‘WE ALL EXPECT A GENTLE ANSWER, JEW’:
THE MERCHANT OF VENICE AND THE
PSYCHOTOELOGY OF CONVERSION

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In his first scene in *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock cites Genesis 30 and its description of Jacob’s prowess in breeding “parti-color’d lambs” to defend the sanctity of his money-lending practices:

The skillful shepherd pill’d me certain wands,
And in the doing of the deed of kind,
He stuck them up before the fulsome ewes,
Who then conceiving did in eaning time
Fall parti-color’d lambs, and those were Jacob’s.
This was a way to thrive, and he was blest;
And thrift is blessing, if men steal it not.1

The Venetian merchant Antonio recoils from Shylock’s chronicle, arguing that Jacob was not blessed as a result of his “thrift[y]” success but rather that his success was a result of his blessedness: “This was a venture, sir, that Jacob served for, / A thing not in his power to bring to pass / But sway’d and fashion’d by the hand of heaven” (1.3.91–93).

One of many moments that call attention to the characters’ competing modes of literary and legal interpretation, the scene has functioned for a long time as the touchstone for critical accounts of the way the play dramatizes the triumph, however complicated, of Christian over Hebraic biblical exegesis and of the new law over the old.2 In such accounts Shylock’s understanding of the Genesis story is made to yield to Christian typological principles that identify Jacob as both Old Testament patriarch and type of Christ. In a recent essay, for instance, Julia Reinhard Lupton suggests that Shylock’s paraphrase of the biblical story, handling as it does “the social and economic challenges of everyday life in an ethical, Torah-based manner,” represents Shakespeare’s version of midrashic commentary, a way of reading that is quickly negated by the Christian community of Venice: “It is not simply that Shylock’s Jewish hermeneutics are rejected in favor of Christian techniques, but rather that the very possibility of imagining a specifically Jewish community of readers...
itself exists within the typological framework as an essential part of its historical vision.” Or, in Marc Shell’s socio-economic critique, Shylock provides a “discussion of usury and sexual generation that . . . is soon enacted in the related terms of a series of exchanges of a purse for a part of a person or for a whole person. The apparent commensurability between persons and purses that this enactment reveals turns out to be more typical of Christian law, which allows human beings to be purchased for money, than Jewish justice and practice, which disallow it.”

In this paper I consider what happens when we recall that for the religious culture of Shakespeare’s time the biblical Jacob served not only as the central figure of a transdenominational “hermeneutic tradition of [Christian] supersession” but also as the exemplary model in Reform accounts of divine election. In the religious literature that proliferated in England during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the account of Jacob and Esau is deployed as a proof-text for Protestant theories of predestination. Thus Shylock’s invocation of Jacob in 1.3—like Launcelot’s parody of Jacob and his father Isaac in 2.2—heralds the play’s engagement with Reform doctrines of salvation. More specifically, it heralds the play’s concern with the role of the Jew in such doctrines. Shylock’s reference and the questions of divine and human causality it raises orient the play within a particular theological framework and catapult it into what I discuss as an increasingly compulsive interest in Shylock’s conversion.

The conversion of Jews, as historians of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance have made clear, was the object for hundreds of years of intense theoretical as well as practical interest, speculation, and disagreement, as it provided an occasion for the working through of fundamental Christian positions on faith, guilt, and redemption and became a crucible for examining the perennial issues of religious doubt, intention, and authenticity. It was also the object of intense suspicion, as converts were assumed to continue to practice Judaism privately, disguising their real beliefs behind a façade of Christian obedience and piety. This suspicion was heightened in Renaissance England in the wake of the forced baptisms of the Iberian Inquisitions and the spread of a small but measurable Marrano community to a few English port cities; in a mixture of politicized and racialized thinking, the converts were assumed to be Jewish by blood, Christian by political exigency rather than the true calling of real faith. In his seminal account, James Shapiro suggests that, ironically, this “increasing sense of the impossibility of sincere Jewish conversion in the
late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries occur[ed] at precisely the same time that apocalyptic belief in the imminent conversion of the Jews was on the rise, creating a sharp and disturbing division between the two positions."

Shakespeare’s innovation on the issue of Jewish conversion is to dramatize these positions not as mutually exclusive but as mutually enabling. Suspicion in Merchant is not the opposite of belief in Jewish conversion but its ally, the result of the characters’ contradictory desires that Shylock convert and that he not convert.

Contradictory desires fuel what classic psychoanalysis understands as compulsive symptoms: behaviors that simultaneously represent and try to assuage “a conflict between two opposing impulses of approximately equal strength.” For the characters of The Merchant of Venice the conflict involves the desire to see Shylock convert and the desire to see him not convert, the symptomatic climax of which is realized in the Duke’s paradoxical address: “We all expect a gentle answer, Jew” (4.1.182). But while psychoanalysis traces such conflicts and their effects back to origins in a person’s psychosexual history, the competing investments in Shylock are better accounted for by contemporary theological paradigms, whose terms orient the characters’ sense of their own agency in matters of justice, sacrifice, and salvation. In what follows I discuss, in Eric Santner’s useful term, the “psychotheology” of The Merchant of Venice, explaining how it is possible to see the play, despite its setting in a historically Catholic city-state, as playing out the paradoxical demands of Reformation understandings of election and reprobation.

Criticism has charted, of course, the multiple ways in which post-Reformation literary culture registered the impact of accounts of predestination and their potential to induce what Peter Kaufman summarizes as a “mix of despondence, vertigo, and ecstasy.” But in Merchant, the character of Shylock clarifies the specific role of the Jew in these theologies of salvation and the responses that they generate. Examining Venetian attitudes to Shylock with respect to Reform doctrines of predestination—doctrines whose terms and logics are reinforced in the play’s abundant anxieties about the limitations of economic and marital choice—allows us to understand with further clarity the function of Shylock as what the religious historian Jeremy Cohen has identified as the “hermeneutical Jew.”
II. “THE WONDERFULL EXAMPLE OF IACOB AND ESAU”

The salvific concerns of Reform doctrine are implicit in Shylock’s reference to Jacob, whose story became in the sixteenth century an example of the effects of predestination and thus of the power of God’s will over human works. In his *Briefe Treatise of Election and Reprobation* (1575), Anthony Gilby refers to Jacob and Esau to ratify the absoluteness of divine grace and reprobation: “Neither can any thing more beate downe mans nature . . . than to behold the maiestie of God making them by grace so far vnlyke one to the other, who were both one . . . as the wonderfull example of Iacob and Esau, of whom the Lord pronounceth that he loueth the one, and hateth the other, before they were borne.”

In a series of sermons on “the free election of God in Jacob,” John Calvin uses these biblical figures in the same way: the brothers, he says, “were twines, their mother bare them in one belly: yet . . . one is received and the other rejected: one is chosen, and the other refused.” In a treatise on predestination, William Perkins cites Jerome when explaining that “[i]f Esau . . . and Iacob were not yet borne, neither had done good or euill, whereby they might winne gods fauour or offend him, and . . . their election and reiection doth not shew their seuerall deserts, but the will of the elector and reiector.” Writing in the later years of James’s reign and in the context of the Synod of Dort, Humphrey Syndeham invoked the two brothers in order to underscore the inscrutable power of God’s will and reiterate his position against the efficacy of works. As he says, “God did not elect Iacob for foreseen workes, but faith”:

What was the cause that God did chuse Iacob and reiect Esav? The mediate and secondary cause, was, because he loued Iacob, and not Esav. But why is his loue incommunicable, and as it seemes, in a partiall reservation, peculiar to that more than this? I know not a more plausible and higher motiue than his will.

Such exegesis was not limited to religious treatises: the Tudor interlude *Jacob and Esau*, published in 1568, deploys a distinctly Reform vocabulary to present its characters. In the play’s second act, for instance, Rebecca tells Jacob:

Now dout not Jacob, but God hath appointed thee
As the eldest sonne vnto Isaac to bee:
And now haue no dout, but thou art sure elected,
And that vnthriftie Esau of God reiected.
Later in the play Isaac will echo her distinct terms, though in tones more somber. First he prays:

O Lorde my God, how deepe and vnsearchable
Are all thy judgements, and how immutable:
Of thy justice, whom it pleaseth thee, thou doest reiect,
Of thy mercy, whome pleaseth thee, thou doest electe.
In my two sonnes O Lord, thou has wrought thy will.

Then he addresses Esau, whose blessing he has given to Jacob: “Ah Esau, Esau, thou commest to late, / An other to thy blessing was predestinate.”

While Shylock summons the figure of Jacob to establish himself in a line of descendants from “our holy Abram” (1.3.72), Antonio articulates the distinctly Protestant view of the shepherd, whose success he says was “swayed and fashioned by the hand of heaven.” Such a view resonates with Antonio’s earliest assessments of his own melancholy, which he sees as already scripted: “I hold the world but as the world Gratiano, / A stage, where every man must play a part, / And mine a sad one” (1.1.77–79). Indeed, this kind of resignation, expressed in a variety of ways, characterizes much of the play’s dialogue, suggesting that the cosmopolitan, mercantile world of Venice, while outwardly Catholic, is governed by a model of causation consonant with a Protestant one. Solanio’s description of Antonio’s melancholy, though couched in terms of natural, humoral theory, is assimilable to such a model:

Then let us say you are sad
Because you are not merry; and ‘twere as easy
For you to laugh and leap, and say you are merry
Because you are not sad. . . .
Nature hath fram’d strange fellows in her time:
Some that will evermore peep through their eyes,
And laugh like parrots at a bag piper.

(1.1.53–59)

Solanio offers here an understanding of human behavior and personality as preordained, immutable, and, ultimately, arbitrary. The logic of such an understanding parallels more extreme formulations of Reform soteriology that dictate the incontrovertibility of God’s election: some are chosen because they are not damned, some are damned because they are not chosen. As Thomas Beard puts it in A Theatre of Gods Judgements: God “exalteth and fauoureth some and

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debatheth and frowneth vpon others, blesseth and propsereth whome Hee please, and . . . curseth and destroieeth whome He please.”

Such a formulation was not, of course, the only Elizabethan understanding of the dynamics of salvation. Scholars have chronicled various strands in Reform models of divine and human causality, all of which could inculcate despair as well as hope and confidence. These strands ranged from rigorous assertions, like Beard’s above, of a Calvinist brand of double predestination, to more forgiving covenantal models, formulated by thinkers such as Philip Melanchthon, Martin Bucer, and Heinrich Bullinger, which emphasized the possibility of assurance before faith. Most strands can be identified in the Elizabethan Church’s doctrine of predestination as it is laid out in the seventeenth of the 39 Articles of 1571:

Predestination to lyfe, the euerlastyng purpose of God, whereby (before the foundations of the world were layd) he hath constantly decreed by his counsell secrete to vs, to deliuer from curse and damnation, those whom he hath chosen in Christe out of mankynde, and to bring them by Christe to euerlastyng salvation, as vessels made to honour. Wherefore they which be indued with so excellent a benefite of God . . . they through grace obey the calling: they be justified freely: they be made sonnes of God by adoption: they be made lyke the image of his only begotten sonne Jesus Christ; they walke religiously in good workes, and at length by gods mercy, they attaine to euerlasting felicitie. As the godly consideration of predestination, and our election in Christe, is full of sweete, pleasaunt, and unspeakable comfort to godly persons. . . . So, for curious and carnal persons . . . to haue continually before theyr eyes the sentence of gods predestination, is a moste dangerous downefall, whereby the deuyll both thrust them either into desperation, or into rechlesnesse of most vnucleane living.

As scholars have suggested, the authorized Elizabethan doctrine of election, in addition to its many permutations in contemporary religious discourse, invited individual contemplation about one’s eternal fate. Experimental predestinarianism, popularized in the works of Perkins, took its terms from 2 Peter 1:10 (“Give rather diligence to make your calling and election sure”) and promoted self-introspection as well as self-observation. The goal was to focus on one’s inner state and outer performance in order to “trie and examine . . . whether [one] is in the state of damnation, or in the state of grace.” As Alexandra Walsham summarizes, such contemplation “lay at the heart of a peculiarly intense and strenuous brand of Protestant piety

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which godly preachers maintained that every Christian ought to embrace. Every happening, catastrophic or trivial, was held to be relevant to the quest for assurance that one numbered among the ‘saints,’ a signpost concerning the lord’s soteriological intentions.”

To this kind of religious self-examination R. T. Kendall opposes practices of self-scrutiny that emphasize “the given, intellectual, passive, and assuring nature of faith,” rather than faith as that which “must await experimental knowledge to verify its presence.” Following Calvin’s warning that “if we have been chosen in Him, we shall not find assurance of our election in ourselves. . . . Christ, then, is the mirror wherein we must, and without self-deception may, contemplate our own election,” this creed-centered form of predestinarianism admonished believers to focus not on themselves and their limitations but on the infinite sacrifice and mercy of Christ. Such a doctrine may have succeeded in turning believers’ attention from their own inward states, but it nevertheless promoted another form of self-scrutiny, now aimed at assessing one’s ability to look faithfully to Christ.

In the writings of both credal and experimental Reformers, looking to Christ or looking into one’s heart and deeds could also involve looking at the Jew—or, more accurately, at a figure of the Jew. Cohen has called this figure the “hermeneutic Jew”: “the Jew as constructed in the discourse of Christian theology, and above all in Christian theologians’ interpretation of Scripture.” In Reform treatises on predestination, the hermeneutic Jew, depicted as simultaneously lost and yet potentially convertible, served to organize and illustrate central soteriological claims. Works of commentary and practical piety used the Jew as a model of potential election or reprobation, a figure against which the Christian could actively assess himself and his own promise of redemption. In a sermon on Romans 13:11, for instance, John Donne makes explicit the urge to evaluate the Christian in terms of the Jew: “Salvation is nearer to us in this respect, that we have . . . more outward and visible means than the Jews had, because we may receive more in one action, then they could in all theirs.”

Daniel Price makes Donne’s logic explicit in a sermon on recusant conversion, where he discusses election as a complementary system of loss and fulfillment organized around the Jew:

The Israelites to whom appertained the adoption, and the glory, and the covenant, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and
The Reformers inherited from patristic and medieval theologians a conventional understanding of the Jews as the people who rejected and continue to reject Jesus as the Messiah and who have thus lost God’s special favor, a favor now granted to Christians. The Jews’ original offense against Jesus was repeated in a catalogue of contemporary sins—blasphemy, ritual murder, usury—all of which simultaneously signified and contributed to the Jews’ reprobation. Included in this depiction of the Jews’ obstinacy to Christ’s message was the expectation of their eventual conversion, an expectation that could shade into either forced command or hopeful neutrality.

Reformers recast this conventional understanding of the Jew to suit the context and requirements of the contemporary religious schisms and the “cultural anxieties about religious identity” they created. In their efforts to define and defend their difference from Catholics, Protestant theologians and writers inserted the figure of the Jew into the heart of theological conflict about free will and providential design, connecting or conflating the omnipotence of divine election—“Freewill is nothing in the case of justification”—with Jewish conversion. While evangelizing Christians might act as God’s “outward means and instruments,” the conversion of the Jew by a God who “conuerteth and saueth as the proper effitient cause and author” served for Reformers as proof of their distinct notions of human passivity and the unconditional grace of the divine. It thus became a pressing personal as well as social or political concern. Luther’s vitriolic screed Concerning the Jews and Their Lies is, among other things, an extreme expression of a disappointed theological as well as social and political Protestant investment in the possibility of Jewish conversion.

Urbanus Rhegius’s The Solace of Sion, for instance, translated and published in London by Richard Robinson in 1587, is characteristic in the way it castigates but then reclaims the Jew for salvation. It begins with a conventional explanation of the Jews’ distance from the holy: “So (as whiles they imbrace not Iesus of Nazareth for their true Messias or Saviour, forpromised in the lawe and the Prophets . . . ) but imagine themselves another Saviour or Sacrifice . . . it is impossible for them to understand the sacred misteries of the Gospell in the Prophets.” For Rhegius, the Jews are “fanaticall persons” who

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cannot help but be unforgivable and act unforgivably: “the worde of God [for them] is turned into a Snare and Trappe, yea unto an offence and Retaliacion: Their eies are darkened that they see not, and their backes are allwaies made crooked, that they see nothing but earthly things.”37 He nevertheless maintains the possibility of their conversion, since, as he says, the “Gospell pertaineth vnto all nations,” using this established notion for a distinctly Protestant agenda. A Jew can be converted, he explains, because conversion is not a matter of his or her own volition. Rather, “he is converted by the alone power of Christ,” because “the beginning of repentance is not in our power, but is given from above.”38

Rhegius’s discussion reveals the central position of the post-Scriptural Jew not only in testifying to models of predestination but also in exemplifying its alternative narratives of salvific possibility. The fallen Jew who could still, at the last moment, be chosen represents both the reprobate and the potential regenerate; he is a model of both the fact of condemnation and the prospect of unconditional grace. Such a role is absolute even as it is indecipherable: the Jew represents the simultaneous determinacy and opacity of divine choice.

This role, as the English counterparts of Rhegius make clear, is embodied most dramatically at the moment of Jewish conversion. While these moments, theoretically, could happen at any time, they are discussed most frequently as part of an apocalyptic scenario, since Jewish conversion was believed to be the prelude to the second coming of Christ. A central concept in Christian eschatology for centuries, the notion of the conversion of the Jews at the end of the world was seized on by post-Reformation writers as a way of discussing and demonstrating the alternative axes of personal as well as national salvation and damnation.39 The Jewish remnant represented for Reformers a special set of Jews already designated, though not yet revealed, as saved. As Heinrich Bullinger describes in A Hundred Sermons upon the Apocalips of Iesu Christ, with a mixture of contempt and acceptance, “an infinite multitude of this stiff-necked people [are] to be gathered which shall be saved.”40

Martyrologist John Foxe’s Sermon Preached at the Christening of a Certayne Iew makes this position particularly clear. Suggesting that even though most Jews are condemned for refusing Jesus, a special group has nevertheless been marked for salvation, Foxe warns Christians not to “think that the Iewes are so altogether forsaken of God . . . as that no sparkle of mercie is reserved . . . for them to hope
Neither that the whole stocke of that Nation is so altogether supplanted, that no remnant . . . hath any droppe of moisture layed vp for them in the fountaine of Gods free election.”41 Thomas Draxe sees the conversion of the individual Jew as a precursor to a greater change: it is, he says, “vndoubtedly, a fore-runner and argument of their generall conversion not far off.”42 Like Foxe, Draxe understands the Jewish remnant as the manifestation and measure of divine prerogative, referring to the “mystery and matter of predestination, in the illumination and blinding, salvation and condemnation both of Iewes and gentiles.” He continues, “The greater part of them . . . are cast away,” but “there is a reseruation of many elect amongst the Iewes. . . . Euen . . . in the time of the new Testament, there is a remnant, a small remainder of Iewes in comparison of those that perish, through the election of grace, whom God of his grace and fauour hath elected to euer-lasting life.”43 In his commentaries on the Revelation of John, the Essex minister George Gifford remarks that, despite the “lamentable state [that] the Iewes are at this day,” nevertheless “God hath not . . . cast off his people which he had chosen: he hath a remnant among them through the election of grace.”44

Lisa Lampert has written that although Jews were expelled from England in 1290, they continued to “lead a powerful life within Christian imaginations.”45 These treatises suggest that, after the Reformation, such power derived from the way that the Jew, depicted at the moment of conversion, condensed in a single figure the possibilities of a particularly Protestant soteriology. What Shakespeare dramatizes in Merchant is the Venetians’ efforts to maintain Shylock in this position, to preserve him in his role on the verge of a predetermined salvation or damnation that remains unknown to them. Recent critics of the play have discussed this kind of contradictory approach to Jewish conversion primarily in terms of Jessica, whose turn to Christianity is celebrated but also doubted by characters who call her “gentle, and no Jew” (2.6.51) while still excluding her from the Christian community at the close of the play.46 Governed by the knowledge that Jessica remains “daughter to his [Shylock’s] blood” despite her different manners and clothes, the Venetians treat her as both “a latent Christian and as a racialized and thus unintegrable Jew.”47 Jessica, in other words, undertakes a conversion that is then suspected by the Christians. But Shylock’s status is different: he is made to answer to characters who simultaneously invite and impede his conversion. The Christians, then, make
Shylock’s conversion at the close of act four compulsory, but it is their demand for his change—a demand that undoes itself—that is compulsive.

III. “WE ALL EXPECT A GENTLE ANSWER, JEW”

Of course, several characters are not at all interested in converting Shylock, offering instead a range of standard late-medieval and early modern stereotypes about the unchangeable perfidiousness of Jews and their connection to Antichrist. Lorenzo claims that Shylock is “faithless” while Solanio and Launcelot both consider him a devil. Indeed, for Launcelot he is “the very devil incarnation” who threatens to convert him, a fear that attached specifically to Jews since, according to Peter Berek, anxiety about contemporary “innovation and change . . . could be figured paradoxically by an ancient stranger who was also an ancestor.” Gratiano is the most vituperative in his depiction of Shylock’s bestiality:

Thou almost mak’st me waver in my faith
To hold opinion with Pythagoras,
That souls of animals infuse themselves
Into the trunks of men. Thy currish spirit
Govern’d a wolf, who hang’d for human slaughter,
Even from the gallows did his fell soul fleet,
And whilst thou layest in thy unhallowed dam,
Infus’d itself in thee.

(4.1.130–37)

These characters insist not only that the Jew is malevolent, with hidden, dark designs on their Christian cohorts, but also that he is fundamentally sinful, irredeemable. They express no interest or belief in his possible conversion; similar to Bassanio, they “like not fair terms and a villain’s mind,” and they assume that he is inevitably reprobate (1.3.179).

But other characters—Antonio, Portia, the Duke—have more complicated relationships to Shylock that bespeak a fascination with the status of Shylock’s soul. Such a fascination, as I have suggested, is inaugurated in the meeting on the Rialto, where Shylock’s reference to Jacob makes clear the theological stakes—later summed up in Portia’s comment, “That in the course of justice none of us / Should see salvation” (4.1.199–200)—of the ostensibly commercial encounter between him, Antonio, and Bassanio. After a contemptuous exchange gives way to the sealing of the famous bond of flesh,
Antonio, originally proceeding out of love and loyalty for Bassanio, becomes preoccupied with Shylock’s religious identity and his potential for change. The bond, he notes, signals “much kindness in the Jew”; at the end of the scene he proposes that “The Hebrew will turn Christian: he grows kind” (1.2.150, 175). Portia demonstrates a similar sensibility later in the play when she assumes Shylock will yield the bond for Antonio’s flesh in exchange for more money. “You shall have gold / To pay the petty debt twenty times over,” she tells Bassanio (3.2.306–7).

Such comments are marked by a deep ambivalence: Antonio cannot discuss the idea of conversion without reference to Shylock as a “Jew” and a “Hebrew”; Portia’s expectation that Shylock will relent on his bond in a merciful, Christian way is predicated on her assumption of the greed often associated with the Jewish moneylender. Such ambivalence represents not only the characters’ inability to believe in Shylock’s conversion—that would render their tone simply sarcasm—but also their conflicting desires about it. The dramatization of this conflict reaches its peak in the trial scene of act four. Long read as the climactic replacement of the Hebrew Scriptures by the Christian Testament, the scene allows Portia, as Lawrence Danson has written, to “reveal the spirit of the law latent in its letter, yielding mercy through rigor.”

But the scene should also be understood as the theatrical display of the prospect of divine election elicited by the figure of the Jew at the moment of judgment. The scene, in trying Antonio against Shylock, makes explicit the associations conjured up by a character whose religious marginality makes him a model of both redemption and damnation. In Donne’s terms, “Of the Jews, it is true, that there is so long a time of their exclusion, so few of them doe come in, since Christ came into the world, as that we may . . . interpret that place of Genesis . . . that the stars of heaven signifie those that shall be saved in heaven, and the dust of the earth, those that perish.”

In addition to the trial’s other dramatic and ideological functions, it serves the psychotheological purpose of maintaining Shylock in his position on the edge of a conversion, as both potentially saved and lost.

The Duke’s opening address to Shylock and the Venetian audience demonstrates such an effort. First he warns Antonio that Shylock is “a stony adversary, an inhuman wretch, / Uncapable of pity, void and empty / From any dram of mercy,” even as he turns to tell Shylock that “the world thinks, and I think so too, / That thou but leadest this fashion of thy malice / To the last hour of act; and then ‘tis thought /

“We all expect a gentle answer, Jew”
Thou’lt show thy mercy and remorse more strange / Than is thy strange apparent cruelty” (4.1.4–6, 17–21). He finishes his address to Shylock by contending, “We all expect a gentle answer, Jew,” a statement that expresses precisely the paradox of anticipation and refusal that characterizes the Christians’ approach to Jewish conversion.

A. R. Braunmuller has eloquently characterized this statement as part of a general “barrage that steadily forces Shylock to a louder and louder insistence on the bond.”52 As the trial proceeds, characters such as Bassanio and Gratiano participate in this barrage, and their continual condemnations of Shylock’s behavior, as Braunmuller suggests, seem designed to breed the Jew’s resentment, making it less and less likely that he will relent. But Bassanio and Gratiano operate on the assumption that Shylock will not give in; they see Shylock only, and always, as the degenerate, an “unfeeling man,” the “harsh Jew” (4.1.62, 122). What distinguishes the Duke’s statement from these other characters’ persistent hounding is that it expresses a desire both that Shylock change and that he refuse to do so. The Duke’s comment demonstrates the rhetorical structure of a compulsion to convert and not to convert Shylock: calling him both gentle and Jew, he has already invalidated what he seems to ask for.

Portia’s exchange with Shylock functions in the same way. Her command that “then must the Jew be merciful” is equivalent to the Duke’s “We all expect a gentle answer, Jew” in that it plays off of the conventional binary that opposes the Judaic to the merciful (4.1.182). But Portia’s demand is more problematic, as Shylock’s own question to her indicates: “On what compulsion must I?” (4.1.183). For, as Portia herself will go on to explain, mercy is precisely that act or exhibition of grace that “is not strain’d” (4.1.184). In Portia’s own terms, nothing Shylock offers can ever be understood as freely given. For all its seeming beneficence, then, Portia’s famous paean actively reinforces the distinction between the “Jew” whose “justice be thy plea” and the Christians who “do pray for mercy” (4.1.194, 197). Every caution that Portia gives Shylock to “be merciful” invites—a refusal that her consistent naming of “the Jew” declares. (4.1.233, 234).53 Shylock’s response has been predicted, elicited, by his judge: “By my soul I swear / There is no power in the tongue of man / To alter me: I stay here on my bond” (4.1.240–42). Portia’s later address to Shylock, when she commands him, “Down, therefore, and beg mercy of the Duke,” is simply another version of her warning, “’Twere good you do so much for charity” (4.1.359, 258).
Bassanio and Gratiano, whose voices also dominate the trial scene, simply insist on Shylock's moral and spiritual degeneracy. The Duke and Portia, in contrast, are caught in a compulsive rhythm in which they demand from Shylock a gentility that they also demand he deny. This compulsive rhythm reaches its apogee in Antonio, whose social and moral proximity to Shylock only exacerbates his drive to change the Jew so that he will not be changed. At the start of the play Antonio entertains, however ironically, the notion that Shylock, having been invited to lend him the needed ducats, “will turn Christian”; by act four, as he becomes increasingly despondent, he depicts Shylock in terms of nature’s most uncompromising forms: the sea, the wolf, trees in the wind. He concludes the portrayal with a stereotypical claim about the Jewish heart—“that than which what’s harder?” (4.1.79). Like the Duke and Portia, Antonio imagines Shylock’s reform while resolving that he “will never change his nature and ‘grow kind.’” But once Shylock has been found guilty by the court and penalized, Antonio voices overtly the bifurcated call for and against conversion that the Duke and Portia have kept implicit in their own previous assertions. Antonio, “the merchant here,” does this by contracting for Shylock’s reformation in exchange for his goods, a transaction that is particularly striking given its deviation from what was known to be customary Italian practice with converts (4.1.174). Asked to render mercy to Shylock, Antonio essentially makes a deal with him:

So please my lord the Duke and all the court
To quit the fine for one half of his goods,
I am content; so he will let me have
The other half in use, to render it
Upon his death unto the gentleman
That lately stole his daughter.
Two things provided more, that for this favour
He presentely become a Christian;
The other, that he do record a gift
Here in the court, of all he dies possess’d
Unto his son Lorenzo and his daughter.

(4.1.380–90)

Usually understood by critics as a measure of developments in English common law, the contract Antonio makes with Shylock—“that for this favour”—also has theological implications. By asking for Shylock’s conversion in the language of both contract and command (one which the Duke quickly reinforces by insisting “We all expect a gentle answer, Jew”
shall do this, or else I do recant / The pardon that I late pronounced here” [4.1.391–92]), Antonio guarantees that conversion’s failure. Antonio bargains with Shylock over his conversion, and in so doing he breaches a fundamental notion, advanced in a variety of practical and doctrinal texts, that conversion, by definition, can be neither forced nor bartered for. As Perkins writes, “[W]hen any man is converted this worke of God is not done by compulsion but he is converted willingly . . . man willeth not his owne conversion of himselfe by nature, but by grace wholly and alone.” For Reform theologians, conversion is never a matter of human intention, never a bargain initiated or closed according to human purposes.

Citing the theater as “a privileged meeting place for accounts of the relations between thought, meaning, and action that group themselves around various senses of intention,” Luke Wilson has traced the way certain early modern plays represented evolving notions of legal intentionality that emphasized human agency or premeditation in the making and breaking of contracts. But in this play, in a Venice in which religious as well as socioeconomic thinking has been shaped by the kinds of causal logics that govern those of reform doctrines of salvation, such agency is highly suspect. With the Duke seconding him, then, Antonio makes Shylock an offer he cannot but refuse, even in—precisely in—accepting it. Antonio gives Shylock a choice that, like all Christian choice in matters of election, is not one. Indeed, it is this very notion of indecipherable possibility that the Jew represents for Reformation theologies. Antonio’s deal with Shylock is thus the most compulsive act of the play: it explicitly demands something that it simultaneously undermines. If this is the most compulsive act of the play, it is also the most successful. For it seals Shylock in the position of the Jew delineated by Reform theology: as always potentially convertible but never actually converted. Sir Henry Finch defines this position in the opening of his *The Worlds Great Restauration. Or the calling of the Ievves*, published in 1621 with the approval of influential Westminster divine William Gouge:

For refusing Christ . . . they are become a regenerate people, now 1600 yeeres together . . . their pleasant land turned into a wildernesse: their fruitfull Countrey, into a dry and barren Desert . . . for all that, he [God] leaueth them not without comfort. Nay, he lifteth vp their hearts with a certaine expectation of most high and ample promises.
IV. “ENJOY YOUR SYMPTOM”

Recent criticism has called attention to Shylock’s function as a frightening specter of change and indeterminacy, as what Berek calls a “plausible representation of the idea that identity is not stable.” Richard Halpern explains this function in terms of what he considers Shylock’s particularly Jewish “adaptability” in both the economic and religious landscapes of the play, his role “as the play’s money-form—or, rather . . . the equivalence form”:

Shylock . . . is the material object in which the play’s gentile characters may read their souls or invisible values. And like the commodity in its role as equivalence form, Shylock is both denied an ordinary place in the social world of the play and subjected to the others whom he reflects. As Jew, and as equivalence form, Shylock must relinquish his own nature in order to measure the natures of others.

I have discussed this kind of instability as the result of Shylock’s doctrinal figuration, of the way the Jew encapsulates Reformation soteriology’s stark axes of predestined redemption and damnation. In Shakespeare’s Venice, this soteriology is reinforced by other social structures—the market, the family—that also participate in the principles of preordination. It would thus be possible to see the Venetians’ treatment of Shylock as a response to the perilous doubts and anxieties of the doctrine of predestination, as an effort to fix or resolve Shylock’s fate in a way that pretends to resolve theirs. The particularly compulsive aspect of such activity would be the way in which the characters, by offering to save Shylock, actually work to damn him, since a deal to convert, a deal nullified in the very agreement, confirms his reprobation. In a theology organized by the principle that God, “in the hardening, blinding, and obstinacie of the Iewes, tooke occasion to call and shew mercy to vs Gentiles,” this confirmation would be the Christians’ triumph.

I am proposing, however, that we see in the activities of the Duke, Portia, and Antonio a different kind of compulsion: a compulsion that preserves Shylock in exactly the position of the Jew offered in Reform accounts of predestination. The characters’ treatment of Shylock, in other words, is predicated on and preservative of—rather than an antidote to—the indeterminacy of the hermeneutic Jew. Shylock’s ambiguous replies at the end of his last scene, including “I am content” and “I am not well,” record his own assumption of this
uncertain position (4.1.394, 396). The Venetians’ compulsion to convert Shylock—to change him so that he doesn’t change—is a way, we might say, that they enjoy their symptom. The play’s fifth act, with its elaborate comic conclusion to earlier threats of adultery and homosocial entanglements, could be said to capitalize on such enjoyment, a capitalization one might call “psychospiritual usury.”

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NOTES

I would like to thank Kristen Poole and Susan Zimmerman for their thoughtful comments.


2 A standard exposition of this view is articulated in Lawrence Danson, The Harmonies of The Merchant of Venice (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1978), esp. 60–65.


5 Lisa Lampert, Gender and Difference from Paul to Shakespeare (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 141. See also Jill Robbins’s discussion of the Jacob and Esau paradigm; “[T]he relation between the prodigal son and his elder brother figures the figural relation between the two testaments” (Prodigal Son/Elder Brother: Interpretation and Alterity in Augustine, Petrarch, Kafka, Levinas [Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1991], 11).

6 For a recent discussion of the play’s specifically Lutheran engagements, see Lisa Freinkel, Reading Shakespeare’s Will: The Theology of Figure from Augustine to the Sonnets (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2002), 245–52.


8 Janet Adelman summarizes the situation: “Already too different and too much the same, Jews were a contradiction that conversion . . . turned into a crisis. . . .

Heather Hirschfeld
Although one theological justification for hatred of Jews had always been their stiff-necked refusal to convert, it turned out that massive conversion brought on its own problems. . . . For conversion threatened to do away with the most reliable signs of difference, provoking a crisis in a very mixed society obsessively concerned with purity of lineage” (“Her Father’s Blood: Race, Conversion, and Nation in The Merchant of Venice,” Representations 81 [2003]: 11).

13 Cohen, 2.
14 Anthony Gilby, A Briefe Treatise of Election and Reprobation (London, 1575), Ai1ii, my emphasis.
18 A newe mery and wittie Comedie or Enterlude . . . treating vpon the Historie of Iacob and Esau (London, 1568), Diii.
19 Enterlude, Fiii v. Compare this to the medieval Wakefield cycle, which begins after the question of birthright and blessing, with Jacob praying to God at Bethel. See The Wakefield Mystery Plays, ed. Martial Rose (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1962), 120–24.
20 The lottery that governs Portia’s marriage, which is the structuring principle of the plot, operates according to the causal logic of predestination. Portia enters the stage ruing the way it limits her agency: “O me, the word ‘choose’! I may neither choose who I would, nor refuse who I dislike” (1.2.22–23). Governed as Portia says by “the will of a dead father” (2.2.25), the lottery seems to invite its male participants to choose a casket, but in fact the choice has already been determined, and it is the father’s. As Nerissa says, “the lottery that he hath devised in these three chests of gold, silver, and lead, whereof who chooses his meaning chooses you, will no doubt never be chosen by any rightly but one who shall rightly love” (1.2.28–32).
23 Articles of Religion (London, 1571), Bii–Bii v.

Perkins, *A Treatise Tending unto a Declaration, whether a man be in the estate of damnation, or in the state of grace* (London, 1589), C6v. Kendall suggests that such admonitions “plant[ed] the seed of voluntarism in the doctrine of faith” (29). The citations from Peter here are from the Geneva Bible, 1561.


Kendall, 19.


Cohen, 3.


Shapiro, 26.


Rhegius, 2v.

Rhegius, 24.

Rhegius, 25v.

Consider Andrew Gow: “[A] . . . concern to Christians since the separation of the early Christian communities from their Jewish roots is the final conversion of the Jews, prophesied in the Christian scriptures and eagerly awaited as a necessary part of the final drama that would free suffering, confessing Christians from the bonds of a sinful world” (*The Red Jews: Antisemitism in an Apocalyptic Age 1200–1600* [New York: E. J. Brill, 1995], 1).


Draxe, 2v.

Draxe, C1.


Lampert, 11.


Metzger, 52.

For studies of these stereotypes, see, among others, Joshua Trachtenburg, *The Devil and the Jews* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1943); and Gavin Longmuir, *Towards a Definition of Antisemitism* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1990). For a recent discussion of these stereotypes in terms of early modern gender issues, see Matthew Biberman, *Masculinity, Anti-Semitism and Early Modern English*
We all expect a gentle answer, Jew.

64 Berek, 130.
65 Draxe, D4v.