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Her Father’s Blood: Race, Conversion, and Nation in The Merchant of Venice

I most humbly beseeche Almighty God, that he will not onely vouchsafe his gracious encrease to this glorious worke begunne with this Israelite stranger, but also to allure the whole remnant of the circumcised Race, by this his example, to be desirous of the same communion: So that at the length, all nations, as well Jewes, as Gentiles, embracing the faith, and Sacramentes of Christ Jesu, acknowledging one Shephearde, united together in one sheepfolds, may with one voice, one soule, and one general agreement, glorifie the only begotten sonne our sauiour Jesue Christ.

—John Foxe, A Sermon preached at the Christening of a Certaine Jew, at London

LANCELOT: Truly I think you are damned. There is but one hope in it that can do you any good, and that is but a kind of bastard hope, neither.
JESSICA: And what hope is that, I pray thee?
LANCELOT: Marry, you may partly hope that your father got you not, that you are not the Jew’s daughter.
JESSICA: That were a kind of bastard hope indeed. So the sins of my mother should be visited upon me.

—The Merchant of Venice

Immediately before the scene that famously ends with Shylock’s forced conversion to Christianity, Jessica and Lancelot debate the status of Jessica’s own conversion in the lines I have just quoted. In sharp contrast to Foxe’s wish that all nations might be united in the body of Christ, Lancelot can imagine only one condition under which Jessica might become Christian: that she had some other father. This is the clown’s point of view, but it is not easily dismissed; as I hope to demonstrate, it opens out onto the vexed territory that lies between the universalizing claims of Christianity and the particularities of blood-lineage and, increasingly, of nation. Nor is Belmont as distant from England as one might suppose: though they were few in number, the conversos in London may have posed their own kind of blood-conundrum and their own challenge not only to Christian universalism but also to the idea of nationhood.

Whether or not Shakespeare and his audience knew of their presence—and it is hard to believe that they could have gone alto-
gether unnoticed after the Lopez affair of 1594—Jessica’s entrance into Belmont and her would-be entrance into Christianity provokes a response that would have been entirely familiar to the conversos themselves.

Jessica herself seems to assume that her conversion will be an unproblematic consequence of her marriage. Well before she assures Lancelot that her husband has made her a Christian in 3.5, she appears to imagine marriage and conversion as interchangeable, as though the laws governing the material conditions of women could unproblematically be applied to her spiritual state, and her husband—rather than the church—had the power to make her a Christian:

Alack, what heinous sin is it in me
To be ashamed to be my father’s child!
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.

(2.3.15–20)

Though her escape from her father’s house to her lover fits conveniently into the conventions of a romance plot, these are not the love-longings of a typical romance heroine: Lorenzo is invoked in this speech not as the solution to Jessica’s erotic desire but as the solution to the problem of her father’s blood. Though we might expect her to convert in order to marry, the rhetorical weight of this speech moves in the opposite direction, suggesting that she would marry in order to convert.

Lancelot’s answer to Jessica’s expectation becomes explicit in the lines with which I opened this essay: the only way out for Jessica is not to have been born of the Jew at all. But his assumption is so deeply embedded in him (and so endemic to the culture in which his author operates) that it occurs in a muted form even here, while he is ostensibly serving as the helpful agent of her escape. Lancelot’s response to Jessica’s request to carry a letter to Lorenzo—“If a Christian do not play the knave and get thee, I am much deceived” (2.3.11–12)—anticipates that later formulation as it hovers unstably between “get” in the sense of “possess” and “get” in the sense of “beget,” despite the temporal illogic that “get” as “beget” would introduce: how can Jessica be begotten by a Christian in the present tense? The Second Folio (F2) reading—“if a Christian did not play the knave and get thee, I am much deceived” (emphasis added)—suggests how readily Shakespeare’s near contemporaries would have heard the pun; it stabilizes the meaning by choosing “beget” over “possess” and then altering the tense to solve the problem of temporal illogic. By securing “get” as “beget” and eliminating the temporal illogic, F2’s reading underscores the way in which Lancelot’s pun answers Jessica’s fantasy of escape from her father’s house: at least for an instant, that pun gives her the Christian father that she seems to be longing for. For a dizzying moment, through its
elision of getting in the present with begetting in the past and its duck-rabbit flickering of father and husband as the subject of “get,” Lancelot’s pun fuses the Christian husband who might (now) get Jessica with the Christian father who might have begotten her—as though Jessica’s Christian husband could away with the embarrassment of her Jewish birth only by becoming her Christian father, literally rebeget her in the present with Christian rather than Jewish blood.

Insofar as it articulates the terms of this impossibility, Lancelot’s pun—which seems to give Jessica what she wants—serves not to realize but to set the limiting condition to her fantasy of conversion-through-marriage. For in its insistence that Lorenzo can get (and hence convert) Jessica only if he can simultaneously rebeget her, thus effecting what amounts to a literalization of the trope of Christian rebirth—“except a man be borne againe, he can not se the kingdome of God”—Lancelot’s pun returns Jessica to the strictures of her father’s blood once again. And Lancelot is not alone: his version of conversion seems closer to the state of things in Venice—and especially in Belmont—that Jessica’s assumption that her marriage will do the trick or Foxe’s wish for a union of “all nations, as well Jewes, as Gentiles” in Christ. Jessica’s would-be escape from her father’s Jewishness seems to begin well enough; only a few moments after she has declared her desire to become a Christian through marriage, her husband-to-be imagines Shylock’s “gentle daughter” as her father’s ticket to heaven, as though she had the power to convert not only herself but him (2.4.34). Graziano also seems willing to grant her fantasy of instantaneous conversion when he proclaims her (depending on one’s text) “a gentle [or “a gentile”] and no Jew” (2.6.51). But when she arrives in Belmont with Lorenzo and Salerio, it becomes clear that Jessica’s status as no-Jew is as evanescent as her transitional status as a gilded boy: Graziano himself identifies her as no-Christian, signaling their arrival with “who comes here? Lorenzo and his infidell” (3.2.217).

Graziano may later prove to be the play’s most outspoken anti-Semite, but he is not alone in regarding Jessica as an alien creature whose marriage has done nothing to convert her; Shakespeare seems to take pains in 3.2 to indicate the extent to which she is an outsider in Portia’s Belmont, Merchant’s xenophobic stand-in for England with its virgin-queen (3.2.169). At least Graziano notices that she exists; neither Bassanio nor Portia register her presence here or elsewhere in the play. (Even when Portia learns Jessica’s name, she never addresses Jessica directly; see, for example, 3.4.38, where she addresses the couple standing before her as “you and Jessica.”) Bassanio’s welcome, reiterated by Portia, extends only to Lorenzo and Salerio; neither Bassanio nor Portia speak directly to her either at her entrance or anywhere else in this scene. Graziano’s somewhat belated instructions to Nerissa—“cheer yon stranger. Bid her welcome” (3.2.236)—in fact function as a stage direction indicating her physical isolation on stage and her demeanor during the awkward moments in which she is pointedly not introduced: “yon” makes sense only if she is standing at some distance from the others who are welcomed into
Belmont, and “cheer” suggests that she is in need of cheering. Moreover, if Graziano’s earlier “infidel” underscored Jessica’s status as alien by religion, his “stranger” here underscores her status as alien by country: though the term could function to indicate simply that she is unknown to the present company, she is after all known at least to Graziano, who could introduce her by name; and other uses of the term in the period tend to circulate around the concept of foreignness by blood or nation rather than simply lack of recognition.7 Bassanio has greeted Lorenzo and Salerio as “my very friends and countrymen” (3.2.222); Graziano’s “stranger” suggests how far Jessica is from inclusion both in the present company and in the category of Bassanio’s countrymen, though she too comes from Venice. His term in fact allies Jessica specifically with her father, who complains that he is spurned by Antonio like a “stranger cur” (1.3.114)—and perhaps with the conversos of London, to whom the term was frequently applied.8

No wonder, then, that Jessica tries to dissociate herself not only from her father’s religion but also from his “countrymen” in her only speech in this scene:

When I was with him I have heard him swear
To Tubal and to Cush, his countrymen,
That he would rather have Antonio’s flesh
Than twenty times the value of the sum. . . .

(3.2.283–86)

Jessica here attempts to ingratiate herself into the company from which she is excluded not only by confirming their sense of her father’s blood-thirstiness but also by defining his “countrymen” as specifically his, not hers: as though her conversion (however questionable in itself) could have the effect of changing her country along with her religion and thus could enable her inclusion as one of Bassanio’s countrymen after all. At her initial appearance, Jessica had distinguished between blood and religion, taking seriously the Christian universalist promise that she could free herself from her father’s religion if not from his blood. But here, in the face of continued designation of her as an infidel and stranger, she appears to absorb the lesson implicit in Lancelot’s pun—and as though in response, she fantasizes a radical separation from her father’s blood and nation as the price of inclusion in the social club to which her husband belongs, and as the only way to cast off her status as a Jew.

The play carefully does not distinguish a moment after which Jessica is converted; and that omission allows for a chronic tension between Jessica and the others, in which she persistently regards her conversion to Christianity as complete, and they persistently regard her as a Jew. If the crucial distinction for Jessica is religious, the crucial distinction for them is of race or nation. But this much she might have heard even in Graziano’s initial riddling praise of her as “a gentle/gentile and no Jew.” As the word slides between “gentle” and “gentile,” it enters the territory of what we might agree to call a protoracial distinction:9 although “Jew” might function primarily as a religious category when it is opposed to “Chris-
tian,” it becomes an incipiently racial category when it is opposed to “gentle/gentile.” For in that opposition, “gentile” invariably functions as a marker of those races or nations that are not Jewish—as in Foxe’s wish that “the whole remnant of the circumcised Race” might convert, so that “all nations, as well Jewes, as Gentiles” might be united in one sheepfold. Graziano’s implied opposition between “gentle” and “Jew”—she is no Jew because she is a gentle—thus underscores the “gentile” in “gentle” and racializes both “gentle” and “Jew” by construing them as mutually exclusive: while “gentle” and “Jew” might conceivably be compatible terms (Jessica appears to imagine herself with gentle manners in her opening scene), by definition Jessica cannot be both a gentle and a Jew. And only status as “a gentle” can guarantee her status as “no Jew”: Jessica hopes for a conversion from Jew to Christian; Graziano implies that the necessary conversion will have to be from Jew to gentile, shifting the grounds of conversion from religion to race even as he seems to grant her the conversion she wishes for.

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

If e’er the Jew her father come to heaven
It will be for his gentle daughter’s sake;
And never dare misfortune cross her foot
Unless she do it under this excuse:
That she is issue to a faithless Jew.

(2.4.33–37)

The more Jessica appears to be “a gentle and no Jew,” the more vigorously her problematic lineage needs to be asserted. Lorenzo initially entertains the possibility that Jessica will be able to convert not only herself but her father, reversing the trajectory—“the sins of the father are to be laid upon the children” (3.5.1)—that Lancelot insists on. But blood wins out in the end. As soon as Lorenzo distinguishes her gentleness/gentileness from Shylock’s Jewishness, he must undo the distinction: if misfortune visits her, it will be because she is her father’s issue and hence a Jew after all. By the end of Lorenzo’s speech, her lineage has trumped her “gentleness”; as soon as the possibility of her gentleness/gentileness is invoked, it inevitably calls up her father’s Jewishness and subjects her to its taint.

In its attentiveness to Jessica’s continued status as outsider and infidel, Merchant seems to me extraordinarily attuned to the plight of the outsider who would assim-
late and to the price of assimilation, registered not only in 3.2 but also in Jessica’s melancholy in 3.5 (“how cheer’st thou, Jessica?” Lorenzo asks after Lancelot has insisted that she is still a Jew), in the absurdly self-denigrating paean to heavenly Portia with which she apparently answers his question, and perhaps especially in her final line in the play—“I am never merry when I hear sweet music” (5.1.68)—a line that simultaneously registers her distance from the merry company at Belmont and returns her to her father’s melancholy and musicless house. Nonetheless, despite these hints of sympathy with her plight, the play’s treatment of her is at least partly in the service of the ideologies that prevent her escape from that house, convert or not, making her a figure for the anxieties attendant upon conversion. In that sense, her situation poses the conundrum of the conversos (including London’s own conversos) and provokes the discourse of blood that their historical presence engendered.

Despite claims that “Jew” was purely a theological category in Shakespeare’s England, and that racialized thinking about Jews is an inappropriate piece of anachronism, protoracialized thinking about the conversos appears to have been both conceptually available and conceptually useful to Shakespeare’s contemporaries. For whatever theological category those conversos fit into, whether or not they were thought to practice secret Jewish rites, they were typically described not only in terms of their “sect” (religious belief) and their “nation” (in this context, usually the country in which they had most recently lived) but also in terms of their “descent”; and the genealogical language of “descent” shades into what would become the newer language of “race.” The Clerk of the Privy Council does not have to have available to him an entire scientific discourse of race in order to describe Pedro Rodriguez, a converso living in Lyons who planned to marry Lopez’s daughter, as “a Portugal by nation and a Jew by race” in 1597.11 Gabriel Harvey accounts for Lopez’s suspicious success as a physician—the trickiness of what Harvey calls his “Jewish practis”—by noting that he was “descended of Jews,” as though Jewish deception were a biological inheritance.12 Harvey’s incipient biologism is similar to, if less explicit than, Foxe’s exasperated speculation that Jewish unbelief is so ineradicable that it must be inherited from the womb: “Jewish Infidelitie . . . seemeth after a certaine maner their inheritable disease, who are after a certaine sort, from their mothers wombe, naturally caried through peruerse frowardnes, into all malitious hatred, & contempt of Christ, & his Christians.”13 If testimony offered to the Inquisition in Madrid in 1588 is any indication of the state of affairs in London (as it claims to be), Foxe’s implied link between religion and race was not conceptually difficult to make. One such witness alleges of some members of the Sephardic community in London that “it is public and notorious in London, that by race they are all Jews, and it is notorious that in their own homes they live as such observing their Jewish rites.”14 Though “rites” and “race”—the theological and protobiological categories—are distinct categories, the notoriety of the conversos’ “race” is apparently used to secure the notoriety of their “rites”: they are
Jews by race, and “as such”—that is, as racial Jews—practice their rites, as though one simply entailed the other.

No wonder that poor Jessica’s would-be conversion doesn’t succeed in freeing her from the strictures of her father’s blood: only a Christian father could do that. Oddly, the play itself seems to toy with its own fulfillment of this fantasy-solution when it “converts” Shylock in the scene after Lancelot articulates this condition, giving her a Christian father in the same ex post facto way as Lancelot’s initial pun does. But the play never takes the possibility of Shylock’s conversion seriously; despite his last-minute court-ordered conversion, his Jewishness seems to be fixed and immutable. And if Graziano’s “gentle/gentile and no Jew” fixes the limiting conditions of Jessica’s conversion, Antonio’s initial joke about Shylock’s conversion uses the same terms to underscore the immutability of Shylock’s Jewishness. Antonio greets the news of Shylock’s substitution of the “merry bond” for the usual penalties of usury with these words: “Hie thee, gentle Jew. / The Hebrew will turn Christian; he grows kind” (1.3.173–74). Shylock’s aside at 1.3.36–47, with its insistence on his “ancient grudge” and its reference to his cursed “tribe,” has already schooled the audience in his immutable Jewishness, his distance from the gentle/gentile, the kind, and the Christian. Antonio’s formulation reenforces that schooling, for though Shylock may be forced to convert, he will never (Antonio’s set of puns suggests) change his nature and “grow kind.” The paradox of “gentle Jew” marks this impossibility: for though a Hebrew might ostensibly become a Christian, becoming “gentile” (and hence no longer Hebrew) would require a change in kind.

Like his nature (kind), his nation (gens) and type (genus) are reassuringly fixed; whatever his pretense of gentility or kindness, everyone knows that this Jew can never join the kind of the Christian. And insofar as Shylock will remain Shylock, converted or not, he secures the important distinction between Christian and Jew, the distinction that Jessica threatens to dissolve both through her conversion and through her gentleness—and he secures it exactly through an appeal to a protoracial difference. For whether or not racial categories were fully in place by the time of Merchant, the puns through which Antonio introduces the topic of conversion into the play suggest the set of anxieties—about sameness and difference, about nature and nations—for which racialized thinking provides a remedy.

By the time of Merchant, Christian societies had been worrying about the instability of Jewish difference for generations. Jews, for example, are generally depicted throughout the Middle Ages as physically unmistakable, with red or black curly hair, large noses, dark skin, and the infamous foetor judaicus, the bad smell that identified them as Jews. But apparently Jews could not be counted on to be reliably different: although allegedly physically unmistakable, Jews throughout Europe were nonetheless required to wear particular styles of clothing or badges that graphically enforced their physical unmistakability—as though they were not quite different enough. Archbishop Stephen Langton’s 1222 council in Oxford seems to
have instituted clothing regulations in England explicitly for this reason, following both the Fourth Lateran Council regulations of 1215 and a particularly troubling local case in which a deacon married a Jew, was circumcised, and was burned for his apostasy. F.W. Maitland paraphrases the institution of the English regulations thus: “there being unfortunately no visible distinction between Jews and Christians, there have been mixed marriages or less permanent unions; for the better prevention whereof, it is ordained that every Jew shall wear on the front of his dress tablets or patches of cloth four inches long by two wide, of some colour other than that of the rest of his garment.”

The regulations thus appear to have been an attempt to make a difference where none was reliably visible, presumably on the assumption that no one would knowingly marry a Jew.

Even apparently reliable physical signs of difference were tricky: some thought, for example, that the foetor judaicus might disappear at baptism, effectively undoing the immutable difference between Christian and Jew. And not every Christian would greet this news with joy: despite the promises of a universalizing Christianity, the difference between Christian and Jew was too important a part of the mental map to be given up lightly. Already too different and too much the same, Jews were a contradiction that conversion—particularly state-enforced conversion—turned into a crisis. And insofar as Merchant worries the contradiction between Jessica’s conversion and her blood, it responds in its own way to the pressures that were, elsewhere in the sixteenth century, forcing a protoracialized definition of Jewish difference. Although one theological justification for hatred of Jews had always been their stiff-necked refusal to convert, it turned out that massive conversion brought on its own problems. In sixteenth-century Spain, the danger was not that Jews would remain an isolated community refusing Christian grace but that they would convert and infiltrate Spanish society at all levels, becoming indistinguishable from their Spanish hosts as they entered into the mainstream. For conversion threatened to do away with the most reliable signs of difference, provoking a crisis in a very mixed society obsessively concerned with purity of lineage. In response to which crisis and the category confusions it entailed, the Spanish Inquisition attempted to establish difference just where it was least visible, in the unstable arena of blood, through the imposition of a series of so-called “pure blood laws.” Jerome Friedman’s account of these laws identifies a pattern that precisely duplicates Merchant’s insistence on Jessica’s Jewishness just when she is most liable to be mistaken for gentle/gentile or Christian: “The more ardently Jews sought acceptance as Christians, the more ardently Christians identified them as Jews”; “The more New Christians assimilated into their new surroundings, the more biological distinctions were needed to separate New Christian from Old Christian.”

In the face of massive Jewish conversion and acceptance into Spanish society, the pure blood laws were a strenuous attempt to ground an increasingly invisible difference specifically in the realm of biological inheritance; in Friedman’s account,
with their emergence, the sixteenth century succeeded in transforming “medieval religious anti-Judaism into a racial antisemitism” precisely at the point that the religious difference between Christian and Jew threatened to disappear. According to the logic of the pure-blood laws,

All descendants of converts were really still Jews because they came from Jewish ancestors. The sixteenth-century “purity of blood” laws stipulated that anyone with at least one Jewish ancestor was himself still a *converso* and therefore not a real Christian. . . . In 1628, one Grand Inquisitor noted that “by *converso* we commonly understand any person descended from Jews . . . be it in the most distant degree.” . . . These new exclusionary legal conventions were called “pure blood laws” because it was maintained that degenerate Jewish blood was impervious to baptism and grace. If mixed with Christian blood, the Jewish blood would contaminate subsequent generations and would continue to do so indefinitely. . . . The result of this racist thinking was that the courts of Inquisition were increasingly involved with determining if a given individual was geneologically $1/16$, $1/32$, or $1/64$th part Jewish. The Toledo court of Inquisition for instance, *devoted four times more space in its records to this than to actual court procedures involving charges of judaization.*

It is emblematic of the entire enterprise that the laws enforcing difference at the point of its disappearance employ a metaphors of blood, since the blood of various individuals is not only notoriously miscible but also notoriously hard to distinguish. The King instructs the lineage-obsessed Bertram on this paradox with some precision in *All’s Well That Ends Well:* “Strange it is that our bloods, Of colour, weight, and heat, poured all together, / Would quite confound distinction, yet stands off / In differences so mighty” (2.3.114–17).

England did not face the massive problem that Spain did, nor is it clear how many of the English knew about, or would have been sympathetic to, the pure-blood laws of its traditional enemy. Certainly the Spanish obsession with purity of lineage was the butt of English satire. Aragon obligingly reenacts this aspect of the national stereotype when he enters Belmont insisting on his differentiation both from the “barbarous multitudes” and from those whose “estates, degrees, and offices” are “deriv’d corruptly” (2.9.32, 40–41): though he insists on employing a standard of “merit” (lines 38, 42), his language collapses the discourse of merit into the discourse of blood-lineage, in which those “deriv’d corruptly” must be distinguished from “the true seed of honor” (lines 41, 46). For an English audience, the joke of his boast—like the joke of the pure-blood laws and the ambition they encode—would be on the Spanish. In the anti-Spanish propaganda prevalent in England, Spaniards had good reason to be concerned about being ranked with the barbarous multitude: they are “this scumme of Barbarians,” “this mongrel generation,” “sprong fro the race of the Iewes”; far from being “the true seed of honor,” especially the aristocrats among them are contaminated by their debased historic internal others (“All the worlde beleeveth . . . that the greatest part of the Spanyards, and specially those, that counte themselves Noblemen, are of the blood of the Moores and Iewes”). For audience members familiar with this propaganda, Jessica would not be the first Jew to enter Belmont, nor would Morocco be the last Moor.
Through Aragon, *Merchant* allows its English audience to mock the Spanish simultaneously for their mongrel blood and for their obsessive concern with uncontaminated lineage. But if *Merchant* is any indication, the blood-laws put in place by the Inquisition addressed anxieties not altogether unfamiliar to English audiences; whether or not the English knew about—or approved of—the Inquisition’s pure-blood laws, the play itself at least partly replicates their logic and hence the racializing structure that underlies them. I have already cited evidence that the English regarded their own conversos as racial Jews and read their alleged lapses from Christianity—or from fair business practices—as a consequence of their race; the play’s repeated insistence that Jessica cannot escape her father’s blood puts Jessica in the company of those conversos, Jewish whether or not they convert. But if the play often insists on Jessica’s Jewishness, it nonetheless sharply distinguishes her blood from her father’s in one striking moment: when Shylock himself claims Jessica as his own “flesh and blood,” Salerio answers, “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” (3.1.33–35). How are we to understand this moment?

Salerio clearly recoils (perhaps on behalf of his friend Lorenzo) from the association between Shylock’s flesh and Jessica’s, and in his desire to make a difference between them, and perhaps simultaneously to taunt Shylock with the “naturalness” and inevitability of his loss, he invokes the language of blood-difference. Not quite a Christian, Jessica is in Salerio’s formulation no longer entirely a Jew and her father’s daughter: as though the transfer from father to husband could unbind her from her father’s blood after all. Some have read the distinction between Shylock’s immutable Jewishness and Jessica’s apparent convertability (vexed as it is) as a sign of the tension between the officially universalizing doctrines of Christianity and the emerging discourses of race. But if this is the moment when the play seems most to allow for the possibility of Jessica’s escape into Christianity, it’s worth noting that it does so only by simultaneously reinstating the discourse of race. In fact Salerio merely reiterates the terms of escape set by Lancelot: for Jessica can be different from her father, he implies, only if her flesh and blood are different from his.

And oddly, Salerio can insist on that difference only by giving Shylock skin of “jet” in comparison to Jessica’s “ivory.” Jessica’s “fairness” has been much remarked before this comparison: she is “fair Jessica” at 2.4.28 and 2.4.39, and “fair” again at 2.6.54. When Lorenzo receives her letter, he reiterates her fairness in lines that protest too much, as though he needs her whiteness to justify and legitimate their union:

I know the hand. In faith, ’tis a fair hand,
And whiter than the paper it writ on
Is the fair hand that writ.

(2.4.12–14)
But if Jessica is to be hyperbolically white and hence marriageable, then her father—“my father Jew” as Lorenzo soon calls him (2.6.25)—must be blackened: otherwise there is no reliable way to distinguish between father and daughter. Salerio’s metaphor does the work of blackening, working to secure the difference between them by moving from the invisible ground of blood to the visible ground of skin color, in the process making Shylock into the equivalent of a Moor. And insofar as blackening Shylock grounds the difference between father and daughter in the visible difference of the other great category of converts troublesome to the Spanish, Merchant once again eerily replicates an Inquisitorial logic. For in its attempt to mark distinctions in the blood, the fantasmatic carrier of ancient distinctions that in itself is maddeningly indistinguishable, the Inquisition too turned to the analogy of skin color:

Who can deny that in the descendants of the Jews there persists and endures the evil inclination of their ancient ingratitude and lack of understanding, just as in Negroes [there persists] the inseparability of their blackness. For if the latter should unite themselves a thousand times with white women, the children are born with the dark color of the father. Similarly, it is not enough for the Jew to be three parts aristocrat or Old Christian for one family-line [that is, one Jewish ancestor] alone defiles and corrupts him.25

Fray Prudencio indulges himself in a fantasy of the Negro’s permanent and visible difference in order to underwrite his fantasy of the Jew’s equally permanent but invisible difference: as though the apparently stable ground of skin color could permanently guarantee the fiction of differentiation by blood.

“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”: Salerio uses the same enabling fiction—that one can read blood-differences through differences in skin color—apparently to undo the Inquisition’s insistence that the taint of Jewishness is permanent, persisting through the generations. But the undoing is deeply equivocal. He elides Jessica’s “whiteness” with her differentiation from her father and thus with her potential to become “one of us” in both religion and race—a potential that the play elsewhere denies. But he can do so only by insisting simultaneously on the permanence of Shylock’s difference, making him hyperbolically black, against all evidence: if his skin was reliably jet—if his difference was permanently and visibly marked like the proverbial Ethiope’s—would Portia have to ask which is the merchant and which the Jew? As though counterphonically anticipating and warding off Portia’s question, Salerio blackens Shylock in order to stabilize invisible Jewish difference in visible Moorish difference. And then, in an impossible attempt to satisfy the contradictory mandates provoked by conversion, he transmutes the difference between Jew and Christian into a difference between Jew and Jew, distinguishing fantasmatically between the “black” Jew-by-race, who will always be a Jew even if the state forces his conversion, and the “white” Jew-by-religion who could perhaps become a Christian and one of us—if only she were not in fact her father’s flesh and blood.26
If Shylock is in effect made into a Moor to secure the permanence of his invisible blood-difference through the visible sign of skin color, perhaps it is not entirely coincidental that a literal Moor is the first of Portia’s suitors that we see, and that his first words explicitly question the relation between skin color and blood:

Mislike me not for my complexion,
The shadowed livery of the burnished sun,
To whom I am a neighbor and near bred.
Bring me the fairest creature northward born,
Where Phoebus’ fire scarce thaws the icicles,
And let us make incision for your love
To prove whose blood is reddest, his or mine.

(2.1.1–7)

Morocco begins by invoking one of the familiar tropes of skin color (he is black, like Cleopatra, because he is close to the sun). But if Fray Prudencio or Salerio would use skin-color difference to guarantee blood-difference, Morocco’s procedure is just the reverse: by turning Portia’s glance imaginatively inward toward the red blood he shares with “the fairest creature,” he invites her to overlook the superficial differences of complexion. His xenophobic hostess is famously unable to accept his invitation: the “gentle riddance” she bids him (2.7.78) is entirely on the basis of his skin color (“If he have the condition of a saint and the complexion of a devil, I had rather he should shrive me than wive me,” 1.2.127–28; “Let all of his complexion choose me so,” 2.7.79). But for one moment, through the force of his formulation, the play produces the vivid image of blood-sameness beneath skin-color difference.

Morocco’s claim to blood as red as the fairest creature northward born might be understood as underwriting Shylock’s later claim to the universality of blood (“if you prick us, do we not bleed?” 3.1.54): if Salerio would use skin-color difference to secure blood difference, Morocco gestures powerfully toward the common blood lying just beneath the skin of difference. Morocco’s entrance might then be taken as a refutation of the kind of racist logic that we see played out not only in Portia’s rejection of him but also in Antonio’s conviction that Shylock would have to change “kind” or gens—nature, kin, and nation—in order to become Christian. Morocco’s articulation of blood-sameness in fact follows immediately after Antonio’s bitter joke to that effect at the end of 1.3; and although conversion is not an issue for Morocco, his insistence on blood-sameness implicitly responds to Antonio’s assumption that only gentiles can be Christian by evoking Paul’s great refutation of biological particularism in Acts 17:26: God “hathe made of one blood all mankinde, to dwell on all the face of the earth.” But perhaps Morocco is allowed to articulate this claim precisely because his skin is so reliably different? As Shakespeare’s next Venetian play about conversion suggests, a Christianized Moor is still a Moor and still bears the visible—and hence reassuring—signs of difference; one
cannot imagine a messenger, say, walking into the Duke’s chambers in Othello’s Venice and asking “Which is the Senator and which the Moor?” Fray Prudencio’s—and Salerio’s—move to ground Jewish difference in skin color depends precisely on the fact that Moriscos, or converted Moors like Othello, were far less threatening to category stability than their Jewish counterparts. Since Morocco’s difference is secured by his complexion—since no one would mistake him for “one of us”—perhaps he can be allowed to make the claim of blood-sameness: he can, after all, do so without compromising visible racial difference.

Though it may seem arbitrary to read Morocco’s opening speech in Belmont as a commentary on Jewish blood, the association between blacks and Jews that both Fray Prudencio and Salerio draw on seems to have been common in the period. And although Morocco’s Marlovian martial vigor would seem to pose him as maximally different from Shylock, he is specifically allied with Shylock not only through Salerio’s skin-color analogy but also through Jessica’s bizarre positing of a familial relationship between them: in Belmont, she lists Ham’s son Cush/Chus—who would have been Morocco’s ancestor according to common interpretations of Genesis 10—as one of her father’s countrymen (3.2.284). But how does this association function here? Does Morocco’s appearance secure Shylock’s racial difference or challenge it? Does the darkness of his skin make Shylock’s “white” by contrast, or does it “blacken” Shylock by analogy, as Salerio would have it? I suggest that Morocco’s entrance into the virgin-kingdom of Belmont reiterates the conundrum of Jewish difference in a different register, serving in part as a stand-in for the distinction Salerio would make between the play’s two Jews, and hence for the tension between Christian universalism and racial particularity. The redness of Morocco’s blood is allied to the “red wine” of Jessica’s (3.1.35) and—through its allusion to Paul’s “one blood”—to the universalizing strain of Christianity played out in the possibility of her conversion, however vexed; but his skin color stabilizes the difference essential to the emergent racist discourses that keep a Moor a Moor—and a Jew a Jew.

But Morocco is not Shylock’s only surprising relative. Though critics interested in race in Shakespeare have recently commented on Chus, Shylock’s other countryman, Tubal, has largely gone unnoticed. But the force of these names lies in their combination; taken together, they allude not only to an associative link between Jews and blacks but more broadly to the so-called dispersal of nations after the flood—and hence to a complex narrative of national difference and origin in a common blood. For Chus and Tubal are both grandsons of Noah, named as such in Genesis 10, the genealogical account of the formation of separate nations after Noah’s flood. If Genesis 11 locates the origin of distinct nations in the linguistic divisions after the Tower of Babel, and thus in supernatural punishment for human arrogance, this chapter locates national difference purely in the “natural” realm of kinship groupings deriving from Noah’s three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth. The rubric for Genesis 10 is “The increase of mankinde by Noah and his sonnes. The
beginning of cities, contrees, and nations”; and the chapter concludes, “These are the families of the sonnes of Noah, after their generacions among their people: and out of these were the nacions dividied in the earth after the flood” (Genesis 10:32). The progeny of Noah’s three sons divide the known world; national history begins with them. Thus William Warner begins his history of England in 1612 with “the division of the World after the generall Flood,” specifying that “To Asia Sem, to Affrick Cham, to Europe Iapheth bore / Their families. Thus triple wise the world deuided was.”

Chus and Tubal are both grandsons of Noah, but they derive from different sons (Chus from Ham, and Tubal from Japheth) and are progenitors of radically different lines—and both would be recognizably distant from Shem’s descendant Eber, “of whome [Geneva’s marginal gloss to Genesis 10:21 tells us] came the Ebrewes or Iewes.” This is not an insignificant detail. At a time of increasingly self-conscious nationalist formation Biblical commentators and genealogically minded historians often expended a good deal of effort trying to pin down exactly which peoples derived from which grandsons; any careful auditor of Genesis and of Merchant would recognize the incongruity of mixed lineages implied by the names of Shylock’s countrymen.30 And when a descendant first of Chus and then of Tubal appears on stage as a suitor to Portia—for if Morocco would have traced his ancestry to Chus, Aragon would have traced his to Tubal31—we can be reasonably certain that Shakespeare is engaging in a complex conversation with Genesis 10 and the dispersal of nations.

It would be easy to read this complex allusion to the dispersal of nations in Shylock’s incongruous countrymen as a reenforcement of Paul’s “one blood” claim and thus as a refutation of those who would attribute specifically “Jewish” blood to Shylock and his daughter. At least one Bible commentator reads the dispersal of nations that way in 1592:

Though we see heere divisions of Countreys made amongst them, and some dwelling here, some there, as they liked, yet one bloud remained amongst them, as a knot evere to ioyne them, what distance of place soever severed them. And is it not so still . . . ? We be all as we see of one bloud and parent.32

But Holinshed’s narrative of the displacement of the “originall beginner” of England—naturally enough a descendent of Japheth, by “Albion son of Cham”—suggests that a “one blood” reading of the dispersal of nations was far from inevitable.33 And from the English point of view, Morocco, Aragon, and Shylock are in any case all outsiders: construing their blood as “one” would do little to destabilize the blood-distinctions otherwise in evidence in the play. In fact, given the frequency with which both Jews and Moors were depicted as contaminants in the Spanish bloodstream, characterizing Morocco, Shylock, and Aragon as kin under the skin is as likely to function as a joke about Spanish mongrelization as it is to serve as a reminder of the universalizing potential of Christianity—especially since all three
represent religions sharply divergent from normative Christianity in England. (Shylock’s “countrymen” and their contemporary descendants sound like the beginning of a joke that might have circulated in xenophobic England, as in Belmont: a Jew, a Catholic, and a Muslim. . . .)

The discourse surrounding the dispersal of nations may sometimes serve to mediate between a universalist impulse (we are all one blood, derived from Adam through his descendant Noah) and a developing concern with divisions, with national particularities traceable to the lines of the separate sons (“out of these were the nacions diuided in the earth, after the Flood,” in the words of Genesis 10:32, or, in Genesis 10:5’s more specific account of the Japhetic divisions, “Of these were the ysles of the Gentiles deuided in their landes, euerie man after his tongue, and after their families in their nacions”). But that last reference to both tongues and families underscores the tensions that need mediating here, for the two different accounts of the dispersal of nations offered in Genesis 10 (the generations of Noah) and Genesis 11 (the Tower of Babel) themselves encode the tension between competing claims for—and therefore competing valuations of—the origins of difference. If national differences are a consequence of man’s sin and God’s punishment in Genesis 11, they are cause for marvel at God’s grace in Geneva’s marginal gloss to Genesis 11:1, where the postdiluvial derivation of nations from the generations of Noah serves “to declare the maruelous increase in so smale a time.” And though not precisely equivalent, the tension between these competing accounts of the origin of difference maps back onto the tension between a universalizing Christian discourse in which conversion is open to all, and a protoracial particularism in which blood-differences make all the difference: one account allows for an original unity, spoiled by sin and in effect recoverable through grace, so that (in Foxe’s words) “at the length, all nations, . . . acknowledging one Shepherde, united together in one sheepefold, may with one voice, one soule, and one generall agreement, glorifie the only begotton sonne”; the other allows for the glorification of differences as a basis for cohesive identities—for pride in precisely those distinctions between nations that Foxe would like to see subsumed into oneness.

Combined with the discourse of blood that I have been tracing, Shakespeare’s reference to the dispersal of nations not only in Shylock’s odd countrymen but in the persons of Morocco and Aragon signals Merchant’s participation in a meditation on nations and national difference, just when the idea of the nation was in flux. Initially firmly linked with kinship—and thus blood—through its Latin root, during this period “nation” was well on its way to becoming a political term, in which the artificial “family” within a country’s territorial boundaries borrows its force from the presumptively natural family groupings of kinship.34 We can hear the stresses inherent in this shift in McMorris’s indignant response to Fluellen’s reference to his “nation”—“Of my nation? What ish my nation? Ish a villain and a bastard and a knave and a rascal? What ish my nation? Who talks of my nation?” (Henry V, 3.3.61–63)—where language, ancestry, and place-origin may all be sus-
pected of pulling against the political and territorial unity of the nation, “our nation,” that Henry V would like to achieve against the French. Jews provide an interesting test case for the idea of a nation as it migrates from a kinship-based to a land-based collectivity; perhaps it is not fortuitous that the tale of the Wandering Jew is reinvented or consolidated, and becomes newly popular, at a time when nationhood was increasingly consolidated and increasingly identified with country—that is, with land boundaries. For Jews famously constitute a “nation” of blood (Shylock himself uses the term three times to describe his fellow Jews in Merchant, and his use is perfectly consistent with Foxe’s references to the “nation” of the Jews in his Sermon), and they equally famously have no land; indeed, Shylock’s “countrymen” Chus and Tubal trace the routes of Jewish diaspora through Spain and northern Africa—the secondary “dispersal” that has the effect of undoing the first “beginning of cities, coutres, and nations” for them. Whatever Jessica’s intention—perhaps her use of the term coming so soon after Bassanio pointedly welcomes his “countrymen” but not her (3.2.222) registers her desire for something so normal as a country?—the naming of these two as Shylock’s “countrymen” has the effect of underscoring Shylock’s countrylessness: of what country could these three be countrymen?

The landless status of the “nation” of the Jews presents an implicit challenge to the emerging idea of a land-based nationhood: if a nation is not a nation of blood, then what exactly is it? We might hear a hint of uneasiness about land-based nationhood in Foxe’s repeated taunting of the Jews for their “fantasticall hope of a terrene kingdome”; the uneasiness in Foxe’s attacks on Jewish pride in ancestry—a topic to which Foxe returns in the Sermon as though it were a persistent itch or a scab—is much more audible, and much more understandable, given not only the period’s generalized fascination with genealogies but also Elizabeth’s own dubious ancestry. At one point in his Sermon he mimics the voice of an imagined Jew: “Will ye see back to your rotten wormeaten poesies? we are the seede of Abraham. . . . well may we wander, but we can never perish. The holy Patriarches are our progenitours: we are the yssue of an holy roote” (Eiv). Foxe has to make up imaginary Jews in his church audience to be the butt of his attacks on Jewish pride in ancestry; in effect, Shakespeare obligingly makes one up for him in Merchant. Shylock refers to Jacob or “our holy Abram” (1.3.68) as though they were his near kin, pointedly using the name of the patriarch before he became Abraham and father to all nations; for him, “nationhood” rests securely in the continuity of the “tribe” to which he belongs, a term that he uses interchangeably with “nation” (see 1.3.46, 52, 106). And though “tribe” is more subject to derogation than “nation”—even Shylock uses it with an odd mix of contempt and irony when he conceals his plan for revenge under the claim that “suff’rance is the badge of all my tribe” (1.3.106), with its allusion to the badge Jews were forced to wear—the word in his mouth unmistakably serves to register not only the blood-kinship of the Jews but more particularly their derivation from the tribes of Israel and hence their claim.
to a nationhood based in ancestry. Against the newer sense of nationhood as attached to what Foxe would call a “terrene kingdom,” Shylock poses a claim to an older nationhood of blood and ancestry: an apparently self-contained nationhood through time that mere dispossession from the land—mere “wandering,” as Foxe’s imaginary Jew would have it—is not able to destroy.

And like Foxe’s imaginary Jew, Shylock poses a blood claim not only to nationhood but specifically to “sacred” nationhood, the term Shylock introduces early in the play (1.3.48) in contestation of the Christian understanding of Jewish history. Jewish landlessness had long been read as God’s punishment for the Jews’ stiff-necked refusal of Christ and thus as the sign that the promise has passed from Jew to gentile, the sign that “the nations”—or “us Gentiles,” as Foxe repeatedly calls them—have replaced the sacred nation of the Jews as God’s chosen people. Foxe reads it this way, and Foxe’s converted Jew Nathanael (formerly Yehuda) signals his conversion by reading it the same way in the opening of his “Confession,” appended to Foxe’s Sermon. But if the landless status of the “nation” of the Jews presents an implicit challenge to the emerging idea of a land-based nationhood, it presents a particular challenge to the idea of sacred nationhood as it might be embodied in the newly emergent nations. While I don’t want to claim that anyone in Shakespeare’s audience would have been likely to take Shylock’s claim to sacred nationhood as anything other than another sign of his benightedness, his claim opens the idea up to question: if the “sacred nation” status of the Jews was originally based in kinship, what is the status of new claims to sacred nationhood? and if Jewish dispossession and dispersal is indeed the sign that the promise has passed to “us Gentiles,” what exactly is the relation between “the nations” of the gentiles and the nations that were gradually taking shape in Europe within land boundaries?

The narrative of the dispersal of nations could provide some comforting answers to both these questions, in effect shoring up the transfer of sacred nationhood to the gentiles—and specifically to the European nations—in a period when religious difference was increasingly defined in national terms. Genesis 10 grounds the founding of the individual nations in kinship and identifies the descendants of Japheth with the gentiles (10:5 specifies, “Of these were the yses of the Gentiles deuided in their landes”); as Biblical commentaries and national histories became increasingly determined to find the origin of the European nations in Japheth’s line, “the Gentiles”—originally all the non-Jewish nations taken together—were increasingly defined as the European nations. Though John Calvin is a bit impatient about attempts to trace the genealogy of each of the nations from Noah’s progeny (“some interpreters haue not unprofitably spent their labour and travell herein,” but “it seemeth to be vaine curiositie, to secke for seuerall nations in euyry name”), he nonetheless suggests what is at stake in these attempts when he concludes his commentary on “yses of the Gentiles” with “whereby we gather that we sprang from those nations”: his generalized pride in his Japhetic lineage is unmistakeable, and his “we” perfectly reflects the ambiguity of “Gentiles” as it shifts from
its original signification to the more exclusive category of a specifically European Christianity. And if the “Gentiles” who are Japheth’s descendants are the European nations, then Genesis 9’s famous prophecy that Japheth will “dwell in the tentes of Shem” (9:27)—a prophecy widely understood to refer to the transfer of the promise from Shem’s line to Japheth’s—has the effect of grounding this transfer in both blood-lineage and political nationhood, thus in effect trumping Shylock’s claim to sacred nationhood on both counts.

If the narrative of the dispersal of nations had the potential to shore up the universalizing tendencies of Paul’s “one blood” claim, it also had the potential to make religious triumphalism one with nationalist triumphalism—especially perhaps in England, where the head of the state was also the head of the church. And as Christian identity is increasingly grounded nationally rather than supranationally, in secure possession of “a terrene kingdome” or its equivalent, Jewish blood increasingly becomes the mark of what cannot be assimilated into that identity, in Spain or (Merchant suggests) in England; and Jewish countrylessness—the loss of “Israel”—becomes increasingly available as the great counter-example against which national/religious identity can be measured. While Foxe himself in the Sermon does not mistake earthly kingdoms for the spiritual kingdom of God, his mockery of the Jews for their “fantasicall hope of a terrene kingdome” inevitably functions partly in the service of a specifically English triumphalism, of a piece with Queen Elizabeth’s representation of herself as head of the new “sacred nation” that replaces Shylock’s—as specifically “the nursing mother of Israel.”

But what sort of sacred collectivity can be based in land boundaries? If England is a new sacred nation founded in a terrain kingdom, how is it constituted? And what are its boundaries under the new dispensation in which nationhood—like Christianity—is potentially open to all? If Shylock’s blood suggests one sort of danger in response to these questions, Antonio’s body seems to me to suggest another. At one crucial moment, Antonio explains that his body is open to Shylock’s knife as a consequence of Venice’s “openness” to strangers: the Duke cannot overrule Shylock, Antonio tells Solanio,

For the commodity that strangers have
With us in Venice, if it be denied,
Will much impeach the justice of the state,
Since that the trade and profit of the city
Consisteth of all nations.

(3.3.27–31)

Antonio’s use of “nations” here hovers between the old and the new dispensation: though it still carries the meaning of kinship groups and hence is equivalent to strangers or foreigners, his sequence of terms—commodity, state, trade, profit, nations—implies a political economy in which states exist to insure trade conditions among “nations” conceived as political and economic units. By the end of his
speech, Antonio’s “strangers” have in effect become foreign nationals whose trade interests must be protected by the state. But nations so conceived are dangerously porous, dangerously subject to the strangers in their midst: the exigencies of trade are a threat to the national body, epitomized here by Antonio’s body, which must be subject to Shylock’s knife precisely to keep open the trade routes by which he and the state thrive. Like Venice itself, with all nations mingling in its markets, the thoroughfares of Antonio’s body are subject to the invasion of others who cannot be kept at bay. This is the danger of the newly modern nation, its porous boundaries no longer defined by kinship and race, its blood no longer intact.

The virginal realm of Belmont would appear to be the antidote to this danger. Though strangers from all nations come to it in a barely idealized imitation of Venice’s merchants—they are all Jasons seeking the fleece (1.2.172)—they are quickly dispatched without damage to this enclosed body. And if they read like a catalog drawn from Shylock’s kinsmen and the dispersal of nations, it is the work—and what passes for the wit—of the first Belmont scenes in effect to ratify not their one blood but the differences between them, to dispatch them for us cleanly in a group while identifying each as reassuringly distinct from the others. And although Portia’s dismissive stereotyping of them creates the illusion that she is doing the patrology of her own boundaries, we all know that her father’s will is operating behind the scenes, maintaining fidelity to a kinship line and eventually enabling just the right amount of exogamy in Bassanio. What a satisfying fantasy of England this is, with its virgin queen and its bloodlines protected by the operations of a father absent but still mysteriously efficacious; and no wonder Portia is so unwilling to recognize Jessica’s entrance into her realm. For Jessica brings with her exactly that muddying of bloodlines that is deflected by Portia’s banter and her father’s will—a fact that the play half-acknowledges in one of its most peculiar moments. Lancelot has been reassuring himself (in the lines cited at the beginning of this essay) that Jessica will be Jewish as long as her father is Jewish, in effect that her marriage to Lorenzo will not convert her blood; and when Jessica reports on this conversation to Lorenzo, adding Lancelot’s charge that he is damaging the commonwealth by converting Jews to Christians, Lorenzo answers by accusing Lancelot of his own damage to the commonwealth: “I shall answer that better to the commonwealth than you can the getting up of the Negro’s belly. The Moor is with child by you, Lancelot” (3.5.33). How does this Moor get into Belmont? We have not met her before; she is apparently produced through a handy-dandy retort structure that makes marrying Jessica and impregnating the Moor equivalent terms. Emblematically, if not literally, then, she appears to have been let in by Jessica by the back door, as though the category-confusions and blood-mixtures attendant upon Jessica’s marriage and conversion were contagious and had reawakened the specter deflected in the person of Morocco—or as though the danger to the realm required that Jessica herself needed to be collapsed into the category of the Moor in order to stabilize her vanishing difference, like her father before her.
The move to ground Jewish difference in the apparently immutable and visible category of race rather than the mutable and invisible category of religion anticipates Shakespeare’s turn to his next play about conversion, where a Moor remains reassuringly black whether or not he is Christianized. But even without this turn, Merchant has its own way of grounding difference and protecting the commonwealth—and given that Portia represents something like the principle of the enclosed state, it is fitting that the task of maintaining boundaries falls to her. I have suggested that Antonio’s body subject to Shylock’s knife epitomizes the boundary-dangers of the new hybrid nation, no longer a nation of blood and perforce permeable by strangers. But this image of the nation vulnerable at its borders maps uncannily onto the central icon of a universal Christianity in 4.1, where the vulnerability of Antonio’s body to the Jew’s knife makes him briefly a type of Christ. The flickering between the images—for Antonio’s threatened body cannot represent both at once—may serve to underscore the tension between the new mercantile state that would become a “sacred nation” and the old dream of “all nations, ... acknowledging one Shepherde, united together in one sheepefold, ... with one voice, one soule, and one generall argreement, glorifying the only begotton sonne.” In the face of this unifying dream, Merchant rushes to reinstate the differences of blood, first through an allusion to the founding moment of Jewish blood-difference and then through Portia’s legal ploy. “My deeds upon my head!” Shylock says (4.1.201), echoing the cry long attributed to his ancestors—“His blood be on vs, and on our children” (Matthew 27:25)—to which the Geneva gloss adds, “and as they wished, so this curse taketh place to this day.” And in a response that simultaneously insists on the integrity of protonational states and ratifies the blood-difference between Jew and Christian, Portia saves the day and the integrity of Antonio’s body by citing not only the absence of blood in Shylock’s contract and the law that protects citizens from aliens (4.1.344–46) but also the law against shedding specifically Christian blood (4.1.305)—the blood that inevitably excluded Jessica and her father, like the conversos of London, from Foxe’s dream.

Notes

I am very pleased to have this oppurtunity to honor Paul Alpers, not only for his enor-mously generative work but also for the enormous intellectual generosity he has always extended to others. I have long been the beneficiary of that generosity. This essay is far too provisional to be any kind of return for that great gift; I nonetheless dedicate it to him.

2. *The Merchant of Venice* 3.5.4–9. All references are to *The Norton Shakespeare*, General Editor Stephen Greenblatt (New York, 1997), unless otherwise noted; *Merchant* is edited by Katharine Eisaman Maus.

3. The presence of a community of conversos in London had long been known to Anglo-Jewish historians and should have been brought into mainstream Shakespeare studies by C. L. Sisson’s essay, “A Colony of Jews in Shakespeare’s London,” *Essays and Studies* 23 (1938): 41–51. Although G. K. Hunter’s 1964 essay “The Theology of Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta*,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 27 (1964): 211–40 cites Sisson’s, Hunter’s claim that “the whole Elizabethan frame of reference discouraged racial thinking” (215) seems to have blinded him to the presence of “racial” Jews in London and had the effect of assuring that Sisson’s essay was consigned to the critical dustbin; it, together with the conversos, has recently been retrieved by James Shapiro’s wonderfully informative *Shakespeare and the Jews* (New York, 1996). In fairness to Hunter, it’s worth noting that his widely influential claim that Judaism was a theological rather than a racial category for the Elizabethans (216) may have been in part a response to Hitler’s racialization of the Jews; certainly “Judaism is a religion, not a race” was a mantra of my youth.

4. Quarto 1, Quarto 2, and the First Folio all have “do”; for convenience’s sake, I will refer to the line in these editions as Lancelot’s pun, and the Second Folio’s variant as F2’s reading. The Arden edition of *Merchant* notes, “If F2’s ‘did’ is accepted, get is used for beget, as in III.v.9”; Arden *Merchant*, ed. John Russell Brown (London, 1988), 46.

5. John 3:3. As with all subsequent citations from the Bible, this one is from *The Geneva Bible: A Facsimile of the 1560 Edition* (Madison, Wisc., 1969). Nicodemus’s literalist answer—“How can a man be born which is old? can he enter into his mothers womb and be born?” (John 3:4)—emphasizes the peculiarity of the image, and the literalist imagination behind Lancelot’s insistence.

6. Norton appears to be alone in substituting “gentile” for “gentle,” a substitution that does not have the authority of Folio or Quarto 1, Norton’s usual authority, though it does appear in Quarto 2. In proximity to “Jew,” as at 1.3.173 and 4.1.33, “gentle” virtually always carries the residue of “gentile.” Arden notes that “the words were not completely distinguished in spelling at this time” (49); its note to 2.4.34 calls gentle “a pun on Gentile” and directs the reader to Graziano’s use of gentle here. Though Norton’s substitution of F2’s “gentile” for the more familiar “gentle” does not appear to have much textual authority on its side, normative usage as well as the implied opposition between gentle and Jew suggest that Shakespeare’s audience would have heard “a gentile” at least as readily as “a gentle” in Graziano’s line. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*), Compact Edition (Oxford, 1971), s.v. “gentle,” notes that the use of “gentle” as a substantive in the singular (“a gentle”) is rare (see definition B.1); it is in fact never used as a substantive in the singular elsewhere in Shakespeare. Since “gentile” can function easily as a substantive in the singular, “a gentile” would appear to be a more familiar formulation than “a gentle.”

7. The *OED*, s.v. “stranger,” in fact lists these latter meanings as dominant in the period: it gives as the first definition for stranger “one who belongs to another country, a foreigner; chiefly (now exclusively), one who resides in or comes to a country to which he is a foreigner; an alien.” The second definition similarly emphasizes nonnativesness over lack of familiarity; the sixth is “a person not of one’s kin; more fully, stranger in blood.” (The latter gives added richness to Lear’s proclaiming Cordelia “stranger’d with our oath,” “a stranger to my heart and me” [1.1.204, 1.1.115]; he is proclaiming her not only exiled and unrecognizable, but also not of his blood. Cordelia is thus one with
her sisters, whose filial disobedience counts for Lear as evidence of their mother’s infidelity.)

8. See, for example, Sisson, “A Colony” 51.

9. The claim that racism as we know it could not exist until the development of the full intellectual apparatus that supported it in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is often made; see, for example, Ivan Hannaford’s Race: The History of an Idea in the West (Washington, D.C., 1996). Though this claim seems to be axiomatically true, the trouble with such claims is that they are often used to make certain kinds of questions unaskable. Hannaford himself suggests that the idea of race “was cobbled together as a pre-idea from a wide variety of vestigial sources during the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries” (8), which would appear to make the period in which Merchant was written decisive for its development; see esp. his chapter 6, “New Methods, New Worlds, and the Search for Origins,” which deals in part with the sixteenth-century “pre-ideas”—several of them clustered in the decades immediately before and after Merchant—on which later concepts of race drew. Hannaford’s insistence that “race” in this period generally referred to the ancient lineage of kings and bishops (see, e.g., 147) and more particularly his claim that “race” in Foxe always has this meaning (155) is contradicted by evidence cited in note 37 as well as by the quotation that opens this essay. But whatever the precise status of the term “race” in this period, Jewish difference had long been expressed in a language of (usually immutable) physical difference that mapped very easily onto emerging concepts of race. For recent literary studies that contest the claim that “race” was not a conceptual category in the early modern period, see, for example, Kim Hall’s “Reading What Isn’t There: ‘Black’ Studies in Early Modern England,” Stanford Humanities Review 3 (Winter 1993): 23–33, expanded in Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England (Ithaca, 1995) and several of the essays collected in Women, “Race,” and Writing in the Early Modern Period, ed. Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker (London, 1994), esp. Dympna Callaghan’s “Re-Reading Elizabeth Cary’s The Tragedie of Miriam, Faire Queene of Jewry,” 163–77, and Verena Stolcke, Invaded Women: Gender, Race, and Class in the Formation of Colonial Society, 272–86, both of which specifically address the racializing of the Jews.

10. OED, s.v. “gentile,” notes the word’s derivation from the Vulgate and lists as its first meaning “Of or pertaining to all of the nations other than the Jewish.” Though it could also mean “heathen, pagan” in the period (see OED, definition A.2), in proximity to “Jew,” it functions protoracially, to distinguish Jews from non-Jews.


15. For the foetor judaicus, see, e.g., Joshua Trachtenberg, The Devil and the Jews (1943; reprint, Philadelphia, 1983), 48–50. Shapiro, Shakespeare and the Jews, characterizes belief in this hereditary smell as “unusually persistent” in England (36). Katz also comments that “it was a universally accepted fact that Jews had a peculiar smell, an odour which was not dissipated by baptism, but was instead a racial characteristic”; Jews in the History of England, 108. Not quite universal perhaps; see Shapiro’s account of Thomas Browne’s wrestling with this issue in Shakespeare and the Jews, 37, 172. For the imposition of distinctive clothing, see, e.g., Trachtenberg, Devil and the Jews, 44–46; or Léon Polia- kov, The History of Anti-Semitism from the Time of Christ to the Court Jews, trans. Richard
Howard (New York, 1974), 64–67. Cecil Roth claims that the Lateran IV regulations, including the wearing of the badge, were enforced more rigorously in England than elsewhere; *A History of the Jews in England* (Oxford, 1941), 76, 95. It is a commonplace that the badges were necessary because, despite the physical stereotypes, Jews were not readily distinguishable without them. See, e.g., John Edwards, *The Jews in Europe, 1400–1700* (London, 1988), 23; Poliakov, *History of Anti-Semitism*, 93; and Roth, *History of the Jews*, 95. Here, for example, is a description of William Anes, one of the London Sephardic community: “He is a young fellow of twenty, well built, with a fair and handsome face and a small fair beard”; cited in Wolf, “Jews in Elizabethan England,” 16. Since this description is written by a Spaniard to a Spaniard, its standard for light skin and hair may be different from an English standard; nonetheless, it strongly suggests that Jews were not necessarily physically distinct from their English hosts.

16. F.W. Maitland, “The Deacon and Jewess; or, Apostasy at Common Law,” *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England* 6 (London, 1912), 261–62. Presumably these regulations went into abeyance once Jews themselves were exiled; but knowledge of them—and of the case that motivated them—may have been common in Shakespeare’s time. Maitland comments that “the old law-books were being put into print” at the beginning of Elizabeth’s reign, and “everyone could read . . . how Langton burnt a deacon who turned Jew for love, and the love of a Jewess” (276); specifically they could read about it in Holinshed, who reports on a deacon who “was accused to be an apostate, and for the love of a woman that was a Jew, he had circumcised himselfe”; see Holinshed’s *Chronicles, England, Scotland and Ireland* (London, 1807), 2: 351–52.

17. See Trachtenberg, *Devil and the Jews*, 48–50, for stories about the disappearance of *foetor judaicus* at baptism.


19. Friedman, “Jewish Conversion,” 16–18 passim; emphasis in the original.

20. Particularly in combination with “seed,” which refers to semen as well as offspring, the genealogical thrust of “deriv’d” is clear; see, e.g., *Two Gentlemen of Verona* 5.2.23, *Midsummer Night’s Dream* 1.1.99, or *Henry V* 1.1.90, for normative Shakespearean uses of “deriv’d” in the genealogical sense. Norton obscures the concern with blood-lineage here by glossing “deriv’d” as “gained.”


23. *The Apologie or Defence, of the Most Noble Prince William* (Delft, 1581), *STC* #15209, reel #240, O2r. The *Coppie of the Anti-Spaniard* (London, 1590), *STC* #684, reel #304, calls the King of Spain “this demie Moore, demie Jew, yea demie Saracine” (9).

24. See especially Mary Janell Metzger, who argues that Jessica’s “multiplicitous nature . . . can illuminate how Shakespeare may have struggled with competing notions of Jewishness circulating in early modern England and how he worked to resolve them by creating not one Jew but two”: Jessica to sustain the universal promise of conversion to Christianity and Shylock to sustain the idea of an England founded on nascent racial identity; “‘Now by My Hood, a Gentle and No Jew’: Jessica, *The Merchant of Venice*, and the Discourse of Early Modern English Identity,” *PMLA* 113 (1998): 52–63; the quotation is from 53. I encountered this fine essay in an early form when I was working on many of the same materials and found it very helpful to my own thinking about these issues. Critics often construe Jessica as more “convertible” than her father (see,
e.g., Kim Hall, “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner? Colonization and Miscegenation in The Merchant of Venice,” Renaissance Drama, n.s., 23 [1992]: 102–4) and therefore by implication as “less racialized” than he is (Callaghan, “Re-reading,” 170). But often the mark of difference in arguments that distinguish between Jessica and Shylock in these arguments is circumcision rather than inheritable racial characteristics; see, e.g., Shapiro, Shakespeare and the Jews, 132. Lynda Boose uses circumcision specifically to trouble the association between racial difference and skin color in “The Getting of a Lawful Race: Racial Discourse in Early Modern England and the Unrepresentable Black Woman,” in Hendricks and Parker, Women, “Race,” and Writing in the Early Modern Period, 40–41.


26. Metzger’s reading of “fair” Jessica’s escape into Christianity is more optimistic than mine. In her view, “her whiteness and femaleness make possible her reproduction as a Christian in the eyes of the ‘commonwealth,’ ” in part because her “conversion from dark infidel to fair Christian is required by the play’s ideology of order through marriage”; “Now by My Hood,” 57. This play seems to me to put nearly as much strain on the idea of order through marriage as on the idea of conversion.

27. This has become something of a critical commonplace. See, for example, Metzger, “Now by My Hood,” 55; Shapiro, Shakespeare and the Jews, 7, 171; and Hall, “Guess,” 100–101. Kim F. Hall also cites an instance from 1600 in Things of Darkness (Ithaca, 1995), 39. Sander Gilman asserts that “the association of the Jew with blackness is as old as Christian tradition”; Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness (Ithaca, 1985), 31; whether or not the assertion was as invariable as he suggests, the strong association between Jew and Moor as the two great alien populations in Spain probably increased its force.

28. Folio’s “Chus” is followed by most editors; Norton’s “Cush” does not appear to have textual warrant. But the spellings appear to have been interchangeable: John Calvin’s commentary on Genesis 10, for example, has “Cush” in the text quoted from the Bible, and “Chus” in the commentary; A Commentarie of John Caluine, upon the first booke of Moses called Genesis, trans. Thomas Tymme (London, 1578), STC #4393, reel #488, 240. Commentators followed Josephus in making Chus ancestor of the Ethiopians; Flavius Josephus, The Antiquities of the Jews, book 1 (1736; reprint, Peabody, Mass., 1987), 37. See, for example, the Geneva Bible’s gloss on Genesis 10:6, or Nicholas Gibbon, Questions and Disputations Concerning the Holy Scripture (London, 1601), STC #11814, reel #1380, 410. For Calvin, “It is certeine that this Chus was the Prince of the Aethiopians”; Commentarie, 240. This is not obscure knowledge: Arnold Williams notes that “Cush, Mizraim, and Caanan among the sons of Ham are quite well known as names of the Ethiopians, the Egyptians, and the Caanonites”; The Common Expositor: An Account of the Commentaries on Genesis, 1527–1633 (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1948), 160. Critics interested in race frequently note Shylock’s surprising countryman, usually by way of positing an association between blackness and Jewishness; see, for example, Hall, “Guess,” 101; Shapiro, Shakespeare and the Jews, 172; and Metzger, “Now by My Hood,” 55.

29. William Warner, Albions England (Hildesheim, 1971), table and 1. This division was commonplace, though it was under pressure from the discovery of new lands. See, e.g., Holinshed’s attempt to reconcile these discoveries with the old tripartite division; Holinshed’s Chronicles (New York, 1965), 1, 2–4.

30. See Colin Kidd’s extensive analysis of “the Mosaic foundations of early modern Euro-
pean identity” as based on Genesis 10 in *British Identities Before Nationalism: Ethnicity and Nationhood in the Atlantic World, 1600–1800* (Cambridge, 1999), esp. 9–72; Kidd cites Gibbon’s wonderfully dismissive comment: “On a narrow basis of acknowledged truth, an immense but rude superstructure of fable has been erected; and the wild Irishman, as well as the wild Tartar, could point out the individual son of Japhet from whose loins his ancestors were lineally descended” (9–10). Half a century ago, Arnold Williams noted that “In nearly all the works on English history and antiquities, one finds fairly extensive treatments of this matter. Raleigh, Drayton, Warner, Purchas, and Heylyn all devote greater or lesser space to ascertaining which of the Gentile people sprang from which of the descendants of Japheth”; *Common Expositor*, 155.

31. Josephus had the figure he calls Thobel founding “the Thobelites, who are now called Iberes”; *Antiquities*, 36. The misidentification of “Iberes” with Spain caused most later commentators to consider Tubal the progenitor of the Spanish; see Williams, *Common Expositor*, 157–58. The Spanish themselves proudly claimed Tubal as their ancestor and rested their claim to antiquity and pure blood on him; see Marc Shell, “Marranos (Pigs), or From Coexistence to Toleration,” *Critical Inquiry* 17 (1991): 311. In the hands of at least one anti-Spanish propagandist, this ancestry should be no cause for pride: “It is certaine that Spaine is of great antiquitie, bearing that name vnder the first Monarchie; but when we shall consider the significations of her and of her first inhabitant, we shall find her age no ornament . . . but a great deformitie considering her incommodities, and pernure qualities of that people all naturall defects being made more imperfect by continuance or alteration of times. [Spain] was not long after the diuision of tongues first inhabited by the third sonne of Iaphet named Iobel or Tubal, signifying worldly, or of the world, confusion and ignominie”; Edward Daunce, *A Briefe Discourse of the Spanish State* (London, 1590), *STC* #6291, reel #880, Blr. Daunce in fact organizes his entire condemnation of Spain according to the various wicked characteristics associated etymologically with Tubal.


33. He laments, “And thus was this Iland bereft at on time both of hir ancient name, and also of hir lawfull succession of princes descended of the line of Japhet”; *Chronicles*, 6–7, 9. Kidd, *British Identities Before Nationalism*, stresses the “one blood” interpretation as part of his general claim that “beneath the superficial variety of mankind early modern literati sought a hypothesized and Biblically authorized unity” (289) and that therefore neither racialist nor nationalist thinking were prominent in the period.

34. As with the concept of race, the full development of the concept of the nation came well after the early modern period; but (again, as with race) the early modern period is in many ways the crucible out of which a proclamationalist is formed. E. J. Hobsbawm, for example, thinks that the characteristically modern nation-state was “in many ways anticipated by the evolving European principalities of the sixteenth–seventeenth century” and finds in Shakespeare’s history plays “something close to modern patriotism”; *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge, 1990), 80, 75. The OED notes in its first definition of “nation” that “in early examples, the racial idea is usually stronger than the political”; the first citation in which the political sense appears to be decisively present is from 1538.

35. The phrase is Canterbury’s, but his worry lest “our nation lose / The name of hardiness and policy” (1.2.219–20) reflects the national unity that Henry—and the play—apparently wish to achieve.

36. For this consolidation, see, for example, Richard Helgerson’s magisterial account of the
transition from “universal Christendom, to dynastic state, to land-centered nation” as it is reflected in the work of early modern cartographers and chorographers; “The Land Speaks,” 107–47, in his Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England (Chicago, 1992); the phrase cited occurs on 120. The precise moment when the various legends concerning wandering coalesced into the story of the Wandering Jew is hard to determine, but there seems to be some agreement that the story either took its definitive form or got a new lease on life in the early seventeenth century. Poliakov dates its spread through Europe from 1602, when The Brief Account and Description of a Jew Named Ahasuerus first appeared “and enjoyed tremendous popularity”; “within the year [it] went through eight editions in German [and] was quickly translated into every European language”; History of Anti-Semitism, 183, 242. George K. Anderson’s extensive study cites a variety of early forms of the legend, not all of them associated with Jews, and concludes that the Reformation and fears of the Antichrist gave the legend a new impetus after 1550. He too finds the publication of the German pamphlet in 1602 the decisive event in the resurgence of the legend’s popularity; The Legend of the Wandering Jew (Providence, R.I., 1965), 41–42. Anderson reports on his discovery of a 1620 English prose version of the legend in manuscript, which alludes to a number of early-seventeenth-century sightings of the legendary figure and reports that “all the countrie was full of Ballads, expressing the same” (63–65). Venetia Newall locates its beginnings in the thirteenth century, “when mass expulsions of the Jews from Western Europe were in progress,” but she too reports on renewed interest in the early modern period, noting that “during the sixteenth century there were reports of visits by the Wandering Jew from the leading cities of Europe,” including “local variants . . . collected in Britain”; “The Jew as a Witch Figure,” in The Witch Figure, ed. Venetia Newall (London, 1973), 98. Shapiro cites the return of the legend to England in the early seventeenth century in connection with his discussion of the puzzling national status of the Jews; see Shakespeare and the Jews, 174–77. Whenever it began, the legend does not appear to have been widespread in the Middle Ages, despite the old association of Jews with the wandering Cain; perhaps it took not only the Reformation and fears of the Antichrist but also a national identity attached to land for the legend to reach its full force in the popular imagination.

37. See Merchant, 1.3.43, 3.1.48, and 3.1.73, and Foxe, Sermon, Biiiiv, Bivr, Ciiiiv, and Liiiiv; in each of these instances, Foxe uses “nation” in close proximity to “race” and seems to regard them as equivalent terms.

38. This phrase is from Foxe, Sermon, Civ.

39. For Foxe’s assaults on Jewish pride in ancestry, see, for example, Sermon, Civiiv and Ciivi.

40. This was still one of the dominant associations of the word in English: OED, s.v. “tribe,” notes that the word enters English through this Biblical usage and retains this association for some time. See OED’s first definition (“a group of persons forming a community and claiming descent from a common ancestor; spec. each of the twelve divisions of the people of Israel, claiming descent from the twelve sons of Jacob”), which is followed by many medieval and Renaissance examples.

41. Foxe uses the phrase “us Gentiles” with notable pride, e.g., at Sermon, Aiiiv and Aivr, because he is speaking on the authority of Paul, Apostle to the Gentiles (Aiiv); in this context, “the nations” and “the Gentiles” are interchangeable terms.

42. The Confession of Faith, which Nathanael A Jew Borne, Made Before the Congregation in the Parish Church of Alhallowes, appended to Foxe, Sermon, Biv–Biiiv.

43. See Williams, Common Expositor, 155.

44. Calvin, Commentarie, 238, 240.
45. For Foxe’s insistence that God’s mercy is not the inheritance of any one nation, see, e.g., Sermon, Kiiir or Kviv; at least in the Sermon, this insistence seems to be more in the service of displacing Jewish claims than of opening the kingdom of God up to all “people, nations, and tongues, whether they be Jewes, or Gentiles, Scythians or Indians” (Kiiir). William Haller’s claim in Foxe’s Book of Martyrs and the Elect Nation (London, 1963) that Foxe played a central role in the ideology identifying England as an “elect nation” has recently been challenged; see, e.g., Helgerson, Forms of Nationhood, 263. Helgerson nonetheless concedes that Foxe “grants England a quite extraordinary place in the universal scheme” (263) and “contributes to the making of a specifically English community of faith” (268).

46. Cited in Haller, Foxe’s Book of Martyrs, 245.

47. Kim Hall puts this moment at the center of her reading of Merchant as a commentary on “growing concerns over English national identity and culture as England develops political and economic ties with foreign (and ‘racially’ different) nations”; “Guess,” 88–89; though our emphases are somewhat different, I am very much indebted to this essay.

48. In Shakespeare’s England, if not in Belmont, it may have been literally: at least some of the Moors in England appear to have arrived as servants to the conversos. See Wolf’s description of the household of Hector Nunez, which consisted, in 1582, of “his wife, three clerks, a butler, and two negresses”; “Jews in Elizabethan England,” 9. These or other “blackamoors” were apparently still there in the 1590s, when Thomas Wilson’s account to the Court of Chancery of secret Jewish practices in that household relied on what “their blackamoors which they kept told me”; Sisson, “Colony of Jews,” 45. Sisson reports of another converso household (that of Ferdinand Alvarez, one of the merchants in his Chancery Court case) that in 1594 it included “his wife Philippa, a widow Anne Alvarez, Alvarez de Lima and his wife, his servant Thomas Wilson, two other servants, Lewis Alvarez and Grace Anegro, and several blackamoors” (45). Does Grace Anegro’s name contain the hint that racial mixing of the kind Lancelot engages in had already occurred in this household?