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Good Girl, Bad Girl: The Role of Abigail and Jessica in *The Jew of Malta* and *The Merchant of Venice*

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Good Girl, Bad Girl:

The Role of Abigail and Jessica in *The Jew of Malta* and *The Merchant of Venice*

by

Anna Beskin

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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I dedicate this Masters Thesis to my best friend, John Jason Lott.

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ABSTRACT

In *The Jew of Malta* and *The Merchant of Venice*, both Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare question anti-Semitism, Christian presumption, and socially constructed gender roles. Often compared, the two plays have obvious similarities: both plots center on rich, Jewish protagonists—Barabas in *The Jew of Malta* and Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*—who are vilified and then destroyed by a merciless Gentile society. On the surface, the protagonists’ daughters—Abigail in *The Jew of Malta* and Jessica in *The Merchant of Venice*—also share many similarities. Both are the young, beautiful daughters of rich and much maligned Jews; both love Gentile men; both flee from their religion and convert to Christianity; most importantly, both are presented as “different” from their fathers—somehow less “Jewish.” However, despite their similarities, they represent polarities of early modern concepts of femininity.

Employing Marilyn French’s concept of gender principles, as presented in *Shakespeare’s Division of Experience*, I argue that Abigail and Jessica embody the inlaw and outlaw feminine principles respectively, and that their importance in the two plays in which they appear has been critically overlooked. As James Shapiro points out in his study of the Jewish presence in England, a sixteenth century audience would hardly be familiar with practicing Jews, although they might have encountered representations of

Jews in the drama of the period. Abigail and Jessica, the only Jewish characters in the two plays besides Barabas and Shylock, provide insight into the interaction between anti-Semitism and gender politics. Moreover, these two daughters sway the audience's sympathies toward or away from their fathers inversely. If we pity Abigail, whose actions are reactions to her father's machinations, then we are gratified that Barabas gets what he deserves. If we are angry with Jessica for her betrayal and theft, then we sympathize with Shylock and see him constructed into a villain by both his society and his own daughter. In this thesis, I will explore the ways in which Marlowe and Shakespeare employ Abigail and Jessica to interrogate the traditional sixteenth century roles of women, daughters, wives, and citizens.

Chapter One

Introduction

By the time Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare were born, England had banned Jews for several centuries. However, even though there were no practicing Jews in England, the travel and trade of the period suggests, and studies such as James Shapiro's, *Shakespeare and the Jews*, further show that Jews were living secretly in England during the early modern period and that, as a result, anti-Semitism was still very much in fashion. Why then would Marlowe and Shakespeare create charismatic, and often sympathetic, Jewish characters, while their Christian characters often embody highly un-Christian characteristics? I argue that the two playwrights provide such anomalies to interrogate anti-Semitism, Christian presumption, and socially constructed gender roles. Often compared, *The Jew of Malta* and *The Merchant of Venice* have obvious similarities: both plots center on rich, Jewish protagonists—Barabas and Shylock—who are vilified and then destroyed by a merciless Gentile society. On the surface, the protagonists' daughters—Abigail in *The Jew of Malta* and Jessica in *The Merchant of Venice*—also share many similarities. Both are young, beautiful daughters of rich and much maligned Jews; both are in love with Gentile men; both flee from their religion and convert to Christianity; and, most importantly, both are presented as “different” from their fathers—as somehow less “Jewish.” Despite their analogous characteristics, however, they represent polarities of sixteenth concepts of femininity.

Employing Marilyn French's gender principles, as presented in *Shakespeare's Division of Experience*, I argue that Abigail and Jessica embody the inlaw and outlaw feminine principles respectively and that their importance has been critically overlooked. Moreover, Abigail and Jessica provide insight into the interaction between anti-Semitism and gender politics, and sway the audience's sympathies toward or away from their fathers inversely. If we pity Abigail, whose actions are reactions to her father's machinations, then we are gratified that Barabas gets what he deserves. If we are angry with Jessica for her betrayal and theft, then we sympathize with Shylock and see him as being constructed into a villainous role by both a Christian society and his own daughter. Abigail and Jessica also act as visual foils to their fathers; John Gross identifies the red wig and fake nose that both Barabas and Shylock, and in earlier plays Judas and Satan, probably wore on stage as an unmistakable signifier of their "Satanic" ancestry (27). Therefore, the beautiful Abigail and Jessica serve to contrast with the hyperbolic representation of Judaism presented by their fathers.

In this thesis I will adopt a Feminist, New Historicist methodology to explore the ways that Marlowe and Shakespeare employ Abigail and Jessica to interrogate the traditional early modern roles of women, daughters, wives, and citizens. However, before I begin my analysis of the two plays, I will provide a detailed historical background of the Jewish people in the sixteenth century period, focusing on such issues as demographics, stereotypes, and the (im)possibility of conversion. In my examination of both the historical milieu that helped to produce the two plays and the dramas themselves, I will examine how these authors interrogate hierarchies of gender and religion by showing how Abigail, an inlaw feminine character, dies fully interpolated into

her appropriate social role, while outlaw Jessica, rebellious and cunning, is often portrayed as living happily ever after, but in many modern productions is played as both regretful and marginalized.

Chapter Two

Historical and Critical Background

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Demographics of the Jewish People in the Early Modern Period

To understand the socio-economic position, as well as the physical location, of the Jewish people in the sixteenth century, we must begin five hundred years prior to Marlowe and Shakespeare's births in 1564. In 1096, the First Crusade departed from Europe in an attempt to "reclaim the Christian holy places in the Middle East from their Arab conquerors. On their way through France and Germany, the Christian Crusaders slaughtered Jews in the middle-European cities. There were large-scale massacres in Worms, Cologne, Prague and other places" (Simkin 137). Stevie Simkin notes that in certain locations, such as the Regensburg, Jewish lives were spared; yet, they were "forcibly baptized in the River Danube" (137). Less than a hundred years later, the Third Crusade, led by Richard Plantagenet (also known as Richard the Lionheart), began yet another wave of persecution during which hundreds of Jews were burned alive in their own houses. Meanwhile, in England

the Hebrew congregation took refuge in the castle and were besieged.

Rather than face torture and death at the hands of the mob, 150 of them committed suicide. From the castle the crowd proceeded to York Minster,

where records of money owed to local Jews were found and burned. In a grim irony, Richard the Lionheart, ransomed from captivity in the Holy Land, owed his freedom in large part to the money of wealthy Jews in England. (Simkin 138)

As in Nazi Germany, starting in 1217 Jews living in England had to wear signifiers of their religion, in this case, in the form of “a yellow badge in the shape of stone-tables—representing the Ten Commandments” (Simkin 139). Seventy years later, Edward I arrested English Jewish community leaders, and “during the reign of Edward and of Henry III, the Jewish population was literally bought and sold—having no rights of citizenship [... or] inheritance, all their property being confiscated by the state on their death. They were also heavily taxed, and tortured if they refused to pay” (Simkin 139).

By 1290 the situation for the English Jewish inhabitants had reached an even more dangerous climax. Edward I had “expelled the entire Jewish population from the nation—perhaps as many as 15,000” (Simkin 140). The King seized all property belonging to Jews and, like Richard the Lionheart, collected the money that the Christians owed to them. The King allowed a small group of Jews to remain behind as long as they converted; but whether their conversion was genuine, we will never know. Some Jews must have remained in England, however, because they were blamed for the European plague in 1347. Christian Europeans believed that “the plague was a weapon of Satan, and the Jews were Satan’s agents. The rumor circulated that Jews were poisoning the water supply[...] and thousands of Jews were killed in the wake of the report, many burned at the stake, others in their homes” (Simkin 139-140). The stereotype of a well-

poisoning evil Jew often appears in Medieval and early modern plays, such as *The Jew of Malta*.

Those Jews who converted publicly but maintained their Judaism in private were called “Marranos”: a term of contempt that originated in Spain to indicate a Jew who chose the “only form of life which made it possible for Sephardic, or Spanish, Jews to survive in what had hitherto been their homeland.” However, “many refused to adopt this course, preferring to be burned alive” (Yates 110). The concept of a “crypto-Jew,” certainly not original to sixteenth century society, can be traced back to Hellenistic days (Roth 1). After two particularly harsh waves of forced conversions in 1391 and 1412, “a handful of Marranos, crypto-Jews from Spain and Portugal, made their way to London during the reign of Henry VIII, and a somewhat larger colony, numbering perhaps a hundred in all, established itself during the reign of Elizabeth. Its members played an important part in overseas trade” (Gross 31-32). In 1492 the Spanish Inquisition altered the course of the Jewish migrants who traveled in search of a nation that would accept them, and “some of the refugees came to London” (Roth 253). Gross observes that

With the spread of mercantilist thinking, of policies designed to foster trade, the economic skills and international connections of the Jews came to seem too valuable an asset to cast aside [...] new communities sprang up, pointing the way ahead. In the closing years of the sixteenth century—around the time that *The Merchant of Venice* was written—a group of refugees from Portugal established the first openly Jewish community in Amsterdam. England remained on the outer edge of these developments. (31-32)

The environment for Jews changed in the sixteenth century as Marranos living in England were able to participate somewhat in commerce. Shapiro explains that “while Jews were not fully tolerated or granted citizenship in early modern England, they were never subject to violent attacks, forced to convert, penned up in ghettos, or burned in inquisitorial fires, as they were elsewhere in Europe” (11). Cecil Roth titles the Elizabethan Era a “remarkable period of English expansion,” and as a result

the foreign mercantile colony in London naturally increased. Among these there was, as always, a considerable number of New Christians from the Peninsula; encouraged, perhaps, by the greater possibilities of tolerance that were heralded by the victory of Protestantism. Thus the Marrano community developed. It numbered at this time approximately one hundred souls. (256)

Mary Jannell Metzger argues that Jews were accepted as long as they were “living and working ‘honestly and unobtrusively,’” which meant that they had to “become invisible as ‘former’ Jews and convincingly performing the prerequisites for integration into English society [...] As long as Jews did not publicly insist on their Jewishness, economic interests prevailed” (54-55). Roth points out that during the sixteenth century, the Marrano community in England was comprised of “no less than thirty-seven householders” (Roth 253), which continued to hold regular Jewish services. Because these meetings and their attendees remained a secret, rumors about Jews proliferated and stereotypes flourished (Harris 81).

Common Stereotypes about Jews in the Early Modern Period

Since Jews were banished from England in 1290, “the Jew” became not so much a person but a *concept* for a sixteenth century English citizen. The absence of actual Jewish people did little to “keep the figure of the Jew from leading a powerful life within Christian imaginations” (Lampert 11). The stereotypical way that Christians saw Jews, and consequently treated them, stems from the Old Testament. Berek remarks that during Elizabeth’s reign, “Jews were figures from narrative rather than experience [...] derived from the Hebrew Bible, as New Testament, or medieval legends of Jewish villainy” (128). The myth of the Jew as a villain “dates back at least to Herod, the slayer of children and aspiring Christ-killer in disguise [...]; to Judas, the original businessman with the contract in the pocket; and to the anonymous vulgar Jewish farceur who, in answer to Christ’s ‘eli,eli,’ forged a reed filled with vinegar between His lips” (Rosenberg 21). Rosenberg even locates a physical stereotype of the Jew in the Bible:

Herod’s frenzy on being mocked by the wise men foreshadows the violent gestures with which subsequent caricatures have been afflicted; and the group of Jewish elders who come to watch the Crucifixion are already pictured as wagging their heads in the immemorial fashion that Shylock re-enacts when ‘they’ spit at him. (21)

H. Michelson remarks that the Jewish character in the Gospel is a “creature full of subtlety and treachery, a dealer of underhanded blows, a liar, a cruel, malicious fellow, a mocker, a murderer, a hypocrite, a traitor, a coward, covetous, boisterous, loud and haughty” (10). He further insists that literature and religion must be examined together

since “English Literature in its infancy was suckled with Christian religion, the influence of which it has hardly ever shaken off” (Michelson 13).

Stereotypes about Jews in the early modern period—Christ-killer, traitor, financial hog—were abundant and, as Rosenberg notes, “had Scriptural sanction from the first” (22). The poisoning of wells, the charging of unreasonable interest when lending money, and the possession of magical abilities were just some of the characteristics attributed to the Jewish people. Many Christians feared that a Jewish person was not only capable of poisoning, but that the Jewish body itself was poison. King Richard the First was so afraid of the Jew’s malignant magical power that he forbade any “Jews to be present at his coronation, for fear they should bewitch him” (Michelson 33).

Stereotypes were often “mobilized at times of crisis or for reasons of political expediency to elaborate an apparently genuine threat of Jewish infiltration” (Harris 82), as occurred with Dr. Roderigo Lopez, Queen Elizabeth’s physician, perhaps the most famous Marrano during the sixteenth century. Well respected by the English medical community, Lopez was not only the royal physician but “also employed by the government by reason of his extensive foreign correspondence” (Michelson 85). When Lopez opposed the Earl of Essex in a political matter, however, the latter accused him of attempting to poison the Queen and of not being a true Christian by practicing Judaism in secret (Harris 82). Until his death, Lopez claimed that he had renounced Judaism and considered himself a Christian. However, exploiting the stereotypes about Jews, the Earl of Essex managed to forge his false accusation; Lopez was tortured and hanged in June 1594 (Simkin 141).

Another stereotype associated with Jews is usury, which although censured and considered a sin for Christians, was not illegal, and so the lucrative practice was grudgingly handed over to the Jews (Michelson 29). Simkin explains that in “1571, a law was passed in England that allowed interest to be charged at the rate of 10 per cent [...], resulting in a shift in the attitude toward usury and an identification of the Jew with over-inflated rates of interest (140). Usury played a vital role during the early modern period because the borrowing of money allowed mercantilism to flourish and the Jew to survive.

Is Assimilation (Im)Possible for the Jew?

In his monumental study of the Jewish presence, Shapiro reminds his readers that any discussion of Jews must start by defining “what one means by *Jew*” (13). He elaborates that Jewish identity has been understood in different ways:

The first category has consisted of those who believe themselves to be Jews (for not everyone who is Jewish by descent necessarily assents to being considered Jewish). The second category has included those whom other Jews accept as Jews, either by descent or through conversion. The third and final category is comprised of those whom non-Jews have thought of as Jews. Some individuals have fit easily within all three categories; others have not [...] Jewishness has thus been understood not only in terms of religious practices and beliefs but also in the context of racial and national identifications. (5)

If “Jewishness” should be understood as a racial or national identity, can a “Jew” ever become “English” by early modern standards? Or is “Jewishness” an essence that one cannot escape regardless of conversion?

For a county that had a dearth of Jews for over 300 years, England was surprisingly engrossed in questions about Judaism, such as:

In what ways were Jews racially and physically different? Did those who converted lose all trace of their Jewishness? Was it true that Jews habitually took the knife to Christians, circumcising and murdering their victims? Should Jews be formally readmitted into an England that had long ago banished them, or were Englishness and Jewishness mutually exclusive identities? Were the Jews in their diaspora still a nation, and, if so, should they be restored to their homeland? (Shapiro 1)

Shapiro does not attribute such inquisitiveness to a deep interest in the Jewish people themselves but primarily to a concern about English identity. “From our own perspective,” Shapiro proposes, “their interest in Jews provides unusual insight into the cultural anxieties felt by English men and women at a time when their nation was experiencing extraordinary social, religious, and political turbulence” (1). Why else then would writers, such as Marlowe and Shakespeare, be preoccupied with writing about Jews? Lisa Lampert proposes that an idealized view of Christianity “could not sustain the ambiguity and paradox of having both [Marranos] and/or actual Jews in its midst” (110). The sheer number, and the publicity, of conversions blurred the line between Christian and Jew and made it more difficult to ascertain who was “English” and who was not. Shapiro notes that it was easier to “identify those who were English by pointing to those

who were assuredly not—e.g., the Irish or the Jews.” So “in order to enforce this point, differences were greatly exaggerated and at times simply invented: other people were deemed un-English in the way that they looked, prayed, ate, smelled, dressed, walked, and talked” (5). Shapiro points out that for several decades before the Reformation, the English thought “of the Jews [...] as a potential threat to the increasingly permeable boundaries of their own social and religious identities [...] ‘Turning’ Jew was also an unnerving possibility” (7). This raised the concern that the banishment of the Jews in 1290 had not been “absolute, and, even if it had been, those Jews who had converted and remained rather than accepted exile might have mingled racially with English stock” (Shapiro 7). Little is known about what Marranos felt or thought about Judaism or Christianity, and Shapiro suggests that what they believed probably “ranged from devout Catholicism to equally devout Judaism, with all kinds of permutations in between” (16).

Christian confusion about Jews appears in official treatment of the Jewish people. For instance, “the Vienna Faculty of Medicine believed that a private code adhered to by Jewish physicians obliged them to murder one patient in ten; according to Spanish authorities, the figure was one in five” (Harris 84). Yet, Count Alfonse of Poitiers, an important official and a

protector of the Council of Beziers which had banned Jews from practicing medicine, summoned a Jewish physician to cure his failing eyesight. In the fifteenth century, it was decreed in the Castilian court that no Jew could be a surgeon or physician, except for the king’s personal doctor. And in England, the ailing Henry IV disregarded the stricture

against Jews in his kingdom and summoned an Italian Jewish doctor.

(Harris 85)

“It was not simply a matter,” Jonathan Gil Harris asserts “of a monarch entrusting himself to a dependable and skilful practioner who happened to be Jewish; rather, it was believed that Jewish physicians possessed unique, semi-magical powers to cure sick patients” (85). Frances Yates contends that even if Marlowe’s play did incite anti-Semitic riots, there weren’t many Jews in England to bait. “At whom, then,” Yates asks “was the propaganda aimed?” (124).

Gendered and Raced

In her highly influential and groundbreaking study, Marilyn French classifies three gender categories portrayed in literature, history, theology, and philosophy: the masculine, the inlaw feminine, and the outlaw feminine. The masculine principle, “predicated on the ability to kill, is the pole of power-in-the-world. It is associated with prowess and ownership, with physical courage, assertiveness, authority, independence, and the right, rights, and legitimacy. It claims to be able to define and administer justice; and it supports law and order” (21). Both the inlaw and outlaw feminine principles are constructed as secondary to the masculine and are associated with nature. Just as nature can be either benevolent or malevolent, so women were viewed as either inlaw feminine or outlaw feminine. French argues that Christianity is responsible for splitting the feminine principle in two in order to undermine it (23). In essence, by dividing women into two categories—inlaw (good) and outlaw (bad) —the patriarchy inherent in Christianity could more effectively conquer and control female power. She further states

that the patriarchy considered Eve “responsible both for the fall from unity with nature and for the continuation of the race becomes a subversive figure ‘redeemed’ by the Mary who *accepts* that she is [...] only a vessel in the transmission of a male line” (23 emphasis mine).

The inlaw feminine principle—emphasizing emotions, relationships, and love—is predicated on the ability to give life, form communities, show mercy, and affirm passivity. The more pejorative outlaw feminine can give life as well, but—like the masculine principle—also possesses the ability to kill. Sexually dynamic, excessive, and often irresistible, the outlaw feminine principle poses a threat to the masculine principle because it has the capability to corrupt men with distractions and tempt inlaw feminine women with a more attractive existence. French posits that the outlaw feminine principle “is associated with darkness, chaos, flesh, the sinister, magic and above all, sexuality. It is outlaw because it is subversive, [and] undermining of the masculine principle” (24).

Lynda Boose and Betty Flowers explain that “in the anthropological narration of family, the father is the figure who controls the exogamous exchange of women [...] and] the exchangeable figure is the daughter” (19). This accepted concept is different in a Jewish family, as Lampert’s study show. She focuses on how the “interconnected representation of women and Jews function in literary texts beyond the limiting economies of particularism” (3), suggesting that “we can better understand the intellectual tradition that posits an ‘absolute human type’ as masculine and Christian by investigating early representations of the hegemonic relationships that posited a Christian universality standing in supersessionary relationship to the particular identities of both

Jews and women” (8). Shapiro further maintains that conversion for Jewish women was not the same as for Jewish men:

In the world of fiction, the marriage and conversion of Jewish women usually go hand in hand; as Jessica [from *The Merchant of Venice*] puts it, she shall become ‘a Christian and [Lorenzo’s] loving wife.’[...] In contrast, Jewish men who convert to Christianity are never married off to Christian women. And where Jewish women are always depicted as young and desirable, male Jewish converts are invariably old and impotent, condemned to remain unwed and at the periphery of the Christian community. (Shapiro 132)

To sixteenth century Englishmen, the fantasy of Christian men marrying converted Jewesses was far more appealing than the idea of Jewish men, even converted ones, marrying Christian women (Shapiro 132).

CRITICAL BACKGROUND

In my research on Abigail and Jessica, I have found that little attention has been paid to the two daughters, although much literary criticism has focused on their respective fathers. Although Abigail and Jessica have been briefly examined in individual studies of the plays, few critics have attempted to compare them.

Abigail, in particular, has been neglected by commentators. Many, such as F.S. Boas, totally overlook Abigail’s importance in *The Jew of Malta*. In *Shakespeare’s Contemporaries* (1961), Boas presents Abigail as little more than Barabas’ “helpmate,” whom he sacrifices just as Agamemnon sacrifices Iphigen. Similarly H. Michelson, in

The Jew in Early English Literature (1972), reduces Abigail to “an innocent lamb,” arguing that “she is prompted by filial love and obedience to the will of her father,” at least “until his true character is revealed to her” (78). However, I would suggest that even after Abigail recognizes her father’s true character, she remains loyal to him, as an in-law feminine daughter should. Despite a promising title, Jeremy Tambling’s essay, “Abigail’s Party” (1991), also fails to recognize Abigail’s importance, describing her as the most marginalized character in *The Jew of Malta* (106). Tambling asserts that Barabas’ daughter has internalized “the discourse of patriarchy” and as a result “accepts the total demands of her father by acting in a nurturing, restorative manner” (106). However, I would insist that she is never given a chance to play this role, as Sara Munson Deats and Lisa S. Starks note in their article, “‘So Neatly Plotted, So Well Perform’d’: Villain as Playwright in Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta*” (1992). In this essay, Deats and Starks show how Barabas exploits his daughter when he promises her “to both Lodowick and Mathias” and how he exploits the suitors’ “competitive desires to orchestrate his plot” (381). Furthermore, in *Spectacles of Strangeness: Imperialism, Alienation, and Marlowe* (1993), Emily Bartels posits that Barabas turns Abigail and her Judaism into an “exploitable commodity” (98). This is an accurate appraisal, although I would insist that Bartels underestimates the complexity of Abigail’s role. By the same token, Janet Clare’s reductionist reading, in “Marlowe’s Theatre of Cruelty” (2000), insists that Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta* should not be read in the same humanistic and psychological way as other Renaissance dramas; rather, she characterizes *The Jew of Malta* as a “savage farce” and Barabas as nothing but a “joker”. Conversely, Lagretta Tallent Lenker, almost alone among commentators, recognizes the importance of the father-daughter relationship in

the play and explores it in *Fathers and Daughters in Shakespeare and Shaw* (2001). She defends Abigail's importance in the play and suggests that "undeniably, the play and its protagonist deteriorate when Abigail is no longer alive." According to Lenker, "when the drama lacks the leavening agent of the daughter, even a naïve one whom some critics call a fool, the patriarchal world [...] plunged into the literal and figurative abyss" (Lenker 99).

Jessica has received far more critical attention than Abigail, perhaps because her characterization is so problematic. On the one hand, to a modern audience, she appears cruel to her father; yet, on the other hand, as critics have noted, an early modern audience might interpret her very differently. For instance, in *Shylock: A Legend and Its Legacy* (1992), John Gross argues that Jessica's selling her father's turquoise ring for a monkey would not need defending to a sixteenth century audience, since "she is the ogre's beautiful daughter, who makes her escape from his castle, and it is the clearest proof of her goodness that she is [as] different from him as possible. She is 'a gentle, and no Jew.'" (69). Gross places Jessica in a long tradition of stories about young Jewish women and maintains that she is "the bad Jew's good daughter [who] attains classic perfection" (70). Conversely, in "Reprise: Gender, Sexuality and Theories of Exchange in *The Merchant of Venice*" (1996), Karen Newman, whose study examines "the exchange of women *and* gifts" (emphasis mine) as well as woman *as* gifts, approaches Jessica's rebellion somewhat differently from Gross. Applying an historical rather than a mythic lens, Newman observes that in early modern England "daughters were pawns in the political and social maneuvers of their families, particularly their male kin" (109). Therefore, Jessica's taking control of her financial future and not allowing her father to

benefit monetarily from her marriage, might reveal her as an outlaw feminine character to a sixteenth century audience. Similarly, Mary Jannell Metzger investigates the importance of patriarchy in “Now by My Hood, a Gentle and No Jew’: *The Merchant of Venice*, and the Discourse of Early Modern English Identity” (1998), arguing that “for Shakespeare’s audience, patriarchal authority was divinely ordained [...] Jessica’s disregard for that authority thus creates the first obstacle to a Christian audience’s acceptance of her as a Christian” (56). Metzger further contends that “Jessica’s incorporation into Christian society is essential to defining her father’s alien status” (59), and, I suggest, Jessica’s actions generate a more sympathetic view of her father. Carol Leventen also examines the relationship between patriarchy and religion in her article, “Patrimony and Patriarchy in *The Merchant of Venice*” (1991), in which she insists that although Jessica seems to subvert the patriarchal establishment she does not actually do so, since she only transfers from one patriarchy to another. Leventen adds that Jessica’s assimilation into a Christian society is unsuccessful and she is more “tolerated at the periphery than welcomed at its center” (74). Also focusing on Jewish conversion, Lisa Lampert, in *Gender and Jewish Difference from Paul to Shakespeare* (2004), postulates that although Jessica’s situation is “seemingly a Christian fantasy of Jewish conversion,” her characterization reveals “concerns about the fragility of Christian and Venetian identities” (15). Lampert initially finds Jessica’s assimilation into Christianity to be successful because “as a woman, she becomes subject to her Christian husband, her body and goods easily taken into his household and his community” (144), while admitting that although “Jessica’s fair beauty and wealth,” “make it easy for her to ‘pass’ into the world of Belmont [...] her true assimilation is more questionable. In this, Jessica exhibits [...]

the dangerous effects of willful female sexuality that all of the play's females represent" (144). Similarly, Suzanne Penuel's essay, "Castrating the Creditor in *The Merchant of Venice*" (2004), compares Jessica to Medea, who "stole from her wealthy father to run away with her culturally Other love" (268), while also equating Jessica's selling the turquoise ring for a monkey with the a rejection of "the connection between her parents" (268). Penuel concludes that Jessica "makes a successful physical escape but cannot manage its less tangible and concrete mental equivalent" (269).

When comparing Abigail and Jessica, some critics do not make a sufficient distinction between the two. For instance, Edgar Rosenberg, in *From Shylock to Svengali: Jewish Stereotypes in English Fiction* (1960), examines Abigail and Jessica together, noting that when each of the two daughters runs away from her father, she "deprives him of his last domestic ties, and leaves him free to engage in his diabolic activities" (88). Rosenberg does not recognize, however, that Abigail can hardly be seen as running away from her father, and the notion of Barabas ever having "domestic ties" is questionable. In his vastly influential study of the Jews in England during the early modern period, *Shakespeare and the Jews* (1996), James Shapiro explains that Jessica becomes a Christian through her marriage to Lorenzo; however, Abigail's conversion is less permanent as evidenced by the fact that "Marlowe has Abigail convert not once but twice to Christianity in the course of the play" (Shapiro 157). Moreover, Shapiro notes that since Jessica was hardly a good daughter to Shylock, "Shakespeare's audience may have wondered how long her own vows of faith, religious and marital, would remain firm" (159).

Utilizing the above critics, I intend to compare how the inlaw and outlaw feminine principles in the characterization of Abigail and Jessica act to sway our sympathies either toward or away from their fathers. Although excellent articles have already been published on *The Jew of Malta* and *The Merchant of Venice*, few have compared the two daughters in detail. In this thesis, I intend to examine Abigail and Jessica through a different lens, employing both a Feminist and New Historicist perspective.

Chapter Three

The Jew of Malta

ABIGAIL

The Jew of Malta was first performed around 1589-90 and became Marlowe's most popular play. Between May and December of 1594, it was revived twenty times (Palmer 133). The play's popularity soared during Lopez's trial "due no doubt, at least in part, to the scandal of the Lopez affair" (Simkin 141). The plot begins on an exciting note and continues to escalate. A Turkish fleet arrives to claim the money owed to them by the Maltese government, led by Ferneze. Since Malta does not have the available funds, Ferneze decides to simply take it from the Maltese Jews. Reminiscent of actual historical events, the Maltese government shows no qualms about taking what belongs to the Jews. The Maltese government has let the tribute to the Turks accumulate for ten years, probably intending all along to pillage the funds from the Jewish population. Unlike the other Jews, who remain optimistic and unaware of the circumstances, Barabas knows what to expect but does not advise his fellow Jews to hide their assets, while he stashes away his own. Michelson points out that "instead of acting as the Jews in history did and standing by his brethren, [Barabas] behaves like a smooth ambiguous Italian statesman" (77). Abigail's willingness to help her father recover his wealth contrasts with Barabas' lack of camaraderie toward his fellow Jews. He murders, while Abigail repents, until she too is killed.

Although Barabas is not a usurer, he is certainly “passionate about wealth,” as Berek notes: “he celebrates riches not for what they can buy but for what they are. He is as willing to deceive his co-religionists as he is to deceive Turk or Christian” (137). From the beginning, the play establishes Barabas as selfish and cruel, and immediately validates his “Jewishness.” Deats and Starks suggest that Barabas’ “posture, gesture, and dialogue—the fingering of coins as he chants a hymn to precious stones—mark him as a stage icon for the sin of covetousness” (379). Berek further posits that although

Barabas is a kind of hero, Marlowe’s plot defeats him and he ends up in the cauldron he built for his enemies. The pervasive irony of Marlowe’s play exposes the Christian characters as being no better than the Jew. But none of this changes the fact that for Marlowe, unlike his predecessors, the Jewishness of Barabas is part of the essence of his evil, and not just an accidental accompaniment. (138)

Abigail’s “Jewishness” is glossed over, however, as she easily converts to Christianity and seems to have no essence besides goodness. Lenker argues that Barabas uses Abigail shamelessly to serve his own ends. At age fourteen, the virtuous and innocent Abigail becomes, in turn, a dissembler as she pretends to become a nun, a thief as she steals her father’s confiscated gold from the nunnery, a temptress as she manipulates her love to the Governor’s son—all at the instruction of her father.” (90)

However, her intentions are always admirable, as she attempts to be the good daughter.

The Christian society of Malta, critics argue, represents the Christian society of England; however, Greenblatt identifies one important distinction: “[t]here was no

'Jewish Question' in Marlowe's England; there were scarcely any Jews" (291). If questions about Jews and Judaism did not interest the sixteenth century audience, why did Marlowe's play about Jews find such a large audience? According to Berek, "the answer perhaps lies in Marlowe's own ambivalence about his heroes and Elizabethan ambivalence about social change" (136). The interrogation of identity (race, religion, gender, nationality) was actively debated in the early modern period, and "the theatre of the 1590s was obsessed by the possibilities that identity might be willed or chosen and social position achieved by deeds, not birth" (Berek 130). Berek further posits that Barabas' "Jewishness is part of the essence of his villainy, the energy underlying the plays anti-Semitism arises less from beliefs about Jews than from anxieties about self-fashioning. Jewishness becomes a trope for anxiety about social change" (137-8).

Rosenberg suggests that

the whole of Marlowe's *Jew of Malta* is presumably an echo of the accusation, widely circulated in the fourteenth century, that the Jews had caused the Black Plague by poisoning the wells, though doubtless the old superstition of the Jewish witch-doctor contributed to his being cast in this role. Barabas, the exemplar of the type, has mastered every trick in the manual. (26)

Greenblatt argues that Barabas, the main figure in the plot, is also "the dominant spirit of the play, its most energetic and inventive force" (297), which increases the importance of Abigail, his only child. Once Marlowe establishes Barabas as the stereotypical Jewish villain, Abigail's innocence becomes even more significant and Rosenberg asserts that "whether Barabas is merely boasting or telling the truth [about his

evil pursuits] is not the issue here; what matters is that his catalogue pretty well exhausts the Jewish capacity for criminal variety in the sixteenth century” (27). Michelson describes Barabas’ actions as a retaliation “upon society like a veritable devil, killing right and left, till he is caught at last like a rat in the trap he had set for his enemies” (82). Nevertheless, Barabas’ wild performance is quite entertaining and charismatic. He is also arguably “the first villain as playwright to tread the Renaissance stage, and, as such, the progenitor of an entire clan of villainous interior playwrights” (Deats and Starks 378). However, a twenty-first century reading of *The Jew of Malta* might engender some sympathy toward Barabas since his adversaries share equally “Jewish”—materialistic and Machiavelian—characteristics. Perhaps Marlowe is arguing that Barabas’s cruelty results from the racism of his society, although an Elizabethan audience would probably not have approached the “evil Jew” in that way. Therefore, as Greenblatt argues, Marlowe’s characterization of Barabas as a Jew “is not the exception to but rather the true representative of his society[’s attitudes]” (296). Further perpetuating the stereotype of an uncaring parent, Barabas views Abigail as a sacrifice. When Barabas first mentions Abigail he refers to himself as Agamemnon and Abigail as Iphigen and Boas suggests that “Agamemnon’s readiness to sacrifice his daughter for the welfare of the Greek host may have suggested to Marlowe the idea of a daughter whom Barabas would be willing to sacrifice on his own behalf” (116).

Merciful, kind, and devoted—first to her father, then her lover, and finally to God—Abigail embodies the inlaw feminine traits highly valued in the sixteenth century. French describes the inlaw feminine principle as one “founded on the ability to give birth, [and] includes qualities like nutritiveness, compassion, mercy, and the ability to create

felicity” (24). She further proposes that an inlaw woman would subordinate herself voluntarily as well as relinquish any power she might possess. The inlaw feminine principle is entirely altruistic,

it values above all the good of the whole, the community. It exalts the community above the individual, feeling over action, sensation over thought. *It is not passive*: it actively reaches for subordination for the good of the whole and finds its pleasure in that good rather than in assertion of self. (24 emphasis mine)

The prototypic inlaw feminine daughter, Abigail ignores what is best for her, and repeatedly (and willingly) sacrifices herself for her father’s sake. The altruistic Abigail contrasts sharply with the egocentric Barabas, who is defined by the eerie playfulness with which he pursues his goals. “This playfulness manifests itself as cruel humor, murderous practical jokes, a penchant for the outlandish and the absurd, delight in role-playing [...] radical insensitivity to human complexity and suffering, extreme but disciplined aggression (Greenblatt 305). Conversely, Abigail sees her existence as entirely complimentary to her father. On her first introduction, Barabas asks her why she is sad, and the selfless Abigail replies, “Not for myself, but aged Barabas, / Father, for thee lamenteth Abigail” (1.2.230-31). Barabas then confides that he only pretended to lose all of his money and that he has hidden a stash in their house. Showing no remorse for his performance and disregarding the way that his secrecy has hurt the other Jews, Barabas explains to Abigail that there is no shame in misleading those who are dishonest themselves (2.3). David Bevington states that the small crowd of Jews functions to “evoke pity for Barabas, and then they are permanently suppressed” (220); however, I

would disagree, suggesting that rather than evoking pity for Barabas, the other Jews impede sympathy for him because he has betrayed them and shows little empathy for his fellow Jews. Yet his daughter, who is misled like everyone else, does not seem upset; she remains willing to help her father recover his money, not out of a selfish desire for riches, but for his welfare alone. When Barabas tells her of his plan to infiltrate what was recently his house, she replies “Father, whate’er it be to injure them / That have so manifestly wrongèd us, / What will not Abigail attempt?” (1.2.274-276)

By presenting Abigail’s innocent devotion as a foil for Barabas’ self-centeredness, Marlowe undercuts the Elizabethan essentialist viewpoint that affirms negative Jewish stereotypes. Abigail, also a Jew, adheres to Christian maxims—such as kindness and mercy—more than any other character in *The Jew of Malta*. Displaying her total obedience to the patriarchal establishment, Abigail does as her father instructs even when she is uncomfortable with her own actions. When he asks her to pretend to care for Lodowick, she confides in the audience that Mathias “has my heart; I smile against my will” (2.3.291). Being deceitful, as Barabas encourages her to be, does not come naturally to Abigail and she questions how long Barabas will force her to keep up the charade, “What, shall I be betrothed to Lodowick?” (2.3.312) In response to his daughter, Barabas replies, “It’s no sin to deceive a Christian, / For they themselves hold it a principle / Faith is not to be held with heretics” (2.3.313-15). By equating himself with the so-called Christians of Malta, Barabas is attempting to explain and excuse his behavior.

Although I agree with Bartels that Barabas treats Abigail as an “exploitable commodity” (98), I would also suggest that she plays a more significant role than simply Barabas’ pawn. As an inlaw feminine character, Abigail accepts her father’s

machinations while intending to marry Mathias so that she may transfer her devotion from her father to her husband. Mathias describes her as “Scarce fourteen years of age,” and a virgin, “the sweetest flower in Cytherea’s field” (1.2.377-78), and the play depicts her as too innocent and young to fully comprehend her father’s evil. Although it is clear to the audience that Barabas would not let her marry a Gentile, so strong is Abigail’s love for Mathias that I believe she would have defied even her father to marry him. In a moment of uncharacteristic forcefulness, she exclaims, “I will have Don Mathias; he is my love” (2.3.365); however, that sentiment is quickly stifled, and she is “put in” the house by Ithamore. When she discovers that her father has caused the death of her lover, Abigail, unlike the other characters in the play, does not take revenge. Instead she enters the nunnery, informing the audience in an aside, “Oh Barabas, / Though thou deservest hardly at my hands, / Yet never shall these lips bewray thy life” (3.3.78-80). Following the traditional inlaw feminine principles, Abigail actively isolates herself from men and—taking her vow of celibacy more seriously than the other nuns—maintains her virginity until death.

Lenker points out that when Abigail rejects her father and Judaism, she moves from “the status of Outsider to that of Insider, on both a literal and a figurative level. Within the confines of the convent, Abigail hopes to find protection from her vengeful father” (96). However, the corrupt Christian patriarchy does not protect her and, after being poisoned by her father, Abigail dies a virgin nun. Despite an anti-Catholic sentiment prevalent during the early modern period and permeating the play, Abigail whole-heartedly believes in the Christian maxims espoused by the Catholic Church and

her continual pity for her father evokes more audience sympathy toward this inlaw feminine character.

Bartels suggests that, by joining the nunnery, Abigail does rebel against Barabas, but turns herself over to “a new position of subjugation beneath those who [...] are as corrupt as her father” (26). Nevertheless, Abigail remains loyal to Barabas until she is literally on her death-bed; only at that point does she confess, as she believes she must, having complete trust that the friar will not repeat her words. No longer a Jew, Abigail becomes just another victim and our sympathies follow Abigail and die with her at the nunnery. Bartels also argues out that the “thinness of her [Abigail’s] characterization [...] as well as other characters] all murdered by the Jew, create a distance between their interests and ours, their victimization and our sympathy” (21). In response, I contend that even if we interpret Abigail as a narrow personification of inlaw characteristics, she remains incredibly sympathetic and her murder adds yet another vilifying factor to the list of Barabas’ crimes.

Given Abigail’s innocent motivation for converting to Christianity, Barabas’ reason for her murder is doubly dubious and seems to derive from his anger over her conversion, rather than fear that she will betray him:

I fear she knows – ‘tis so! – of my device

In Don Mathias’ and Lodovico’s deaths.

If so, ‘tis time that it be seen into,

For she that varies from me not,

Or, loving, doth dislike of something done. (3.4.7-12)

Bartels finds Abigail's death amid the pregnant nuns farcical and argues that the comedy distances the audience from this potentially poignant event. In response, I would insist that Abigail's death, far from farcical, is mournful, or, at the very least, pathetic. Although anti-Catholic sentiment was rampant during the Elizabethan era, the play presents Abigail as entirely genuine and worthy of admiration until the very end, emphasizing that she does not cause Barabas' evil, but is merely "collateral damage" of his rampage. Through Abigail, Marlowe has an opportunity to further subvert anti-Semitism by presenting her as different from Barabas in her goodness, but still Jewish. However, by creating her as an inlaw feminine character, a trait so highly valued during the sixteenth century, and then alienating her from her religion, Marlowe erases her Jewishness as a part of her identity. Abigail, a virgin nun, becomes the "good Christian," who is then killed by her own father, the "evil Jew."

OTHER CHARACTERS

In *The Jew of Malta*, Marlowe questions anti-Semitism when he presents all of the characters, except Abigail, as possessing stereotypical "Jewish" traits. McAdam asks if characters can really embody "Christian" qualities in a society like Malta, and explains that "[t]urning the other cheek would certainly not help anyone survive for long in Maltese society. Rather than confirming such ideals, the biblical parody in *The Jew of Malta* makes evident the inadequacy, even the absurdity, of Christian ethics in the dog-eat-dog world that the characters inhabit" (150). All of the characters in the play, except for Abigail, universally express desire for selfish gain, and hardly embody the Christian or inlaw feminine maxims of charity, mercy, and kindness. Greenblatt argues that

Barabas' "actions are *responses* to the initiatives of others (299) and McAdam notes that Barabas, as Antichrist, is not pitted "against a true Christian or Christ-like counterpart (an ideal that few characters in the play come close to embodying) but rather against those characters, most importantly Ferneze, who successfully operate within the limits of their natural and social selves" (146).

Ferneze, a Machiavellian figure, hides behind religion and steals from the Jews because they have no way of protecting themselves. Barabas, well-aware of the hypocrisy confronting him, shrewdly explains to Abigail that "religion hides many mischiefs from suspicion" (1.2.281). Further subverting Christianity, Marlowe presents the friars and nuns as a mockery, and bawdy jokes about their sexual escapades pervade the play. Greenblatt comments that "Marlowe never discredits anti-Semitism, but he does discredit early in the play a 'Christian' social concern that might otherwise have been used to counter a specifically Jewish antisocial element" (297). Barabas—and Marlowe behind him—thereby flips the stereotypic negative perception of Jewish greed and depicts the Gentile characters as preoccupied with the desire for wealth. "Promising his daughter Abigail to both Lodowick and Mathias, Barabas exploits their competitive desires to orchestrate his plot" (Deats and Starks 381). Lodowick probably pursues Abigail for her dowry; and even Mathias, who at times seems genuinely to love Abigail, refers to her as "the rich Jew's daughter." "Noticeably, Lodowick begins the wooing of Abigail by referring to her in financial terms" when referring to her as a diamond (Tambling 102). Similarly, Pilia-Borza and Bellamira manipulate Ithamore to obtain Barabas' riches; Ithamore betrays his master for lust and money; and the Turks and the Spaniards are also

driven by their desire for riches. All have duplicitous motives, one public and one private—all except Abigail.

Bartels points out that “Marlowe sets Barabas on an island in the middle of the Mediterranean, a key site of cross-cultural commerce and conflict, demanding that we consider what it means to be ‘of Malta’ while deciding what it means to be ‘the Jew’” (83). Yet, I would like to suggest that Marlowe sets Abigail in an even more difficult situation: placed within a patriarchal, anti-Semitic land with a monster for a father and a suspect-lover, and surrounded by hypocritical nuns and friars. No matter which corrupt patriarchal system claims Abigail’s allegiance, she always evokes the audience’s sympathy.

Chapter Four

Merchant of Venice

JESSICA

Jessica is clearly an outlaw feminine character: she lies; she steals; she runs away from her father; she marries without his approval; and, as a result of her actions, she pushes Shylock into a state of uncontrollable revenge. John Middleton Murry argues that Jessica does not act to sway the audience's sympathy toward her father; on the contrary, he believes that "Shakespeare is most careful to prevent any such impression from taking lodgment in our minds" (106). I would agree that Jessica's cruelty is difficult to forgive; however, we should remember that Jessica is not Christian and that the rules for Jewish women during the early modern period were different from those of Christian women. Jessica's characterization should thus be examined in the appropriate context, since, at least according to Murry,

taken out of the play, and exposed to the cold light of moral analysis, [Jessica] may be a wicked little thing; but in the play, herein alone she has her being, she is nothing of the kind—she is charming [...] she is much rather a princess held captive by an ogre than the unfilial daughter of a persecuted Jew [...] it is almost certainly true that [Shakespeare] did not himself conceive, or imagine that others would conceive, that Jessica's behaviour was unfilial. (104)

Certainly it would be anachronistic to assume that a sixteenth century audience would feel as disappointed in Jessica as would a contemporary one; however, Shakespeare makes a point of establishing Jessica's role in her father's downfall, showing how her treatment of her father effeminizes him. Metzger notes the differences between the representation of Jewish men and women. For instance, according to Metzger, Shylock is likened to:

a devil intent on the apportionment of a Christian body which is part of a tradition of anti-Semitic discourse in which Jews were said to be horned, tailed, and bearded like goats, to emit a distinct smell, and to be the source of leprosy and syphilis. According to this discourse, Jewish men, unlike Christian men, shared the mark of women's sexual difference: menstruation, a feminizing trait that would effectively erase the patriarchal authority inscribed literally and figuratively on Jewish men. (59)

Despite the emasculating stereotypes of Jewish men current at this time, Metzger points out that even though "Jessica distances herself from sin by blatantly disregarding her father's authority" and although a sixteenth century audience might consider this distancing necessary, it is also problematic. "For Shakespeare's audience, patriarchal authority was divinely ordained, and it secured the right of princes as well as that of fathers. Jessica's disregard for that authority thus creates the first obstacle to a Christian audience's acceptance of her as a Christian" (Metzger 56).

Although some of the early modern audience would probably have considered Jessica's treatment of her father well deserved, she

embodies the threat of indeterminate identity, who is both Christian and Jew and whose beautiful exterior may belie an intractable Jewish essence [...] As a woman, Jessica is property to both her father and her husband, but in her decision to convert and to abandon her father's house, she displays an agency that is at least as much of a threat to Venetian order as Shylock's bond. (Lampert 143)

I argue that Jessica's outlaw actions operate to evoke sympathy for Shylock. Her behavior threatens her father, just as, according to French, the outlaw principle "is tremendously threatening to the masculine principle because it does not respect the constructs attendant on that principle" (23). Indeed Jessica's agency can be approached from an historical rather than a mythical perspective, as Karen Newman clearly does in her valuable study. She observes that, "in early modern England, among the elite at least, marriage was primarily a commercial transaction determined by questions of dowry, familial alliances, land ownership and inheritance. Daughters were pawns in the political and social maneuvers of their families, particularly their male kin" (109). Not following this mold, Jessica, takes control of her financial future and does not allow her father to benefit monetarily from her marriage. By eliminating Shylock from his paternal role as metaphoric king, and herself as metaphoric subject, Jessica emotionally cripples him.

Comparing Abigail and Jessica, Gross observes that, unlike Abigail, Jessica is "not so much afraid of her father as ashamed of him, and the domestic hell of which she complains turns out to be a matter of 'tediousness'" (71). Gross explains that if examined traditionally, Jessica's defense is not necessary, because she is vindicated as "the ogre's beautiful daughter, who makes her escape from his castle, and it is the clearest proof of

her goodness that she is different, from him as possible. She is ‘a gentle, and no Jew’” (69). However, before the audience meets Jessica, we see an exchange between her father and Antonio that invokes pity for the former. Shylock states:

Fair sir, you spit on me on Wednesday last,
You spurned me such a day, another time
You called me dog, and for these courtesies
I'll lend you thus much moneys? (1.3.124-127)

The theme of usury dominates *The Merchant of Venice*. The play immediately establishes Shylock as a usurer, who is consistently vilified for practicing the activity that Jews of the period were virtually forced to practice. He does not seem unreasonable in his demands, as Penuel observes: “it is unclear that Shylock is an unusually demanding creditor for taking interest, despite his debtor’s complaints. As *Merchant* critics and editors have noted, a rate of up to 10 percent was both legal and common in England by 1572, and 5 percent was legal in Venice by the end of the century” (258). Shylock is incredulous that the same man who spits on him and calls him a dog asks to borrow money (1.3.126-7).

Unaffected by Shylock’s protests, Antonio proudly proclaims:

I am as like to call thee so again,
To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too.
If thou wilt lend this money, lend it not
As to thy friends, for when did friendship take
A breed for barren metal of his friend?
But lend it rather to thine enemy,
Who, if he break, thou mayst with better face

Exact the penalty. (1.3.128-135)

Shylock's downfall derives from his attempt to "exact the penalty" at all costs.

Although the first exchange between Jessica and her father is a friendly one and Shylock lovingly refers to his daughter as "my girl" (2.5.16), she clearly wants to escape from her father whom she sees as a miserly killjoy. Jessica also wants to establish that she is different from her father as she reveals in an aside:

But though I am a daughter to his blood,
I am not of his manners. O Lorenzo,
If thou keep promise, I shall end this strife,
Become a Christian and thy loving wife. (2.3.18-2.3.21)

These words contrast with Shylock's later lament, since even after Jessica's betrayal, Shylock acknowledges Jessica as "flesh and blood" to Solanio and Salerio (3.1.350).

In response, Salerio bursts into a bitter invective in order to show Shylock the constructed differences between himself and his daughter:

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. (3.1.36-38)

After thoroughly insulting Shylock, Salerio exacerbates the situation by asking the much abused Jew: "do you hear whether Antonio have had any loss at sea or no?" (3.1.39-40).

At this point, Shylock steps over a metaphoric edge, warning Antonio's friend: "Let him look to his bond" (3.1.44). Jessica's treachery and the taunting of Shylock by the Venetians combine to coerce him into villainous action—the killing of Antonio—that he probably would not have attempted had Jessica not betrayed him.

At the end of the play, the Venetians unite to destroy Shylock, even as the Maltese destroy Barabas. Shylock's silence at the denouement contrasts with his earlier loquaciousness. Indeed, he seems close to death as he mutters, "I am not well. Send the deed after me, / And I will sign it (4.1.394-395). Martin Yaffe bluntly asserts that Shakespeare did not endorse the prejudices of his time period but instead saw them for what they are: "dubious and damaging opinions, and so encourages his reader to do likewise" (23). He insists that "there is a pervasive, philosophical element to Shakespeare's 'Jewish' play, which has remained by and large unappreciated by current scholars. Not Shakespeare, but scholars themselves seem vulnerable to the charge of having imposed their own dubious prejudices on the events that Shakespeare dramatizes" (Yaffe 23).

We will never know exactly what Shakespeare thought or felt about Jews or Christians but he certainly would not have provided such moving, emotional speeches for Shylock and such ambivalence in Jessica's conversion had he endorsed the prejudices of his society. A master of his craft, Shakespeare subtly yet pointedly interrogates the social mores of his time in *The Merchant of Venice*. Metzger proposes that "Jessica's multiplicitous nature—as Jew and Christian [...]—constitutes an emblematic figure for the play's renowned discontinuities. The ambiguous mix of comedy and tragedy, humanism and racialism, patriarchal imperialism and festive rebellion in *The Merchant* corresponds to the inherent incompatibility of identities Shakespeare attempts to unite in Jessica" (53). I would expand this argument to observe that Shakespeare does not attempt to unite Jessica's "identities" but instead shows the falsity of her conversion, at the end of the play, silencing Jessica, as he does Shylock, and leaving her in limbo—neither entirely

Jewish nor Christian. According to Penuel, “she makes a successful physical escape but cannot manage its less tangible and concrete mental equivalent” (269).

A case can surely be made to defend Jessica’s fleeing from her father. As Gross points out, she “had just made her escape from an environment where she felt stifled. She was young, in love, swept up in the great adventure of her life” (69). However, how can one defend Jessica’s stealing of the ring that her mother gave her father and selling it for a monkey? Gross explains that “[p]erhaps the business with the ring was no more than a moment’s thoughtlessness. But does she really need defending, anyway? If we accept the traditional reading of the play, we rejoice in her progress: at worst, the business with the ring is a mere blip” (69). In reply to Gross, I would insist that her frivolous and insulting gesture would impede the audience’s empathy for her plight. Whether she actually sold the ring or not is of little importance; instead, the significance of the ring derives from Shylock’s reaction; he clearly values the sentimental meaning of the ring more than its material value. Gross maintains that the turquoise ring Jessica steals from her father is an appropriate stone for a keepsake since turquoises were widely believed to have magical properties. They were said to change color, in order to warn those who wore them of impending danger, they were also supposed ‘to reconcile man and wife.’ An appropriate stone for a keepsake—and if the ring was dear to Shylock while Leah was alive, it must have been doubly precious now she was dead [...] Disposing of the ring was heartless. It is as though Jessica were trying to undo her parents’ entire marriage at a stroke. (69)

Jessica wishes to assimilate into a Christian society in Belmont, but, as Leventen observes, she is more “tolerated at the periphery than welcomed at its center” (74). One of the few times that Jessica does speak out in her new Christian home, she tells of her father’s seriousness in his quest for Antonio’s flesh; however, Gross suggests, “she is not really telling those present anything that they do not already know [...] she is also plainly anxious to distance herself as far as possible from her father and ‘his countrymen’ (*his*’ countrymen – they are no longer hers)” (74).

By the end of the play, Jessica’s outlaw feminine characteristics appear to be forgiven, and she regains some of the sympathy that she had earlier lost through her callous actions because she re-appropriates herself into another patriarchal society, transferring the financial as well as the psychological power that she stole from her father and thrusting it into her new husband’s hands. However, Lampert submits that

although seemingly a Christian fantasy of Jewish conversion, Jessica’s situation actually calls this very fantasy into question. In Jessica’s uneasiness and her continual doubts that she can escape a Jewish essence, the play most clearly reveals its concerns about the fragility of Christian and Venetian identities [...] The play’s emphasis on the making and unmaking a Christians suggests that to be a Christian is not a static state but an identity to be performed and enacted. (15)

OTHER CHARACTERS

In *The Merchant of Venice*, the exchange of rings—a symbolic transference of love, money, and power—plays a central role in the plot and critics have debated the audience response to Jessica’s stealing of her father’s turquoise ring, the ring given to him by Leah, his late wife, when he was still a bachelor. I would argue that unlike the other male characters in the play—Bassanio and Gratiano—Shylock values the ring primarily for its sentimental meaning rather than its symbolic monetary value. Gross agrees, remarking that Jessica’s actions are particularly “heartless” because “to the Elizabethans, monkeys symbolized lechery [...] and for a man like Shylock, the mere idea of acquiring such a pet must have seemed unbearably frivolous” (69).

Portia and Jessica are both involved with the transference of rings. Critics frequently contrast the two daughters because Portia, at least on the surface, is a devoted daughter, who protects her father’s money and passes it along safely to her husband—although a number of critics have persuasively argued that she manipulates the casket ordeal in order to choose her own husband. In contrast, Jessica steals from her father, throws the caskets of jewels down to her lover, and then squanders it all. Newman notes that Bassanio “gives his ring to an ‘unruly woman,’ that is, to a woman who steps outside her role and function as subservient, a woman who dresses like a man, who embarks upon behavior ill suited to her ‘weaker’ intellect, a woman who argues the law” (115). Similarly, Jessica also violates her feminine role by defying her father, by stealing from him, by dressing like a man, and by challenging the social conventions that attempt to convert her into an inlaw feminine character. However, the motivations of Portia and

Jessica are significantly different; Portia acts to secure her father's money while Jessica plunders her father's wealth. As Leventen remarks, "Where Portia gives, Jessica takes; where Portia accepts constraints, Jessica rebels; but in the end, where Jessica wins the battle, Portia wins the war" (62).

Unlike "the Jew," who "would not have given it [Leah's ring] for a wilderness of / monkeys" (3.1.116), only a gentle prodding from Antonio convinces Bassanio to surrender Portia's ring, validating the new husband's earlier promise to give up his life, his wife, and the world to save his friend. Shylock's priorities seem different; he values the ring simply as a token of love from his wife, whereas when Portia passes the ring to Bassanio, it becomes a transfer of power, authority and wealth. Penuel explores Shylock's downfall and suggests that by "taking Shylock's stones, ring, ducats, and daughter, *Merchant's* Christians not only betray fear of debts to fiscal creditors as well as economic and emotional resentment of parents, but they also reveal anxiety about Christian culture's indebtedness to Judaism" (263).

Jessica's mishandling of the precious ring evokes sympathy for her father, whereas Bassanio's betrayal of Portia by giving away her ring evokes only laughter. Barbara Lewalski observes that when Bassanio returns to Belmont he is briefly "taunted" but soon "the whole crisis dissolves in laughter" (37). However, the play presents Jessica's offense with more gravity, by suggesting that this particular act of cruelty pushes Shylock over a metaphoric edge into villainy. Yaffe states that after Jessica "despoils her father of considerable cash and jewels, Shylock is afterward unable to separate the loss of her from the loss of his savings" (65). Would Shylock have been as obdurate in his revenge if Jessica had not betrayed him? The multivalent voices in the

play, as well as Shylock's multivalent character, make an answer problematic, although I certainly believe that he would not have been as determined to obtain a pound of Antonio's flesh had he not been so abused by both his daughter and his society. Although the play first depicts Jessica as "kind" and "unthrifty," unlike her father—she soon turns out to be just as cruel and prodigal as the other characters in the play.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

It is difficult to separate issues of religion and gender in *The Jew of Malta* and *The Merchant of Venice* because they intertwine so closely in the characterizations of Abigail and Jessica. The two are very similar: they are both daughters of rich and vilified Jewish men, who flee from their religion and are appropriated by the dominant Christian community. However, they are also very different: Abigail, an inlaw feminine character, comforts her father, helps him when she can, and generally sees her role as a supporting one until he kills her love, Mathias. Jessica, on the other hand, steals from her father, lies to him, and despoils him of the one possession that means more to him than money—a turquoise ring from his late wife, Leah. Abigail’s goodness contrasts with her father’s villainous actions and our pity for her increases as she endures one test after another; meanwhile, Barabas grows in cruelty as Abigail grows in goodness. Conversely, Jessica’s betrayal, shoves Shylock further into a villainous role and simultaneously evokes at least some compassion from the audience for the Jew. As a result, the father-daughter relationships act to sway our sympathies inversely. If we pity Abigail, whose actions are reactions to her father’s machinations, then we are happy that Barabas gets what he deserves. If we are angry at Jessica for her betrayal, then we sympathize with Shylock and see him as being coerced into a villainous role by his society and his own daughter.

Marlowe shows that the so-called Christians display all of the negative traits normally associated with “Jewishness” (materialism and Machiavellianism). Abigail’s

sincere conversion evokes sympathy for her but hardly for the Christian community which remains entirely corrupt. Indeed, the fact that the only truly “Christian” figure in the play is a young Jewish woman certainly explodes anti-Semitism. Shakespeare offers a more subtle satire of anti-Semitism; however, he evokes sympathy for Shylock by giving him moving speeches that remind the audience of the bond of common humanity that transcends religious and racial differences. Also, Shakespeare arouses compassion for his “villain” by showing how the cruelty of his daughter combines with the taunting of the Venetians to drive Shylock into villainy. Shakespeare also demonstrates how the Venetians, like the Maltese, embody those characteristics traditionally considered to be “Jewish.” Ultimately, most of the Venetians are revealed to be very commercial (Bassanio is a fortune hunter; Lorenzo and Gratiano are grossly materialistic; Portia makes sure at the trial that she does not lose any of her money). They are also vengeful; Shylock receives no mercy in the courtroom but only an eye-for-an-eye, tooth-for-a-tooth vengeance.

Both of the plays expose cultural differences as unreliable signifiers of goodness and depict the Christians and the Jews as more similar than different, thereby calling all kinds of racial/religious prejudice into question. However, Marlowe’s satire is more trenchant and the world of Malta more corrupt than that of Venice and thus Barabas, in one sense a representative of that society, alienates audience sympathy, primarily because of his treatment of Abigail. Conversely, both the Venetians and Shylock are presented more sympathetically than the Maltese and Barabas. In light of these similarities and differences, it is important to consider the implications of *The Jew of Malta* and *The Merchant of Venice*. Were Shakespeare and Marlowe really interrogating anti-Semitism?

Or, by appropriating the two daughters into the Christian society, is anti-Semitism simply reinforced? I conclude that although Marlowe's caustic satire points out the hypocrisy of the Gentile characters and Shakespeare's more subtle satire reveals common human weaknesses, both authors are certainly interrogating the social norms of their time.

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