

‘A Gentle and No Jew’:  
The Difference Marriage Makes in  
*The Merchant of Venice*

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Critics are divided on the precise nature of the *difference* between Christian and Jew as represented in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*. By investigating reported cases of inter-racial (or cross-cultural) marriages circulating in early modern England, and by close examination of the relationship between Lorenzo and Jessica in the play, one is able to map out the competing discourses of race, theology, and gender in the construction of ‘the Jew’ during the Elizabethan period.

The scene is Johannesburg, South Africa, in the year 1993. Huddled in cramped theatre seating, a mother eagerly waits to catch a glimpse of her son Eric’s performance as Romeo in a university production. To pass the time, or perhaps to discharge some of her building excitement, she turns to the black woman sitting beside her – who, as it turns out, is her housemaid, brought along for the show – and discusses how thrilled she is to be in the audience, especially since her son has mentioned that he has been seriously dating the young lady playing Juliet. They turn to watch the stage in time to hear her son – looking very much the part – recite those famous words that have haunted women on balconies ever since: ‘What light through yonder window breaks?’ (II.2.2).<sup>1</sup> The moment has arrived – Juliet appears – and within seconds a mother’s hopes are dashed and she faints. You see, the ‘light’ that ‘through yonder window’ broke wasn’t ‘light’ at all: Juliet was *black*. Apparently oblivious to her madam’s sudden loss of consciousness, the maid sitting next to her comments, ‘Interesting interpretation’, and proceeds to watch the production with renewed interest.

<sup>1</sup> All references to Shakespeare are taken from *The Complete Pelican Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Orgel and A. R. Braunmuller (London: Penguin, 2002).



**Fig. 1.** Stephen Francis and Rico Schacherl, 'Black Juliet', in *Madam & Eve: Free at Last* (Johannesburg: Penguin, 1994). Reprinted with permission of the authors and Rapid Phase (Pty) Ltd.

This is the story that appeared in *Madam & Eve* (fig. 1), a popular comic strip published in South Africa that focuses on the lives of a rich suburban housewife and her 'liberated' African domestic servant as the pair comes to terms with the divided politics and cultural idiosyncrasies of South African society. This comic strip neatly raises the three issues that I wish to investigate in this article, namely, 'race', inter-racial relationships, and Shakespeare.

As Marjorie Garber has aptly remarked, '*The Merchant of Venice* is above all Shakespeare's great play about difference'.<sup>2</sup> Precisely what *kind* of difference is emphasized in *The Merchant* has divided both critics and audiences of the play. For G. K. Hunter, the distinction between Jew and Christian exemplified by Shakespeare and Marlowe is essentially theological, neatly avoiding the representation of 'real' or 'racial' Jews in preference to a 'moral condition' within a 'theological rather than ethnological framework'.<sup>3</sup> Later critics have challenged Hunter's sharp division between racial and theological difference – most notably James Shapiro and Kim F. Hall – arguing instead that the figure of the Jew is shaped by competing discourses of race, theology, and gender.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All* (New York: Pantheon, 2004), p. 283.

<sup>3</sup> G. K. Hunter, 'The Theology of Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 27 (1964), 211–40 (p. 215).

<sup>4</sup> James Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Kim F. Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

Studies of this sort have tended to focus almost entirely on the representation of Shylock, to the exclusion of the other Jewish characters in the play. It is only comparatively recently that the part played by Shylock's daughter Jessica – who elopes with her Christian lover Lorenzo – has received critical attention in terms of her role in fashioning identity in the play: through Jessica, Mary Janell Metzger has explored 'how Shakespeare may have struggled with competing notions of Jewishness circulating in early modern England', and how, in an effort to resolve them, he 'creat[ed] not one Jew but two'.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Janet Adelman has shown how Shakespeare's construction of different 'Jewishness' – that of Jessica's on the one hand and Shylock's on the other – and the question of conversion interrogate the boundaries of 'race' and 'nation'.<sup>6</sup> Continuing this line of inquiry, in this present article I will examine Shakespeare's treatment of the inter-racial (or 'cross-cultural') marriage between Lorenzo and Jessica to map out the competing discourses of race, theology, and gender in the construction of 'the Jew' in the play.

How did an Elizabethan audience – and indeed, Shakespeare himself – perceive 'the Jew'? Despite the fact that early modern England played host to two separate Jewish communities,<sup>7</sup> and an increasing number of Englishmen were publishing accounts of their personal interactions with Jewish travellers and traders abroad, it seems that neither actual nor reported experiences played an important role in formulating the figure of 'the Jew'. For some critics this suggests that, consequently, the figure of 'the Jew' in Shakespeare's England is based 'on an essentially theological conception of the status of both Moors and Jews as non-Christians'; that these Elizabethan stereotypes should be interpreted 'as rooted far less in notions of inherited dispositions' and 'far more in the idea

<sup>5</sup> Mary Janell Metzger, "'Now by My Hood, a Gentle and No Jew": Jessica, *The Merchant of Venice*, and the Discourse of Early Modern English Identity', *PMLA*, 113 (1998), 52–63 (p. 55).

<sup>6</sup> Janet Adelman, 'Her Father's Blood: Race, Conversion, and Nation in *The Merchant of Venice*', *Representations*, 81 (2003), 4–30.

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of the Jewish communities in early modern England, see Roger Prior, 'A Second Jewish Community in Tudor London', *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England*, 31 (1990), 137–52.

of the Moor and the Jew as infidels, unbelievers whose physical differences are signs (but not causes or effects) of their unbelief’.<sup>8</sup>

This model and its insistence on a purely theological foundation of difference, as mentioned before, has been challenged by critics asserting that it ignores gender constructs and disregards the notions of ‘race’ and ‘nation’ that were being developed during Shakespeare’s time. As Ania Loomba has shown, discourses of gender, race, and nation were inextricably linked in the early modern mind: for instance, ‘racial difference was imagined in terms of an inversion or distortion of “normal” gender roles and sexual behaviour’.<sup>9</sup> Medieval and early modern Christian texts, as well as popular culture, ascribed a range of physical and ‘essential’ attributes to Jews. Jews were characterized as having large hooked noses, red or dark curly hair, dark skin, hidden cranial horns (such as those found on Michelangelo’s sculpture of Moses)<sup>10</sup> or prehensile tails, an unpleasant odour – the *foetor judaicus* – and the ability of both male and female Jews to lactate and menstruate. In addition to these physical traits were behaviours characterized as essentially Jewish in nature: Jews were reported to slaughter Christian children and to use their blood in rituals (known as the ‘blood libel’, first reported in England in the twelfth century), to poison Christian wells and to desecrate the Eucharistic host, to indulge in acts of cannibalism and

<sup>8</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah, ‘Race’, in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 274–87 (pp. 277–78). See also, for example: Robert Bartlett, ‘Medieval and Modern Concepts of Race and Ethnicity’, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 31 (2001), 39–56; Hunter, ‘The Theology of Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta*’; as well as the discussion of this issue in Lisa Lampert, *Gender and Jewish Difference from Paul to Shakespeare* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), pp. 16–20.

<sup>9</sup> Ania Loomba, *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism*, Oxford Shakespeare Topics (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> Michelangelo’s sculpture of Moses renders the patriarch with two prominent horns. I agree with Trachtenberg’s suggestion that this may be the result of mistranslation of Exodus 34. 29 and 35 where the Hebrew root *karan* (‘shine’) has been rendered in Aquila and the Vulgate as ‘horns’, the Hebrew root *keren*. As a result the passage ‘And behold the skin of his face sent forth beams’ was misinterpreted as ‘His face had horns’: Joshua Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews: The Medieval Conception of the Jew and Its Relation to Modern Antisemitism*, 2nd edn (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1983), p. 44.

sorcery, and to exploit good Christians through usury.<sup>11</sup> Many of these myths were justified by recourse to scriptural exegesis. For example, Matthew's gospel reports that after condemning Christ to death the Jews cried out 'His blood be upon us, and on our children' (Matthew 27. 25). For many, this passage explained Jewish male menstruation as a form of divine retribution. Similarly, the pronouncement that the Jews were 'of [their] father the devil, and the lusts of [their] father ye will do' (John 8. 44) adequately covered the full spectrum of sinful activities ascribed to them.

However, despite all these exotic characteristics, it would seem that 'Jews could not be counted on to be reliably different', and to remedy this a system that 'graphically enforced their [supposed] physical unmistakability' was imposed, 'as though they were not quite different *enough*'.<sup>12</sup> Thus, Jews all over Europe were required to wear items of clothing – such as red caps or yellow badges – that would visibly distinguish them from their Christian neighbours, presumably as part of an effort to minimize cases of Christians *accidentally* marrying Jews or letting them join the country club. It appears that medieval and early modern Europeans did not appreciate this inherent contradiction (i.e. the manufacturing of visible difference to make Jews more 'Jewish'), and the resulting confusion over who or what constituted 'the Jew' reached a critical point with the question of conversion.

If being a 'Jew', like being a 'Moor', was a theological distinction, then it stands to reason that conversion to Christianity would efface these differences. It was said that Jews lost their 'stink' upon converting; indeed, there are reports of Jews becoming 'perfumed' when baptized.<sup>13</sup> However, there are no accounts of Jews losing their horns or tails, changing their hair or skin colour – presumably into something 'whiter and brighter' – or of Jewish men ceasing to lactate or menstruate upon conversion. Conversion seems to be especially problematic

<sup>11</sup> For a more detailed account of the medieval and early modern characterizations of the figure of the Jew, see: Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews*; R. Po-chia Hsia, *The Myth of Ritual Murder: Jews and Magic in Reformation Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988); James Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews*; and David S. Katz, 'Shylock's Gender: Jewish Male Menstruation in Early Modern England', *Review of English Studies*, 50 (1999), 440–62.

<sup>12</sup> Adelman, 'Her Father's Blood', p. 10.

<sup>13</sup> See Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews*, pp. 47–49.

when dealing with issues of ‘race’, since it ‘implies that religious identity is not fixed or innate and can be acquired and shed’,<sup>14</sup> confronting the pre-modern mind with the fearful reminder that outward appearances are not necessarily a manifestation of inner traits. In this way conversion results in a crisis of identity, since one can never *really* be sure that the convert has converted – that inner faith matched outer show. A clear illustration of this crisis in action was the introduction of the Spanish ‘pure blood laws’ – the *limpieza de sangre* – in the fifteenth century, so named ‘because it was maintained that degenerate Jewish blood was impervious to baptism and grace’.<sup>15</sup> These laws arose out of the nagging suspicion that the Jews of Spain, who had been forcibly converted to Christianity in the 1390s, were not *real* Christians, or at least were a lesser kind, and therefore ‘if mixed with Christian blood, the Jewish blood would contaminate subsequent generations and would continue to do so indefinitely’.<sup>16</sup> The laws limited the rights of these converts, called *conversos* or New Christians, and a culture of intense genealogical scrutiny followed. The Spanish pure blood laws are evidence of ‘a growing identification of Jewishness as biological fate and infection, both physiologically and spiritually, to be cut out of society rather than incorporating it’.<sup>17</sup>

In Shakespeare’s England, where Jews had been officially expelled since 1290, the figure of ‘the Jew’ as a complex mixture of discourses of race, gender, and theology was still present. Like other early modern Europeans, the English were convinced that the Jews were different, to the point of being inhuman. To be a Jew was not simply a theological distinction:

Most Englishmen saw Roman Catholics, for example, as a mistaken religious group or even part of a traitorous political organization. But a Catholic who abandoned his faith and converted to Protestantism was completely purified, and promised himself a secure and equal future limited only by his social standing. The Catholic was an Englishman who had chosen membership of the wrong club. This was not the case

<sup>14</sup> Loomba, *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism*, p. 56.

<sup>15</sup> Jerome Friedman, ‘Jewish Conversion, the Spanish Pure Blood Laws and Reformation: A Revisionist View of Racial and Religious Antisemitism’, *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 18 (1987), 3–29 (p. 16).

<sup>16</sup> Friedman, p. 16.

<sup>17</sup> Friedman, p. 27.

with the Jews, defined racially and physically by their peculiar smell and by circumcision.<sup>18</sup>

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare relies on all of the competing discourses of race, gender, and theology in his construction of ‘the Jew’. The theological distinction between Christian and Jew is plainly evident in the slurs made against the Jews, such as ‘misbeliever’ (I.3.108), ‘faithless Jew’ (II.4.37), and ‘infidel’ (III.2.218, IV.1.332). However, it appears that the play relies more on racial – that is, intrinsic or innate – differences rather than on theological ones. Shylock is visibly different from the Christians: his ‘Jewish gaberdine’ (I.3.109), like the contemporary use of red caps or yellow badges, acts as ‘the badge of all [his] tribe’ (I.3.107). Underneath his clothes we know that Shylock is circumcized – that he lacks the ‘hood’ by which Gratiano can swear (II.4.51) – and the play hints at the possibility that his skin is darker than the Venetians, since ‘Tubal’ and ‘Chus’ are reported as ‘his countreyemen’ (III.2.285). Chus was the Biblical son of Ham, whose disobedience was ‘punished by the blackness of the son that he fathered’ and ‘who supposedly settled in Africa and became [the] originary father of the black Moors’.<sup>19</sup> The treatment of the Prince of Morocco, a Moor, is also indicative of the prominence of racial discourse in the play. On hearing that her suitor is a Moor, Portia exclaims that ‘If he have the condition of a saint / and the complexion of a devil, I had rather he should / shrive me than wive me’ (I.2.124–26), dismissing Morocco on account of his skin colour alone. Critics that try to maintain that *complexion* is being used to refer to his temperament struggle to avoid this racial reading when Morocco appears and introduces himself, stating ‘Mislike me not for my complexion / The shadowed livery of the burnished sun / To whom I am a neighbour and near bred’ (II.1.1–3), coupled with his references to ‘clime’ (II.1.10) and ‘hue’ (II.1.11). Clearly, Morocco recognizes that his physical difference is a hindrance to his chances of successfully winning the ‘gentle queen’ (II.1.12), and despite Portia’s insistence that ‘in terms of choice [she is] not solely led / by nice direction of a maiden’s

<sup>18</sup> Katz, ‘Shylock’s Gender’, pp. 440–41.

<sup>19</sup> Lynda E. Boose, ‘“The Getting of a Lawful Race”: Racial Discourse in Early Modern England and the Unrepresentable Black Woman’, in *Women, ‘Race’, and Writing in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 35–54 (p. 44).

eyes' (II.1.13–14) and that Morocco 'then stood as fair' (II.1.20) as any other suitor, he is dismissed with 'a gentle riddance' (II.7.78) and the hopes that 'all of his complexion' fail as he has done (II.7.79). That Morocco is not a Christian does not appear to play much part in Portia's dismissal of him, since she has done so before he has prayed for 'some god' – and not Christ – to 'direct [his] judgment' (II.7.13), and even though the pun on gentle/gentile in her riddance of him would suggest aligning Morocco with her against 'the Jew', her mind has been made up long before.

But Jessica is different, and the Christians in the play take great pains to distinguish her from her father. It is imperative that Jessica is distanced from her father, both theologically and racially, since it increases her chances of becoming integrated into the dominant Christian society through conversion and marriage. While Shylock is aligned with Chus and blackness – and, similarly, Morocco is given a gentile riddance – Jessica is 'fair' (II.4.28), whose hand is 'a fair hand / and whiter than the paper it writ on / is the fair hand that writ' (II.4.12–14). The Christian characters repeatedly refer to Jessica as 'fair', both in the sense of colour and beauty, both of which clearly distinguish her from her father the 'cut-throat dog' (I.3.108) that is accused of being 'wolvish, bloody, starved, and ravenous' (IV.1.38). Jessica distances herself from her father when she states that 'though I am a daughter to his blood, / I am not to his manners' (II.3.18–19), a sentiment that is repeated later by Salarino who declares to Shylock that 'there is more difference between thy flesh / and hers than between jet and ivory, more between / your bloods than there is between red wine and Rhenish' (III.1.34–37).

However, we are left with the question of just how effective this distancing act has been. While Jessica attempts to 'nullif[y] the claims of filial attachment by insisting that she is a different kind of Jew', that is, 'one whose manners take precedence over blood and who thus can see the truth of Christianity', at the same time 'she equates Shylock's blood and manners, asserting a racial notion of Jewishness that she claims not to share'.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Lancelot challenges the effectiveness of Jessica's conversion in a scene that has been dismissed too hastily by one critic as 'the most expendable in the play',<sup>21</sup> since it provides much insight

<sup>20</sup> Metzger, "'Now by My Hood, a Gentle and No Jew'", p. 56.

<sup>21</sup> *The Merchant of Venice* (Shakespeare in Production Series), ed. Charles Edelman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 207.

into the question of race and conversion. During this scene, Lancelot suggests that Jessica is ‘damned’, save for a ‘kind of bastard hope’ that Shylock ‘got you not’ and that she is ‘not the Jew’s daughter’ (III.5.2–10). Jessica, acknowledging that she is ‘damned by both father and mother’ (III.5.12–14), falls back on her hopes that her marriage to Lorenzo will prevent her damnation, pleading ‘I shall be saved by my husband. He hath made / me a Christian’ (III.5.17–18), to which Lancelot replies that all her marriage and conversion has effectively done is to increase hardship for (Old) Christians, since it will raise the price of pork (III.5.19–23).

Although Jessica and the Christian Venetians in the play may rhetorically distance her from her father, as was the case for converts in Spain, her lineage returns to haunt her. When Gratiano calls Jessica ‘a gentle and no Jew’ (II.6.1), he

establishes her status as gentile as the necessary – and impossible – condition for her escape from Jewishness: although Jews might become Christian, they are, axiomatically, not gentiles. His apparently liberatory comment thus returns her to the strictures of her father’s blood as firmly as Lancelot’s contention that the problem of her Jewishness could be solved only if a different father had gotten her. And this return to her father’s blood is a move the play continually makes; her beloved Lorenzo no sooner calls her a ‘gentle’ than he recalls her to her position as her father’s issue.<sup>22</sup>

The play’s final act hints that the match between Lorenzo and Jessica – like her conversion – is bound to fail. Retiring to Belmont, the couple exchanges tales of famous lovers: Troilus and Cressida (V.1.4–6), Pyramus and Thisbe (V.1.7), and Dido and Aeneas (V.1.10). The fact that all of these famous relationships ended in tragedy despite their legendary acts of love, coupled with the general melancholy that pervades this scene, suggests that Lorenzo and Jessica are set to follow suit.

While there is evidence of inter-racial marriage in early modern England, such as the marriage of John Rolfe to Pocahontas, or the marriage of Robert

<sup>22</sup> Adelman, ‘Her Father’s Blood’, p. 8.

Sherley to the cousin of the King of Persia,<sup>23</sup> in most cases the practice was frowned upon as taboo.<sup>24</sup> In the two celebrated cases cited, the taboo of interracial marriage was seemingly overcome by stressing that the marriage facilitated the performance of virtuous (profitable) acts on behalf of the commonwealth, and the promise of converting more exotic (female) foreigners to Christianity. In 1614, John Rolfe wrote to Sir Thomas Dale, the governor of the Virginia colony, to ask for permission to marry Pocahontas, admitting that although he was aware ‘of the heauie displeasure which almightie God conceiued against the sonnes of Leuie and Israel for marrying strange wives’, he could not in good conscience refuse to ‘performe the duetie of a good Christian’ to ‘indeuour to make her a Christian’.<sup>25</sup> The same sense of commitment is apparently absent in Lorenzo’s treatment of Jessica. At best his love for her is cool – his friends even comment that he is late for his own elopement – at worst, he is no better than a thief who, like the rest of his fellow Venetians, tolerated the Jewish aliens only as long as their money was plentiful and in supply. After he and Jessica have eloped and married, Lorenzo – as well as the other Christians – no longer refers to her as ‘fair’, presumably either because her ‘fairness’ is now self-evident or, more plausibly, that the words have already served their purpose. For Lorenzo, women are ‘fair’ as long as they offer financial benefit: Portia and Nerissa are ‘fair ladies’ (V.1.294) when they deliver the deed of gift to him and Jessica.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> For a detailed discussion of the ramifications of the representation of Rolfe’s marriage to Pocahontas, see: David Stymeist, “‘Strange Wives’: Pocahontas in Early Modern Colonial Advertisement”, *Mosaic*, 35 (2002), 109–25. On the differing accounts of the exploits of Robert Sherley, and his marriage to Lady Teresa Sampsonia Sherley, see: Bernadette Andrea, ‘Lady Sherley: The First Persian in England?’, *The Muslim World*, 95 (2005), 279–95.

<sup>24</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the various restrictions on intermarriage in Europe and abroad during this period, see Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Christianity and Sexuality in the Early Modern World: Regulating Desire, Reforming Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>25</sup> John Rolfe, ‘Letter to Sir Thomas Dale, 1614’, in Ralph Hamor, *A True Discourse of the Present Estate of Virginia* (London, 1615), pp. 61–68 (pp. 64–65).

<sup>26</sup> Similarly, when describing Portia as ‘a lady richly left’ who ‘is fair, and fairer than that word’ (I.1.161–62), Bassanio articulates the play’s repeated association between fairness and wealth. Like Lorenzo’s marriage to Jessica, Bassanio’s discovery of ‘fair Portia’s counterfeit’ (III.2.115) is a most welcome investment for a man whose financial ‘state was nothing’ (III.2.259).

Shakespeare toys with both racial and theological conceptions of ‘the Jew’ in *The Merchant* in his presentation of Jessica’s marriage to Lorenzo: the repeated references to Jessica as ‘fair’ and ‘gentle’ earlier in the play suggest a malleability and a potential for successful conversion and integration, whereas the later treatment of Jessica – ignored, alienated as ‘yond stranger’ (III.2.237), and no longer a ready source of finances – flirts with the idea that her status as an outsider and a ‘Jew’ is innate and unchangeable. The potentially transgressive act that Shakespeare presents in the inter-marriage of Jew and Christian in *The Merchant* is contained and diffused: while marriage might appear to make a difference in the construction of ‘the Jew’ in Venice, these differences are only skin-deep. Jessica may be ‘fair’ and ‘gentle’, but she is – at least in the eyes of the Christians in the play – still her father’s daughter, and as such she will never *be* gentle, and, therefore, never fully integrable into the Christian society of Shakespeare’s Venice.

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