

UC Irvine

UC Irvine Previously Published Works

Title

Exegesis, mimesis, and the future of humanism in The 'Merchant of Venice' (Examining the exegetical historicism of William Shakespeare)

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/38t0j3qt>

Journal

Religion & Literature, 32(2)

ISSN

0029-4500

Author

Lupton, Julia Reinhard

Publication Date

2000-07-01

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

EXEGESIS, MIMESIS, AND THE FUTURE OF HUMANISM
IN *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE*

Julia Reinhard Lupton

In the trial scene, Shylock twice declares his symbolic function in *The Merchant of Venice*. "I stand for judgment" (4.1.103); "I stand here for law" (4.1.142). Spelling out Shylock's place in the play's archetypal confrontation between Law and Mercy, a tableau itself derived from medieval dramatic forms, these lines cast Shylock as a kind of allegorical personification displaying its meaning on a banderole in an iconographic parade. At the same time, however, Shylock's movement into allegory is regulated by the play's overall mimetic consistency; Shylock "stands" for judgment in the sense of demanding it, and not only as an inscribed icon but also as an historic representative of the Jewish community in modern Venice. The play's primary typological opposition between Jew and Christian is not opposed to Shakespeare's mimetic successes, but on the contrary provides the vehicle for the Shakespearean synthesis of religious and profane narratives. In *Merchant*, the literary-historical transformation of the "Old" Testament into the "New" models forth the conjunction of ancient Judaism and secular modernity condensed in the figure of Shylock. In Shakespeare's exegetical historicism, the playwright exploits the philosophy of history encrypted in Pauline motifs in order to create a coherent order of representation, a Christian mercantile modernity clearly marked off from both ancient and medieval world-views. In *Merchant*, Shakespeare's Pauline coupling of historiography and hermeneutics organizes the competition between Jewish and Christian readings of the Old Testament in the play. In this reading, Shylock is neither a purely theological type (following previous Biblical readings of the play in the tradition of Barbara Lewalski) nor a primarily secular figure of a civil society freed from moral values (as emphasized by Stephen Greenblatt and others).¹ Responding to both imperatives, this essay locates secular and religious

readings of Shylock within the set of historical and representational possibilities opened up by Pauline exegesis in its Shakespearean articulation.

Exegetical Communities

In his first scene, Shylock defends usury through recourse to a Biblical proof-text, the story of Jacob in the house of Laban:

Shylock: When Jacob graz'd his uncle Laban's sheep,—
 This Jacob from our holy Abram was
 (As his wise mother wrought in his behalf)
 The third possessor: ay, he was the third.
Antonio: And what of him? did he take interest?
Shylock: No, not take interest, not as you would say
 Directly int'rest,—mark what Jacob did,—
 When Laban and himself were compromis'd
 That all the earnings which were streak'd and pied
 Should fall as Jacob's hire, the ewes being rank
 In end of autumn turned to the rams,
 And when the work of generation was
 Between these woolly breeders in the act,
 The skillful shepherd pill'd me certain wands,
 And in the doing of the act of kind
 He stuck them up before the fulsome ewes,
 Who then conceiving, did in eaning time
 Fall parti-colour'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. (1.3.66-85)

Shakespeare tries to dramatize here a specifically Jewish hermeneutics. Shylock's reading deliberately excludes all references to the New Testament and its systematic reinscription of Old Testament motifs. Note, for example, Shylock's reference not to "Abraham" but to "Abram," the name used by the first patriarch until the institution of circumcision (Gen 17.5); the unconverted, pre-contractual name "Abram" situates him in a moment before covenantal transformation, announcing Shylock's Bible as a text not yet marked by the epochal shift brought about by the New Covenant. Instead, the emphasis of Shylock's reading falls on the practical reason embedded in the story, the pointers it contains for handling the social and economic challenges of everyday life in an ethical, Torah-based manner. Shylock's reading of the Jacob story is by no means a straightfor-

ward literalism or legalism, since his examination of the conundrums of urban life through recourse to the pastoral vocabulary of ancient Israel requires the systematic substitution of one set of terms for another. As such, Shylock's hermeneutics are not out of keeping with the project of early midrash. Much as Shylock uses the Jacob narrative to explain and legitimate the practice of money-lending, many midrashim gloss Biblical stories in response to legal rulings or problems, striving to co-ordinate the narrative and the prescriptive dimensions of Torah by asking "Scripture to tell them how they were supposed to conduct themselves at the critical turnings of life" (Neusner 76).²

Moreover, Shylock casts the Hebrew Bible as a nation-defining text—hence his opening excursus on the genealogy that links him through the ages to "our holy Abram," a preamble that expands upon Shylock's reference earlier in the same scene to "our sacred nation" (1.3.43). In Shylock's hermeneutics, what makes his nation sacred is the Book that establishes election on the basis of a revealed Law, a set of "statutes and ordinances" (cf. Deut 4.1,5) confirmed and unfolded in the Torah's narratives of generation and livelihood. Here as elsewhere in the play, the word "nation" in the singular translates the peculiar status of the Jews as an *ethnos*, a stranger-people defined by both a religious code and a genealogical imperative that sets them apart from the universe of "nations" [*ethne*] united in Christ (cf. *Merchant* 3.1.50, 78).

Yet Christianity's majority discourse brackets and negates Shylock's Jewish reading methods. 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. Here we can look to the example of Paul himself, who not only crafted Christianity's Gentile mission, but did so as a Jew, "circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews" (Phil 3.5). In extending the Christian message to all mankind, Paul preserved within that universal message a unique place for Judaism. That place is defined above all historically, as the monumental foundation for the Christian epoch that will replace it. Identifying himself as a Jew to a Roman audience that included his fellow Jews, Paul writes, "They are Israelites, and to them belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race [*sarx*: flesh] ... is the Christ" (Rom 9.4-5). Paul translates the ethnic particularity of Israel into the operative core of a philosophy of history that is also a literary hermeneutics. Israel is

special, Paul asserts, and its privilege rests in its historical function, its role in laying the genealogical and prophetic lines realized in Christ's death and resurrection. Paul manages to salvage what Hans Hübner calls "the theological relevance [of] the history of Israel" (56) by granting the Jews a unique place in God's unfolding plan. And the record of Israel's historical function is the Hebrew Bible, which presents itself to the Christian reader as a vast tissue of references to Jesus. Paul's insistent linkage of historiography and hermeneutics insured that the Hebrew Bible, reconceived as the "Old Testament," became securely woven into the literary and historical impulses of Gentile Christianity.³

As if to correct Shylock's Jewish hermeneutics, Shakespeare will play out the Pauline reading of Jacob and Esau in the comic scene of Launcelot Gobbo's blessing by his father, an allusion that gives epochal significance to the clown's shift from a Jewish to a Christian master.⁴ The elopement of Jessica and Lorenzo further dramatizes the Pauline reading of Jacob, insofar as their tale of treasures stolen from the house of a greedy and recalcitrant father recalls Jacob and Rachel's flight from the house of Laban with his idols (Engel 32). Planning her elopement, Jessica disaffiliates herself from the family of Shylock:

But though I am a daughter to his blood
I am not to his manners: O Lorenzo
If thou keep promise I shall end this strife,
Become a Christian and thy loving wife! (2.3.18-21)

Jessica distinguishes between "blood" and "manners," the first joining her to Shylock's "sacred nation" defined genealogically, and the latter associating her with the "gentle/Gentile" community that she is about to join. Her reference to Lorenzo's "promise" evokes Paul's distinction between Abraham's progeny "according to the flesh" and those granted like Isaac "through promise" (Gal 4.23), since her "promised" marriage and attendant conversion allow her to move from carnal Israel to spiritual Israel. Pauline typology provides the symbolic archway shaping and sheltering her flight from "blood" to "manners," from "flesh" to "promise," from Judaism to Christianity.

Following Paul, Shakespeare grants a qualified authenticity, a fixed yet potent integrity — the bounded coherence of an historical period — to the Hebrew Bible and the interpretive modes associated with it. The play distributes the figure of Jacob between three distinct epochs: ancient Israel, its Christian conversion, and their modern synthesis. As Old Testament patriarch, Jacob represents the heroic yet surpassed foundation of

Judaism; in Lorenzo's phrase, Jacob is our "father Jew" (2.6.25), an originary figure necessarily ignorant of his own place in the larger scheme of history, but nonetheless attaining a conditional validity for his own time. As such, the figure of Jacob-as-patriarch already points to his second function, namely as a symbol of conversion from the old covenant to the new, a switch-point marked in Pauline imagery by the victory of Jacob over Esau, and expanded into the stuff of romance by *Merchant's* revisitation of the tale of Rachel's elopement.

Yet *Merchant* takes place in neither the pastoral Israel imagined by Shylock's midrash nor the early Christian world of Paul's epistles, but unfolds instead on the stage of a distinctively modern Venice. First and foremost, this modern Venice is Christian, its commercial projects traveling along the lines of intercourse opened up by the Gentile mission. In the Duke's judgment, "the trade and profit of the city / Consisteth of all nations" (3.3.30-31). In its putative universalism, its embrace of the nations or *ethne*, mercantile Venice becomes an anagogical image of the City of God, its realization on earth to be crowned by the conversion of the Jews and the final dissolution of their stranger-status.⁵ In *Merchant*, the Christian ideal of human brotherhood culminates in the triumph of global capital, which locates each individual and each nation in a symbolically coordinated network of interchangeable relations.

At the same time, the Renaissance workings of the market were frequently at odds with the tenets of Christian charity. The rise of Christian modernity required the Jews of Europe not only to perform some of the money-lending on which capitalism relies, but also to give an identifiable moral face to the increasingly amoral drives of the post-feudal economy. As Stephen Greenblatt writes of Marlowe's anti-hero, "It is because of the primacy of money that Barabas, for all the contempt heaped upon him, is seen as the dominant spirit of the play, its most energetic inventive force" (204). Like Barabas, Shylock becomes a concentrated cipher of the divisive forces of an increasingly market-driven economy, an anti-social society that identifies, as Shylock does, a man's "goodness" not with his ethical bearing, but with his financial credit (1.3.11-15).⁶ Shylock's argument in court is ultimately grounded on the rights of private property and the inviolability of contract, crucial legal guarantees for the free exercise of capital: "The pound of flesh which I demand of him / Is dearly bought, 'tis mine and I will have it" (4.1.99-100). As such, the play identifies Shylock's motiveless malignity, borrowed from the stage Devil and morality Vice, with the legal principles of a nascent capitalism freed from moral sentiment.⁷

In Shakespeare's Venice, Christianity is modern, but modernity is — Jewish. And it is only as an insufficiently cancelled Old Testament type that Shylock and his brethren come to personify the anti-Christian aspects of Christian modernity, giving a local habitation and a name to the bewildering side-effects of early capital. If the transformation of the Old Testament into the New provides a paradigm for the transition from Christian medievalism to Christian modernity, the incompleteness of that translation — the frustrating persistence of Judaism beyond its abrogation — justifies the concentration of secularization's discontents in the obdurate figure of the modern Jew. Its due date up, the continued practice of Judaism after the moment of its Christian sublation evacuates it of its historical validity, reducing the revealed Law into a mere legalism, an empty shell that can then be filled with a new secular meaning, the peculiarly contentless content of the market economy. In the Christian historical imaginary, the Jew becomes a figure of modernity insofar as he stubbornly holds on to his antiquity. Hence we need not choose between interpreting the stage Jew as either an exclusively theological type (Lewalski) or as an essentially secular figure (Greenblatt), since Shylock and his brethren become symbols of the secular precisely because of their persistent ties to the superseded era of the Law.

Circumcision and the Dialectic of Humanism

The most debated passage in the play is surely Shylock's "Hath not a Jew eyes?" speech, which can be rendered either as proof of Shylock's inveterate quest for Old Testament revenge (and hence a sign of Shakespeare's anti-Judaism) or as a statement of common brotherhood (and hence a sign of Shakespeare's fundamental humanism). It is moreover a mimetic set piece that measures the difference between Marlowe's ranting stage Jew and Shakespeare's potentially tragic character. Paul's exegetical historicism provides a key to this fundamental passage.

Shylock defends his bond:

He hath disgrac'd me, and hind' red me half a million, laugh'd at my losses, mock'd at my gains, *scorned my nation*, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated my enemies, — and what's his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? *fed with the same food*, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? — *if you prick us, do we not bleed? if you tickle us, do we not laugh? if you poison us do we not*

die? and if you wrong us shall we not revenge? — if we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. (3.1.47-60; emphasis added)

Shylock argues for his inclusion in a common humanity by listing the basic needs, vulnerabilities, and responses that he shares with his Christian interlocutors. From this humanist perspective, the poignant rhetorical question, “if you prick us, do we not bleed?” offers an image of punctured flesh as an emblem of common humanity designed to transcend all national differences. Yet Shakespeare blunts the force of this challenge by associating it with an irremediable materialism. Shylock’s list of human qualities begins with physical needs only to shift almost imperceptibly into the moral register of revenge, implicitly casting the ethical as an extension of the physiological.⁸

Shylock speaks as a Jew, his argument unfolding almost from the start under the sign of *ethnos*. Shylock castigates Antonio for “having scorned my nation,” an insistence that undercuts his demand for inclusion in the human community by calling attention to the persistent national particularism of the Jews. Shylock’s pricked and bleeding flesh evokes the rite of circumcision, which distinguishes the Jews from the Gentile nations. (Circumcision will, of course, become the dominant fantasy motivating Shylock’s bond and the trial scene.)⁹ What functions as a humanist symbol on one level, aligning Shylock with the brotherhood of *ethne*, operates as a nationalist marker on another, serving precisely to separate him from them, in an *ethnos* forever apart.

Circumcision in Judaism functions both to define the limits of Israel and to open up that nation to the stranger through an act of citizen-creating naturalization. In Genesis God establishes his covenant with Abraham by commanding the rite of circumcision:

This is My covenant, which ye shall keep, between Me and you and thy seed after thee: every male among you shall be circumcised. And ye shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of a covenant betwixt Me and you. And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised among you, every male throughout your generations, he that is born in the house, or bought with money of any foreigner, that is not of thy seed.... And the uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that soul shall be cut off from his people: he hath broken My covenant. (Gen 17.10-14)

Circumcision marks that organ through which Abraham will become “the father of a multitude of nations” (Gen 17.4). The commandment is a nation-marking sign that links generations across time and space without, however, being a genetic trait. Unlike a birthmark, which would signify a “natural” or “blood” relationship, the scar imposed by ritual manifests the

maintenance of laws not themselves natural or even moral as the necessary foundation of the nation. In Genesis, the commandment extends to Abraham's children by other women (Ishmael, born of the handmaid Hagar) and to any sons born to slaves with no genealogical ties to Abraham; to this group, commentators would add converts to Judaism (*gerim* or proselytes).¹⁰ Circumcision functions as the sign and mechanism of naturalized citizenship, since membership in the nation, whether incurred through birth or through other means, is equally ratified by circumcision.

In both Jewish and Christian traditions, the crux of the passage lies in God's promise of "a multitude of nations [*goyim*]" to Abraham. Did the promise apply only to Israel (as Ramban argues), or also to the other progeny of Abraham, the descendants of Ishmael and Esau (as Rashi suggests)?¹¹ Although the dominant tradition favors a restrictive reading of the passage, the plurality of "nations" within the people of Israel guarantees that the latter will not be defined along blood lines only. If the promise is indeed made to Israel alone, that single nation nonetheless contains "nations" within it, the half-brothers, strangers, proselytes, and slaves who enter the community through circumcision.

As such, circumcision plays out the characteristically Jewish tension between the unique election and identity of Israel as a nation apart and the potential universality of its historical example, ethical code, and single God. From the Jewish perspective, the universal significance of Israel to the nations of the world can be attained only through the strict maintenance of its own borders; it is not a question of choosing the world or the nation, but rather of opening up to the world precisely by obeying those ritual laws that keep the nation separate. Only through its unique identity, a position maintained by its special laws, can Israel assume a larger historical function. Through circumcision, the "people of Israel," a legally constituted and maintained community, can include within it "a multitude of nations," of non-self-identical elements that make up its circumcised heart. In this sense, every Israelite is a Gershom, a "stranger in a strange land," adopted by his own family and converted to his own religion.¹²

In Judaism, circumcision is not opposed to Israel's world significance as a "light onto the nations," but rather lies at the very center of it, articulated by the cut of covenant that determines the boundaries — at once absolutely exclusive and absolutely permeable — of the Chosen People. Whereas in the humanist and universalizing moments of Jewish theology, elected nation and general humanity are held in productive tension with each other, Paul makes Christian universalism the historical negation of Jewish particularism, relaxing a synchronic coupling into a diachronic

sequence. Paul could indeed maintain the idea of Israel's election, but only by historicizing it as a past moment and interiorizing it as a symbol of faith. Paul, by identifying the *goyim* promised to Abraham with the Gentile nations, resolves this Jewish tension in the most inclusive direction.¹³ In doing so, however, he changes forever the status of circumcision as the ritual trace that constitutes Israel as a nation elected by God. For now faith, with or without circumcision, establishes true inclusion among God's elect, which is no longer conceived as a national unit at all. As a result, the "nations" promised to Abraham have shifted in Paul from naming the naturalized heterogeneity that makes up the Israel of the rabbis to a truly trans-national conception of the church as that group in which there is no "Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free man, but Christ is all, and in all" (Col 3.11).

Shylock's rhetorical question, "If you prick us, do we not bleed?" appeals to the universal strand in Judaism while alluding to the particularism associated with circumcision. For him, membership in the nation of Israel does not contradict participation in common humanity. The Christian perspective that frames Shylock's speech, however, cannot brook this dual citizenship. To hold onto the materiality of the flesh and the particularity of the nation is to renounce the claim to common humanity. Shylock's reference to hunger follows a similar logic. Both Jews and Christians, Shylock claims, are "fed with the same food," and, from a physiological perspective, he is right. Yet Jewish dietary laws, taken by Paul along with circumcision and the festal calendar as the rituals most emblematic of Jewish law, require that Jews not be "fed with the same food" as their Gentile neighbors. Shylock himself makes this point early in the play, with his curt rejection of Bassanio's dinner invitation: "I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you, and so following: but I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you" (1.3.30-34). Shylock's marked observance of *kashrut* (the laws of "keeping kosher") is another locus where the residual antiquity of the Jew intersects with his estranged modernity: by adhering to his old dietary laws, the Jew comes to emblemize the moral sterility of a purely civil society, in which all neighborly and brotherly intercourse is reduced to the types of exchanges governed by buying and selling. Eating with his own, refusing the consolations of communion and community in their Christian senses, the observant Jew embodies (for all his traditionalism) the modern separation of the public and the private that leads to an alienated and litigious society.

Does the materialism of Shylock's speech as well as its nationalism mean that a humanist reading of Shylock is permanently disabled? The

answer must be “no,” since such a reading has of course been developed to great effect in the last two centuries, beginning with the Romantics and scoring a good number of both theatrical and critical successes in the meantime.¹⁴ The challenge is not to reject the humanist interpretation, but rather to understand the deeper historical patterns that underwrite it.

At least four distinct moments constitute the humanist reading of Shylock in its fullest historical disclosure: *Jewish humanism*, in which national election and universal humanity do not represent absolute alternatives but rather imply each other; *Christian humanism*, in which Shylock’s sacred nation and Antonio’s brotherhood of friends cannot legitimately exist in the same historical space; *secular humanism*, in which modern liberal principles are used to unmask the bad faith of the Christian characters; and *multicultural humanism*, which restores the ethnic singularity of Shylock without, however, accounting for its religious basis. We have already visited the first two moments in the analysis of circumcision in the Torah and Saint Paul. In the humanist and universalizing strand of Judaism, circumcision links the national definition of the Jews to their sense of world purpose, insofar as the mark of *brit milah* allows for the incorporation of the stranger into the ranks of the nation. Following a similar logic, Shylock’s speech poses the question of a common humanity, but does so without relinquishing his membership in the “sacred nation” of the Jews. The national coherence of the *ethnos*, however, remains at the core of a broader world consciousness. Emmanuel Levinas, David Hartman, and other thinkers committed to the philosophical implications of Jewish observance have argued that in Judaism, the national and the universal perspectives require rather than exclude each other. It is only as an elected people that Judaism can become a light unto the nations, since the laws that draw the boundaries of the religious community also allow for the practical regulation and theoretical conceptualization of relations with the stranger that acknowledge his or her alterity.¹⁵

Pauline humanism, unlike Jewish humanism, takes as its starting point the unity of the *ethne* brought together by Christ; its tendency is to dissolve national difference in favor of a universal set defined by conversion. As Paul writes in Romans, in Christ “there is no distinction” (3.22): no *ethnicity*, no definitive nationality, inheres in the *ethne*, the nations of God. In relation to Shylock’s speech, the Pauline framework reduces the characteristically Jewish interplay between nation and world to a logical and historical contradiction that serves to ironize and discount Shylock’s claims to participation in the human community. From this perspective, Shylock cannot claim to be “fed with the same food” and hold onto his dietary laws;

he cannot assert that he, too, bleeds when he is pricked *and* continue to circumcise his sons on the eighth day. It is not that, from the Pauline perspective, Shylock-as-Jew could never legitimately claim membership in a shared humanity; indeed, it is precisely Jessica's function in the play to illustrate the crossing from Jewish law to Christian brotherhood implied by the Pauline variant of the humanist argument. Rather, Shylock can only enter this transnational brotherhood by accepting the historicization of his legal observances — that is, by becoming Christian.

The play's answer to the problem of the modern Jew, namely to convert Shylock to Christianity at the end of the play and thus to bring him into the loving circle of nations, has been felt by even the most typologically-committed critics as a strained and painful one, its costs partially registered in the brevity and resignation of Shylock's "I am content."¹⁶ The millennial dream of the final conversion of the Jews minimally instantiated by Shylock's forced choice solves at least formally the historical dilemma raised by the survival of Judaism. Yet a more effective solution lies just beyond the conceptual reach of the play's immediate field, in the formulation of the humanist challenge at a third level of abstraction, developed in secular-humanist readings that take up Shylock's side of the argument in order to expose the hypocrisy of the Christians in the play. Defenses of Shylock often oppose their own humanism to the behavior of the play's Christian characters, who fail to live up to the humanist ideals championed but unrealized in Christianity itself. The play's Christianity, that is, appears as a kind of *second-order Judaism*, a Christianity that falls short of its own humanist potential by sliding back into the very "ethnic" prejudices that its dialectic purports to transcend. In this sense, the Christian characters are more Jewish than the Jews, bound up in hypocrisy, provincialism, and an unacknowledged and therefore all-the-baser materialism.¹⁷ As Richard Halpern has argued, in the supposedly secular interpretation, Christianity nonetheless remains the implicit measure of the play, even when the Christian characters are made into the grossest transgressors of its ideals (159-226). In this stage of the humanist argument, the contradiction between nation and world is not reworked or revisited (by an examination, say, of Jewish sources on the problem) but rather further extended in order to lay bare the unacknowledged biases of Christianity in its institutional realizations prior to the rise of secular humanism. The secular interpretation constitutes not the rebuttal so much as the culmination of the very conversionary types that Pauline readings of the play foreground. If the Christians are more Jewish than the Jews in the play, then

the play's secular humanist readers are more Christian than the Christians.

To avoid this reinstantiation of Christianity within secularism, more contemporary readings of the play strive to salvage rather than dissolve the Jewish particularism that aggravates the play's ideal of human community. This fourth movement of the humanist dialectic operates in the name not of religion but of culture. For example, Thomas Cartelli praises the play for its "cultural relativism" and its "comparatively enlightened approach to cultural difference" (258, 259). It is only as culture — as "nation," but not as "sacred nation" — that Shylock's practices can be reclaimed for modern criticism, a tactic borrowed from moves on the part of secular Jewish intellectuals to define Judaism as an ethnicity, culture or civilization rather than a religion. As James Shapiro has pointed out, if neo-historicist critics were to distinguish Judaism-as-religion from Judaism-as-culture, its practices would veer too close to Zionism, fundamentalism, and other tendencies out of tune with liberal and leftist principles (*Shakespeare and the Jews* 85-86). Multicultural humanism negates the universal ideals of both Christian humanism and secular liberalism through a renewed appreciation of individual cultures in their hybridized identities. Although there is much that is salutary in this development, it nonetheless tends to ignore the religious bases — in both Jewish and Christian Scriptures and commentaries — of the national concept, and hence falls short of accounting for the intimate relation between the first two moments of the humanist argument as well as their continuing effects in contemporary criticism. Christianity and Judaism are too often constituted, that is, as two competing "cultures," without the idea of culture-as-*ethnos* itself being traced back to its exegetical foundations in the historical conflict of the two religions. It is my contention that this failure to dialecticize the terms of contemporary cultural analysis in relation to their exegetical foundations severely limits our historical and theoretical comprehension of the ethnopolitical field of Shakespearean drama as well as its later effects in modern discourses of race, culture, and ethnicity.

Circumcision emblemizes the movement between these four moments in the play's reading of and by humanism. The nationalizing mark of *brit milah* leads to its Pauline appropriation, in which it becomes the sign and seal of the epochal transition from Jewish to Christian humanism. Insofar as Judaism survives as an evolving religion distinct from the nations united in Christ, however, it points to the limits of Paul's universal vision, leading to the articulation of the new — broader because more secular — humanism affirmed in the third stage. From this perspective, the stigma of

circumcision is not erased so much as turned onto the Venetian Christians themselves, who have failed to overcome their own “Judaism” and who deserve the circumcision in the heart spelled out in Shylock’s bond. Finally, in the fourth moment, the cultural quotient resident in circumcision — the element of custom that distinguishes ethnicity from race — is recuperated in the rise of multicultural humanism, at the cost, however, of the rite’s proclaimed roots in revelation.

When pricked, the Jew indeed bleeds, leaving a permanent seal of his covenantal bond and becoming a scandal to the later stages of the humanist vision. The scar of circumcision introduces an irritant into the Pauline discourse, insofar as it foregrounds the Jewish *ethnos* as a splinter of singularity that belies the symbolic coherence of the *ethne*. The continued articulation and observance of Jewish law means that Judaism constitutes neither a past period anterior to Christianity (a blow to Christian humanism) nor a set of relative regional practices within a generalized humanity (contrary to the impulses of multicultural humanism).

In the present moment, Shylock’s speech can direct us to the future of humanism — to humanism as an ideal never yet realized, as a possibility for thought and action that is always just beyond the horizon of our current moment. Such a reading would have to take its lead from Judaism — anything less is an insult to Shylock — but would need to develop Judaism’s universalist strands. Contemporary Jewish philosophy offers several pointers in this direction; indeed, one could argue that the very project of “Jewish philosophy,” mediating as it does the contrary legacies of Athens and Jerusalem, is fundamentally oriented towards this problematic even when it does not explicitly address it.

Emmanuel Levinas is exemplary here. In his brief essay, “Israel and Universalism,” Levinas suggests the fundamental futurity of humanism, its function as urgent imminence rather than achieved transcendence:

The rabbinic principle by which the just of every nation participate in the future world expresses not only an eschatological view. It affirms the possibility of that ultimate intimacy [with the non-Jew], beyond the dogma affirmed by the one or the other, an intimacy without reserve. ... This is what is represented by the Jewish concept of Israel and the sense that it is a chosen people. It is not ‘still anterior’ to the universalism of a homogeneous society in which the differences between Jew, Greek, and barbarian are abolished. It already includes this abolition, but remains, for a Jew, a condition that is at any moment still indispensable to such an abolition, which in turn at any moment is still about to commence. (*Difficult Freedom* 176-77)

Alluding to Romans 1:14-16, where Paul declares the equality of Greek, Jew, and barbarian in Christ, Levinas counters that Judaism, too, posits the equality of the nations, but retains the election of Israel as a precondition to this state. In Levinas' analysis, universalism remains an imminent possibility and a pressing responsibility; humanism is always in and of the future, and only as such can animate the present. Such a view taps on the messianic tradition in Judaism, which conceived of redemption as a beckoning possibility that required constant vigilance to the mystery of the stranger and the promise of the moment. In the words of Walter Benjamin, "Every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter" (264). Via its own articulation of and by the dialectic of a once and future humanism, *The Merchant of Venice* offers a salutary glimpse and a possible passage through that gate, a gate that reveals the history and laws of the nation within the cosmic landscape of creation.

The University of California at Irvine

NOTES

1. Lewalski provides a thorough-going typological analysis of the play using Dante's theory of allegory, an analysis that beautifully demonstrates the symbolic resources of allusion in the play, but does not address their politics or economics. See as well essays by Coghill, Colley, and Anderson. Stephen Greenblatt, on the other hand, reads Marlowe's Barabas as a figure of secular society, retroactively installing Marx's *On the Jewish Question* in the Renaissance scene (204-07). Stephen Cohen's reading of *Merchant* develops a similar line; thus he argues that "Shylock's Jewishness in the play is less theological than cultural," since Judaism "functions in the play as a derogatory marker for a group ... characterized by its economic self-interest and its willingness to further that interest by opposing itself to the dominant social ideology: the rising class" (41-42). In my estimation, Leslie Fiedler, Lars Engel, Richard Halpern, and Marc Shell are the critics who most successfully combine theological and modernist readings of Shylock.

2. This account of midrash in terms of practical reason is, of course, an extremely limited one that ignores the theological concerns of rabbinic discourse; it is, however, about as much as one can imagine Shakespeare being able to absorb or intuit from received accounts of Jewish writing that might have been circulating at the time. The crucial point is the role of midrash in mediating between law and narrative — between rules for current conduct and the revealed history of the nation. On the relation between law and narrative in the Hebrew Bible, see Calum Carmichael, *The Origins of Biblical Law*.

3. Cf. Erich Auerbach on the importance of Paul to the establishment of Biblical typology as one of Christianity's fundamental aesthetic and historiographical principles (*Scenes* 49-53).

4. On the Jacob and Esau story in *Merchant*, see Colley.

5. I take my lead here from Lewalski's typological reading, which refers the world of the play to "an analogical significance treating the ultimate reality, the Heavenly City" (35); later, she reads Shylock's conversion in terms of the conversion of the Jews that will mark the Apocalypse (47). This motif has been explored most thoroughly by James Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews*, especially 131-65.

6. Cf. Barber 16.

7. In Leslie Fiedler's analysis, Shakespeare exploits "the link ... which joins together scriptural and legal notions of the bond, identifying both with nascent capitalism" (81).

8. As C. L. Barber comments, "Shylock claims to think only a *part* of humanness, the lower part, physical and passionate" (24).

9. A longer version of this essay culminates with an extended reading of the trial scene. Most recently, James Shapiro has pointed out the importance of circumcision in the play (126-28). Leslie Fiedler noted the connection in earlier work (78).

10. Rashi glosses "he that is born in the house" as "one to whom a handmaid gave birth in the house" and "he that is bought with thy money" as "one whom a person bought after his birth" (Gen 17.12; p. 67). The *Midrash Rabbah* glosses this passage by way of a story about two Hellenistic Egyptian proselytes, "sons of King Ptolemy," who each have themselves circumcised after reading this scene. (*Genesis Rabbah* 17.9-10; 395-6)

11. See Rashi I.66 and Ramban I.218-19.

12. The popular etymology of "Gershom" (eldest son of Moses and Zipporah and born in the land of Midian, Ex 2.22, 18.3) means "stranger there," expanded into "stranger in a strange land" (*Eerdman's Bible Dictionary* 412). Zipporah circumcises Gershom with a rock upon their return to Egypt (Ex 4.25). The word *ger*, "stranger," is also frequently translated as "proselyte," indicating a convert to Judaism.

13. See Davies on Paul's appropriation of the universalist strand from Jewish thought (58-85). Other Pauline scholars who have usefully addressed the Jewish legacy and implications of Paul's thought include Daniel Boyarin, Hans Hübner, and E. P. Sanders.

14. For a history of the changing valuations of Shylock, see John Gross, *Shylock: A Legend and Its Legacy* as well as Bloom's useful collection, *Shylock*.

15. In one line of philosophical work on the history and parameters of Jewish universalism, thinkers such as Hermann Cohen (working in the neo-Kantian tradition) and Ernst Simon worked to separate out humanist and universalist moments from the burdensome weight of Jewish law. To this project we could also add the work of Pauline scholars to demonstrate the Jewish sources of Paul's humanist ideas (see, for example, W. D. Davies 58-85). Other philosophers, including Levinas and Yeshayahu Leibowitz, have strived in a less apologetic mode to show how the ideals of universalism and humanism do not negate but rather stem from the concept of national election that animates so much of Jewish law and observance.

16. Lewalski writes, "There is some evidence that Shylock himself in this scene recognizes the logic which demands his conversion, *though understandably he finds this too painful to admit explicitly*" (51; *emph. added*).

17. In A. C. Moody's ironic reading, "The play is 'about' the manner in which the Christians succeed in the world by not practising their ideals of love and mercy ... the play does not celebrate the Christian virtues so much as expose their absence" (101).

WORKS CITED

- Anderson, Douglas. "The Old Testament Presence in *The Merchant of Venice*." *ELH* 52.1 (Spring 1985): 119-32.
- Auerbach, Erich. "Figura." In *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1959. 11-78.
- Barber, C. L. "The Merchants and the Jew of Venice: Wealth's Communion and an Intruder." *Barnet* 11-32.
- Sylvan Barnet, ed., *Twentieth-Century Interpretations of The Merchant of Venice*. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall, 1970.
- Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1969.
- Bloom, Harold, ed. *Shylock*. New York: Chelsea, 1991.
- Boyarin, Daniel. *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1994.
- Carmichael, Calum. *The Origins of Biblical Law: The Decalogues and the Book of the Covenant*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell UP, 1992.
- Cartelli, Thomas. "Shakespeare's *Merchant*, Marlowe's *Jew*. The Problem of Cultural Difference." *Shakespeare Studies* XX (1988): 255-60.
- Charney, Maurice. "Jessica's Turquoise Ring and Abigail's Poisoned Porridge: Shakespeare and Marlowe as Rivals and Imitators." *Renaissance Drama* 10 (1979): 33-44.
- Coghill, Neville. "The Theme of *The Merchant of Venice*." *Barnet* 108-13.
- Cohen, Hermann. *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*. Trans. Simon Kaplan. Atlanta: Scholars P, 1995.
- Cohen, Stephen. "'The Quality of Mercy: Law, Equity, and Ideology in *The Merchant of Venice*.'" *Mosaic* 27.4 (Winter 1994): 35-54.
- Colley, John Scott. "Launcelot, Jacob, and Esau: Old and New Law in *The Merchant of Venice*." *Yearbook of English Studies* 10 (1980): 181-89.
- Davies, W. D. *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism: Some Rabbinic Elements in Pauline Theology*. 1948. Fourth Ed., Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980.
- Eerdmans's Bible Dictionary*. Rev. Ed. Allen C. Myers. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987.
- Engel, Lars. "'Thrift is Blessing': Exchange and Explanation in *The Merchant of Venice*." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 37.1 (Spring, 1986): 20-37.
- Fiedler, Leslie. *The Stranger in Shakespeare*. New York: Stein and Day, 1972.
- Genesis Rabbah*. Volume One of *Midrash Rabbah*. 10 Volumes. Ed. H. Freedman. London: Soncino, 1983.
- Girard, René. "'To Entrap the Wisest.'" In Bloom, ed., *Shylock*. 291-301. Reprinted from *Literature and Society: Selected Papers from the English Institute*. Ed. Edward W. Said. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1980. 100-119.
- Goddard, Harold C. "Portia's Failure." 1951. Bloom 27-36.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980.
- Gross, John. *Shylock: A Legend and Its Legacy*. New York: Touchstone, 1992.
- Halpern, Richard. *Shakespeare among the Moderns*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1997.
- Hawthorne, Gerald F. and Ralph P. Martin, eds. *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1993.

- Hübner, Hans. *Law in Paul's Thought*. Trans. James C. G. Greig. Ed. John Riches. Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1984.
- Leibowitz, Yeshayahu. *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State*. Ed. Eliezer Goldman. Trans. Eliezer Goldman, Yoram Navon, et al. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1992.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*. Trans. Seán Hand. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990.
- Lewalski, Barbara. "Biblical Allusion and Allegory in *The Merchant of Venice*." *Barnet* 33-54, Bloom 236-51.
- Lupton, Julia Reinhard. *Afterlives of the Saints: Hagiography, Typology, and Renaissance Literature*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996.
- . "Ethnos and Circumcision in the Pauline Tradition: A Psychoanalytic Exegesis." In Christopher Lane, ed. *The Psychoanalysis of Race*. New York: Columbia UP, 1998. 193-210.
- Moody, A. C. "An Ironic Comedy." 1964. *Barnet* 100-08.
- Neusner, Jacob. *A Midrash Reader*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990.
- Ramban. *Commentary on the Torah*. 5 Volumes. Trans. and annotated Charles B. Chavel. New York: Shilo, 1971.
- Rashi. *Chumash with Rashi's Commentary*. 5 Vols. Ed. A. M. Silverman. Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1934.
- Sanders, E. P. *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983.
- Shakespeare, William. *The Merchant of Venice*. Ed. John Russell Brown. London: Methuen, 1955.
- Shell, Marc. *Money, Language, and Thought: Literary and Philosophical Economies from the Medieval to the Modern Era*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1982.
- Shapiro, James. *Shakespeare and the Jews*. New York: Columbia UP, 1996.
- . "'Which is *The Merchant* here, and which *The Jew*?': Shakespeare and the Economics of Influence." *Shakespeare Studies* XX (1988): 269-79.
- Simon, Ernst. "The Neighbor (*Re'a*) Whom We Shall Love." In *Modern Jewish Ethics: Theory and Practice*. Ed. Marvin Fox. Ohio State UP, 1975. 29-56.
- Stoll, Elmer Edgar. 1911. "Shylock." Bloom 85-100.