any kind of hate-speech directed against a particular group of people, nor could it have provoked others, intentionally or otherwise, to violence against them. There were no real Jews there, or at least very few real Jews, and those few were practicing in secret. But even if this is right, that for Shakespeare and his age Jewishness was largely a metaphor rather than a social reality, it at very least demands the question of what to do now, when there are real Jews who might be offended or otherwise affected by a performance of the play.

Or, since history at best seems to offer us only a temporary escape from the difficulty, we can appeal to form: the play is a comedy, we can tell ourselves, not really about Shylock at all, but a conventional romantic plot that seeks to bring the love of Portia and Bassanio to a happy and harmonious conclusion. Shylock in this sense is but a minor character, present in only five of the play's twenty scenes and formally merely an obstacle for the lovers to overcome. The play begins "with usury and corrupt love; it ends with harmony and perfect love," says a distinguished English critic: "And all the time it tells its audience that *this* is its subject; only by a determined effort to avoid the obvious can one mistake the theme of *The Merchant of Venice*" (Kermode 215).

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But each of these arguments seems to me in fact to be far *more* determined efforts “to avoid the obvious,” each an almost perverse attempt to do something that almost any genuine encounter with the play would seemingly make impossible: that is, each tries to convince us that Shakespeare was not fundamentally interested in the unsettling figure of the Jew. He was.

Often what people say about the play is that the Jew represents a vulgar commercialism, and point to Shylock’s confusion of categories: “My daughter! Oh my ducats!” the most notable; “oh my daughter! / Fled with Christian! Oh my Christian ducats!” (2.8.15–16). In his grief, he hideously implies the equivalence of his daughter and his money in his value scheme. This is regularly pointed to as the most obvious sign of his moral limitation, and the Christian world has a more humane set of values.

But does it? The world of money, commerce, profit, and wealth in this play is not opposed to the world of romantic desire and fulfilment but in fact is revealed as the very condition of it.⁵ Bassanio’s suit of Portia begins as only the most recent of his “plots and purposes / How to get clear of the debts” he owes (1.1.133–134). The observation that begins and motivates the romantic action is: “In Belmont is a lady richly left” (1.1.161). And the wooing ends successfully in the same terms: with Portia’s “Since you are dear bought, I will love you dear” (3.2.312). “Dear” here, of course, means both expensive and passionately, the unavoidable pun in English revealing how inescapable the economic logic is in Venice. Its commercial language penetrates all of its social and emotional realities.

Christian Venice in fact does not even pretend to be anti-materialistic; it happily admits its commercial activity. It does, however, insist that its economic principles are morally superior to the corresponding principles of the Jewish world. In part the issue is money lending.⁶ Antonio “lends out money gratis” (1.3.40) the play says, that is, he does not charge interest, responding to the biblical instruction to “lend, looking for nothing again” (Luke 6:35); while Shylock insists on interest, the Hebrew bible giving him permission: “Unto a stranger though mayest lend upon usury, but thou shalt not lend upon usury unto thy brother” (Deuteronomy 23:20).

Obviously, however, both men are equally desirous of profit in their commercial activity, but they pursue it by different means. Antonio is a merchant,

5 This has become the central insight of modern ironic readings of the play; see, for example, Eric S. Mallin’s observation that even at the level of plot “the Jew works as an integral part of the Christian community by providing the necessary economic conditions for romance” (146).

6 See John Drakakis’ Introduction to his edition of the play, 8–17, and Jones.

who would thrive by “venture,” to use the play’s characteristic word for Venetian commercial activity. Venture, the Christians of the play think, is acceptable because there is uncertainty about the outcome; it puts success in the hands of God. Antonio insists that commercial venture is good because, as he says, it is “swayed and fashioned by the hand of heaven” (1.3.89). Shylock is a merchant, but one who would thrive by usury, to use the loaded term for money lending. Usury is unacceptable to the Christians of the play, not merely because of its rate of interest, but because of the certainty of its profits. It avoids any dependence on “the hand of heaven,” the avoidance of God’s providence, not just in the money earned from the schedule of interest payments but from the insistence upon collateral that ensures that even if the debt is *not* repaid the lender cannot lose.

It is merely on the basis of those differences in what we might call “risk management strategies” that the play world comes to insist that it is the Jew who is the villain, the obstacle to harmony and love, though of course it is of course it is only with the money provided by Shylock to Antonio that Bassanio can woo Portia—and no one ever asks why he needs money to woo her anyway.

“Which is the merchant here, and which the Jew?” (4.1.170), asks Portia as she sweeps into the courtroom.⁷ It hardly seems a serious question. Could anyone really be uncertain which is which? Is not this precisely the difference upon which the comedy depends? At the level of the plot, the question is intended to do no more than affirm the reality of the Venetian Portia’s disguise as the “young doctor of Rome” in “his” seeming lack of local knowledge. Productions have tended to make the question laughable to an audience, and indeed on stage often the assembled Venetians themselves laugh at the sheer absurdity of it, with Antonio standing in the fashionable clothing of a Venetian nobleman and Shylock dressed in whatever is described as his “Jewish gabardine.” How could there be a question?

From the first, the scene tries visually to confirm what it will later verbally insist upon: the ethical distinction between gentile and Jew, “the difference of *our* spirit” (4.1.364, emphasis added), as the Duke says, gracious and generous, from Shylock’s “Jewish heart” (4.1.79), who would get rather than give, and insists upon the letter of the law rather than its spirit.

7 Among the many critics who have focused on this extraordinary question are Moisan, Shapiro (“Which is *The Merchant* here, and Which *The Jew*”: Shakespeare and the Economics of Influence”), Oz, Halpern (159–226), and Nirenberg.

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Portia's question, however, echoes through the play. As much as characters assert the radical difference between the merchant and the Jew, the play itself is far less confident that it can be maintained. In various ways, the play erases the distinction that is insisted upon, and suggests that the Venetians' hatred of Shylock is primarily their psychological strategy for projecting what they should see as evil in themselves outward, "onto an alien Other" (Fiedler 28). What they hate in them is what they are unwilling to face in themselves. And it is worth remembering that Antonio, not Shylock, is the "Merchant of Venice" of the title, and the fact that we so often forget that makes the point of their similarity.

In the play, Jessica can be welcomed into the Christian community. She is the good Jew in the story, though, of course, this really means that she ends up not being a Jew at all. All she needs to do to be included is to give up her faith and find a Christian to marry. The daughter of what the play calls "a faithless Jew" (2.4.38), though of course Shylock has faith, just not *their* faith, is able to "become a Christian, and [Lorenzo's] loving wife" (2.3.21).

But Jessica is not really the difficult case. It helps that she is young, she is beautiful, and that she comes "furnished" with Shylock's "gold and jewels" (2.4.32). It helps, too, that she is eager to accept her new identity ("ashamed," she says, "to be [her] father's child" [2.3.17]), and that she is enthusiastically invited into the Christian community. Shylock is the hard case. He is old, he is unattractive, and he is eager to insist on the same difference that the Christians see between them. What he calls "[t]he difference of old Shylock and Bassanio" (2.5.2) is in his mind as clear as the Duke's sense of "the difference of our spirit" from that of the Jew. And the difference that both insist upon is what prevents Venice from truly being cosmopolitan.

In the trial scene, the Duke first appeals to universal human values, hoping that Shylock will display the "human gentleness and love" that will release Antonio from the vicious bond. "We all expect a gentle answer," (4.1.33) says the Duke. But Shylock, unlike his daughter, is neither "gentle" nor "gentile," the word used by Jews for a Christian. "[B]y our holy Sabbath have I sworn / To have the due and forfeit of my bond" (4.1.35–36). His "our" here is no more inclusive than the Duke's in his phrase: "the difference of our spirit." Both uses of "our" separate and divide rather join. It is the Jews' Sabbath on which Shylock swears, reconfirming his membership in his own "sacred nation" (1.3.44) rather the supposedly cosmopolitan one of Venice.

Jessica is able effortlessly to enter into the Christian community, perhaps proving that there is no religious hatred of Jews in the play; but she is welcomed having

abandoned her father's faith and carrying with her his money. But Shylock cannot be accommodated at all. He is totally absent from the concluding act, and is neither mourned nor even remembered except in Lorenzo's one mention of "the Jew," as he sneeringly refers to his future father-in-law.

Shylock's exclusion is the play's formal acknowledgment of the bitter lesson he learns in the trial about the difference that has everywhere been insisted upon, not least of all by him: the difference between his "our" and their "your," both of which point to lie of a cosmopolitan Venice. This is the difference that plays out in the trial scene, about which there is so much more to say than I will now, a difference that allows Antonio to escape having to pay the forfeit of the pound of flesh Shylock is owed. But it is a difference that undercuts the very idea of cosmopolitanism that Venice insists upon to construct and preserve its commercial advantages. The trial scene reveals that Shylock is an "alien" according to the law, not the Jew *of* Venice at all, just a Jew *in* Venice, marking the limits of the city's claim to equality and justice.

And at the end, if Venetian justice stops short of taking Shylock's life, it does so with two provisions: first, that Shylock not be allowed to disinherit his daughter (his property is to be deeded now "[u]nto his son Lorenzo and his daughter" [4.1.386]); and second, that "[h]e presently become a Christian" (4.1.283).

There is, of course, some mercy here; the court could have demanded Shylock's death. But it has appropriated one half of Shylock's wealth, given it to a son-in-law Shylock must despise, denied Shylock the right to control his own estate, and, perhaps most surprising, insisted upon Shylock's conversion to Christianity. *Maybe* this is an example of Christian mercy. And yet it is difficult for us to hear the sentence this way (Berger 35–37).⁸ What is most unsettling to a modern audience is the proviso "that he presently become a Christian."

At the end of the play the Jew will have to convert to Christianity as the condition of the mercy that is offered. Our modern commitment to religious toleration, our confidence that God's house has many rooms, makes it hard to see this as an act of kindness toward Shylock.⁹ And yet it is true that sixteenth-century Christians,

8 A. D. Nutall had earlier sensed "a faint smell of patronizing contempt in the very exercise of mercy" (130).

9 Hugh Short is one of the few recent critics to argue that Antonio's proviso is well-intentioned, "opening up the possibility of salvation to Shylock" (210), and that "Shylock speaks the truth when he says he is content" (202).

like some of their twenty-first century brethren, would believe that only by converting can Shylock be saved.

Perhaps Shylock's forced conversion is, if not unambiguously merciful, at least an example of what was then paradoxically called "charitable hatred,"—forcing a conversion as an act of charity. Theologians of various religions insisted that to live in an "irreligious religion," a false faith, was to insure the death of the soul. Martin Luther wrote in his "Preface to the Old Testament" that "such blindness must be . . . compelled and forced by the law to seek something beyond the law and its own ability, namely the grace of God promised in the Christ who was to come" (44). "Compel them to come in," Jesus says (Luke 14:23).

But there is no thought in the play—or even in Luke or Luther—of how such compulsion would work. If conversion needs to be compelled, if, that is, it is to be accomplished against one's will, in what sense is it truly a conversion, which is a transformation of the will that must be, one might say, willingly accepted?

One might wonder, then, how really "charitable" Antonio's request is; the hatred part, we know. It is not an invitation but a requirement, but a requirement that can only be enforced in outward practice—that is, in ways that cannot matter if it *is* intended to save a soul. So what is the point? Here, then, the "difference" of the Christian spirit that the Duke insists upon seems exactly like the Jewish letter. And by the fifth act, the Jew, of course, is gone. Any fantasy of a cosmopolitan Venice is denied by the plot. Shylock does not appear in the fifth act and Jessica the Jew . . . well, she is not one anymore.

Let us look now at Shakespeare's other Venice play: *Othello*. Othello has indeed turned Christian. He is a seemingly a willing convert. Iago discusses Othello's Christianity, noting his "baptism, / All seals and symbols of redeemed sin" (2.3.328–329), though it is not clear what religion he has converted from or what he in fact believes. Othello's origins are as obscure as Shylock's,¹⁰ but, unlike Shylock, who is marginal in Venetian society even if economically necessary, Othello is central, both in the culture and in the plot. He is a celebrated hero, the city's protector against the "Turk," and he is married, although secretly, to a senator's daughter, who is able to see past the racial difference between them. She can ignore the superficial difference of skin coloration to see "Othello's visage in his mind"

10 Iago tells Roderigo that Othello "goes into Mauretania and taketh away with him the fair Desdemona" (4.2.224–225)—perhaps a hint of Othello's origins that are never explained, as Shylock's might be hinted at in his reference to a diamond he bought "in Frankfurt" (*Merchant of Venice* 3.1.76–77).

(1.3.250)—another difference from the comedy in which Portia is unable to do this with the black Prince of Morocco.

In *Othello*, *religion* is not the social problem; race is—though at least in part that is because religion in *Othello* goes away as the problem precisely because of race. *Othello* relaxes the anxiety about conversion precisely because it keeps *visible* the difference that Jewish conversion eliminates, especially since Judaism's tell-tale mark of difference, circumcision, is invisible to all but the most intimate observers and, of course, a defining sign only for males, part of the reason for the seeming ease with which Shylock's daughter Jessica can be welcomed into the Christian community, and Shylock is excluded.¹¹ The true sign of Jewish otherness is inside—a difference of spirit, as the Christian world in *The Merchant of Venice* insists—hence the need at some times in history (Nazi Germany for example) to make Jews wear some badge outside to confirm it.¹²

But the badge of *racial* difference is racial difference itself. The prophet Jeremiah asks, “[c]an the black Moor change his skin, or the leopard his spots?” (Jeremiah 13:23), in his warning to the Hebrew people against becoming accustomed to sin, and these proverbial phrases for impossibility echo through early modern England. In Richard Crashaw's poem “On the Baptised Ethiopian” (16), the poet deploys the proverbial claim that you “cannot wash the Ethiop white,” but he then denies the claim: “Let it no longer be a forlorn hope / To wash an Ethiop,” says Crashaw, because the acceptance of Christ will turn the Ethiop's *soul* “white,” and God will then love its “black-faced house.”

Othello is similar to Crashaw's “Baptised Ethiop.” There is no doubt the play insists upon his blackness. He is referred to as “the thick-lips” (1.1.66) and “an old black ram” (1.1.88) with a “sooty bosom” (1.2.70). It is so central even to his own self-image and imagining that when he tries to find terms to measure the change in his understanding of Desdemona's moral being, the best he can come up with is: “Her name, that was as fresh / As Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black / As mine own face” (3.3.388–390).

11 Jewish law, however, insists, though Shakespeare was unlikely to have known this, that the child of a Jewish mother is Jewish.

12 Fynes Moryson noted that in Prague “[t]he law binds the men to wear red hats or bonnets, and the women a garment of the same color, near blood, to witness their guiltiness of Christ's blood,” and that “in all places the Jews long servitude and wonderful scattering is exposed to all Christians for a fearful spectacle and to themselves for a daily remembrance of God's curse laid upon them” (489–490).

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It is, however, worth remembering that at least in Shakespeare's theatre you *could* wash an Ethiopian white—indeed you had to, with no black actors to take the role (Callaghan). A white actor had to use makeup to play it, and would be washed back to his natural white once the performance ended. It is hard to know how much an early modern audience while watching the play would register this fact. It is hard to know, that is, if the Duke's attempt to reassure Brabantio, “[y]our son-in-law is far more fair than black” (1.3.288), might be heard as a joke about performance (since the actor playing the role is indeed more fair than black), rather than merely as the recognition of the superficiality of judging by skin colour—though as a theatrical reference it would reinforce the stubborn reality of actual racial difference.

Othello can convert, but he cannot be washed white; only the actor who plays him can. And, even if Othello's soul is so washed, its “black-faced house” is more loved by God than by the citizens of Venice. Othello is embraced when he is needed either to lead a regiment or to serve as a dinner guest, but he can never be fully naturalised as a citizen of Venice—and revealingly he is immediately replaced as the Governor on Cyprus once the Turkish fleet has been destroyed. Othello is a moor, he is *the* moor, an identification even turned into a mocking term of office: “his Moorship,” Iago calls him (1.1.32). And that fact makes him inevitably suspect, despite his conversion—or maybe because of it. He never becomes the Moor *of* Venice, only the Moor in it, serving at their pleasure. “*Marrani*,” was the word, as an English writer defined it, for “baptised *Iews* or *Moors*,” who converted only to escape prosecution and who always remain “utterly opposed” to the Christian religion (Sandys, sig. X2v).

In early modern England, the word “Moor” referred to various people. As Michael Neill notes in the introduction to his edition of the play, it was an ethnographic catchall (115–116). It could be a geographic, racial, or a religious category, referring to the Arabs of Morocco, to dark-skinned Africans, to Ottoman Turks, or to Muslims in general. Though Iago uses the term as a racist insult, Othello is comfortable with whom he is, confident of his total acceptance into Venetian society. He is seemingly at ease with himself as a Christian Moor, a naturalised black European convert, having self-fashioned an identity that is, as he says, “all in all sufficient” (4.1.265), perfect, complete.

But the play reveals he is not “all in all sufficient,” exposing cracks in the identity he has so carefully constructed, raising questions both about what he has turned to and turned against. Othello is caught between cultural positions. The very claim

that he is a “noble moor” (2.3.129, 3.4.24, 4.1.256), three times repeated, begins to sound like an oxymoron (all too much like the “gentle Jew” [1.3.73] in *Merchant of Venice*), and, indeed the play is the agonizing history of Othello’s inability by force of will to participate in the cosmopolitan harmony that Venice imagines as its own. The Jew who will *not* convert in the comedy is an “alien” in Venice, but so is the Moor in the tragedy who will.

If Venice is a paradox, Othello is a paradox within that paradox, as he himself agonizingly will discover:

in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
I took by th’ throat the circumcised dog,
And smote him—thus. (5.2.351–355)

He is himself both the “malignant” Turk and, once again, and for a final time, the champion of Venice. This suicidal act completes his terrible journey to destruction but also marks a return to his former dignity. It is he, not Desdemona, who will “turn, and turn, and yet go on, / And turn again”—turn Christian, turn Turk, and turn once more, to try to reconcile the contradictions.

And the scene he recalls is carefully set. Aleppo, today sadly in ruins because of the war in Syria, then played much the same role in the Ottoman empire as Venice did in Christian Europe, as a cosmopolitan trading centre at its edge. In thinking about Aleppo, what Othello recalls in his final moments is not his exotic African past, as he does in his tale that won Brabantio’s daughter, but his European present—in the suicidal act becoming again, for one last time, the defender of Venice, executing justice on another who has “[b]eat a Venetian and traduced the state.” But of course that means now executing himself.

Othello enacts the paradox that he knows himself to be. He knows he can never be fully naturalised: he cannot be made one with the culture or even one with himself. He is, as the quarto title page says, “The Moor of Venice,” but by the end of the play it is clear this marks not some well-integrated social identity but an impossibly divided self.

“And yet how nature erring against himself,” Othello begins, as his confidence in Desdemona crumbles in act 3 scene 3, precisely echoing the racist logic of her father in insisting that only by witchcraft could Othello have won his daughter:

“For nature so preposterously to err” (1.3.63). And Iago jumps in right there, recognizing that what Othello has internalised will provide the means to undo him: “Ay, there’s the point” (3.3.232).

It is indeed the point: the tragic tipping “point” in Othello’s tragic fall from an Othello who was “once so good” (5.2.289). It is the line that makes the “point” about the insufficiency of the identity that Othello has framed for himself; and it is the line that brings us to the “point” at which Venice in its thoroughly conventional understanding of what is natural, reveals itself as so much less cosmopolitan than it imagines itself to be—with devastating implications both for the Jew who underwrites its economic system and the Moor who protects the city.¹³

It is true and no doubt important that Shakespeare does give both Shylock and Othello complex psychologies that makes each more than a stereotype, each a memorable character that demands our sympathy. That is a sign of his generous humanity. But he fails to imagine worlds in which even three-dimensional Jews and Moors can avoid the bitter discovery of how provisional and vulnerable their existence is within the cosmopolitan fantasies of both Venice’s Christian theology and its commercial ideology.

But if not in Venice, then where? Certainly not in Shakespeare’s England, where Jews would not be readmitted and allowed to live openly as Jews for another half century, and where, in 1601, “Negroes and blackamoors” were ordered to be deported because of the inconvenience of their growing numbers, not least as a result of the fact that “the most of them are infidels having no understanding of Christ or his Gospel.”¹⁴

But also not in Shakespeare’s plays. We can read *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello* as critiques of Venetian self-regard, but Shakespeare himself too readily reproduces the familiar discourse of privilege and centrality to allow him be the prophetic voice of universal fellowship. In *Macbeth*, a “[I]viver of blaspheming Jew” (4.1.26) is added to the witches’ cauldron, but of course this is an ingredient in a witch’s recipe. More unsettling are the merely conventional usages. “I am a Jew else, an Ebrew Jew,” says Falstaff (*1 Henry IV* 2.4.177) as a validation of the truth of what he has just spoken, and Benedick will define his commitment to Beatrice similarly: “if I do not love

13 William Thomas, in his *History of Italy* (1549) notes that the army in Venice is “served of strangers, both for general, for captains, and for all other men of war, because their law permitteth not any Venetian to be captain over an army by land, fearing, I think, Caesar’s example” (78).

14 For the deportation order for “Negroes and blackamoors,” see *Tudor Royal Proclamations* (221). On the historical context of the deportation proclamation, see Bartels (100–117); on the complex history of the resettlement of the Jews in England in 1655, see Shapiro (*Shakespeare and the Jews* 58–62).

her I am a Jew” (*Much Ado About Nothing* 2.3.252–253). It is the sheer conventionality of the usage of “Jew” as a synonym for a “liar” or “betrayers” that is disturbing, precisely from the fact that it is not intended as an insult at all.

Turks fare little better; their body parts also find their place in the witches’ stew (“Nose of Turk, and Tartar’s lips” [4.1.29]), and similarly their name becomes a conventional term of contempt. In *Merry Wives*, Pistol calls Falstaff a “[b]ase Phrygian Turk” (1.3.86), outraged by Falstaff’s arrogance and ambition. And Moors are “barbarous” and “irreligious,” though those are the terms the Roman world of *Titus Andronicus* (5.3.4, 120) uses unsuccessfully to differentiate its own behaviour from that of Aaron. If Shakespeare gives both Shylock and Othello a complex psychology that differentiates Shylock from Marlowe’s Barrabas, and Othello from “Aaron the Moor,” Shakespeare fails to imagine worlds in which outsiders can be easily welcomed inside, their differences both recognised and respected. But, of course, he never set out to do so.

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