

## A Modern Lycaon: Recalling Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* in *The Merchant of Venice*

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### Abstract

*The article examines the role of “wolvish” characteristics and their association with Jewish identity in Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice. Scholars have long noted the tendency of non-Jewish characters in the play to identify Shylock as canine. But this canine character, although fixed in its essence to Shylock, never remains the same, fluctuating between the various designations of “dog,” “cur,” and “wolf.” The essay argues that whereas the “dog” and “cur” designations function as manifestations of Christian typological thinking, the description of Shylock as a “wolf” belongs in a mythic view of humans and their place in the world. Thus, in The Merchant of Venice it is not only the human-animal distinction that remains unstable, but also the category of the “animal” itself. At stake is the accommodation of two different conceptions of animality: one belonging in Christian typology, and the other rooted in a mythical natural history. The distinction between these different categories, far from being trivial, has political, legal, and theological implications.*

### Shylock as a Wolf

### A State of “Nature”

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### Shylock as a Wolf

Since his appearance in *The Merchant of Venice* in the late sixteenth century, Shylock has remained a paradigmatic “Jewish” figure that continues, even today,

to haunt the Western cultural imagination. Shylock is a distinctly “modern” figure in the sense that, as a Jew, he lives among the Gentiles without renouncing his religious faith and ethnic identity. This state of affairs, not generally available to Jews in medieval Europe, is presented in the play as the outcome of Venetian civil law which protects the commercial rights of both parties in a business transaction, whether they be citizens or legal aliens. As Julia Lupton noted, when two parties sign a bond or contract in the “limited yet economically essential public space defined by ‘trade and profit’,”<sup>1</sup> it does not matter whether they are Jewish or Christian, Venetian or foreign. In this sense, Venetian civil law functions in the play as a distinctly modern institution, an early form of capitalism in which the legality of the business contract overrides the authority of sovereign decision. Thus, although Shylock’s civic liberties remain sharply circumscribed in the Venetian polity—he is neither a citizen nor a legal resident—his money lending activities nevertheless place him at the heart of Venetian economy, albeit as a barely suffered foreign element.<sup>2</sup> In this context, Shylock’s unusual yet perfectly legal demand to be paid his bond in human flesh poses an unprecedented challenge for the Venetian polity: namely, how to suppress the cannibalistic potential inherent in capitalism itself, and personified by the “Jew” with his unreasonable demands and merciless business ethics. When considered in these terms, “Jewish” moneylending in *The Merchant of Venice* does not only portend the subversion of Christian morality by new economic means. The problem that Shylock poses for the Venetian polity is fundamentally a political one, since by virtue of a contractual bond that grants him the right of decision over the life of a Venetian citizen, the “Jew” effectively undermines the sovereign power of the State. To be sure, Shylock’s cannibalistic contract does not invalidate capitalism as such, but instead it exposes and isolates the dangerous elements inherent in nascent capitalist economy. As David Nirenberg observed, throughout the sixteenth century parties to such contracts were free to specify any mutually agreed-on penalty for nonperformance, with the result that “such bonds enabled penalties independent of—and sometimes grossly incommensurable with—the value of the debt.”<sup>3</sup> Thus

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<sup>1</sup> Julia R. Lupton, *Citizen-Saints: Shakespeare and Political Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 88.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>3</sup> David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York: Norton, 2013), 284-285.

the debt contract raised difficult questions concerning economic and political life in Shakespeare’s time:

Are there limits to the freedoms, the autonomies of soul and body, that can be alienated through contract? What legal practices, what ways of writing and reading contract and law, can help us determine these limits? [...] Shakespeare pushed these questions to their limits, not only by staging them as “Jewish questions” but also by posing the legal alienation of self in the extreme form of a carnivorous contract, one that explicitly equates three thousand ducats of Shylock’s gold with (on default) one pound of his Christian debtor’s flesh.<sup>4</sup>

Shylock’s carnivorous contract is evidently “Jewish” because, not unlike the rite of circumcision, it introduces a covenant for which one is required to pay with one’s own flesh.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, Shylock’s contract functions as a “limit case” of capitalism: a way of exploring the extreme implications of a society based on exchange.<sup>6</sup> More fundamentally, however, Shylock’s business contract only makes use of capitalism in order to attain a goal that has little to do with economic profit. Instead, Shylock’s insistence on the written word of the bond is presented in the play as part of a “Jewish” vengeful, cannibalistic desire for Christian flesh—a desire that, as Kathleen Biddick noted, belongs in the “bundles of fantasies that bind ‘Christian-ness’ to supersessionary notions” and that have determined the role of the “Jew” in the Christian typological imaginary.<sup>7</sup> By Shakespeare’s time, the representation of Jews as cannibals lusting for Christian flesh and blood already had a long cultural history, with allegations of Jewish cannibalism surfacing in Europe during the course of the thirteenth century. These allegations centered on the so-called “Jewish” practice of ritual murder of children, more commonly known as the “blood libel,” which engaged the attention of the highest authorities

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 285.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of circumcision in *The Merchant of Venice*, see also James Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 113-130; Lupton, *Citizen-Saints*, 87-101.

<sup>6</sup> Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism*, 286.

<sup>7</sup> Kathleen Biddick, *The Typological Imaginary: Circumcision, Technology, History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 1-21.

in Europe at the time, and helped transform the perception of Jews, as Robert Chazan noted, “from a theologically significant minority into a mortal danger, against which the Christian majority had to organize in self-defense.”<sup>8</sup> In an important study, Kenneth Stow has shown how the “Jewish” cannibalistic threat to Christian society came to be closely associated in the Christian typological imaginary with the figure of the dog. According to Stow, the dog-figure was often invoked in reference to the desecration of the eucharistic Host. Referring to Jesus’ words in Matthew 15:26, “it is not meet to take the children’s bread and cast it to the dogs,” early Christian commentators interpreted the verse as heralding a supersessionary fulfillment in which the historical roles of “dogs” and “children” were reversed. However, as Stow points out, the historical reality of supersession was not simply to be asserted, but also tirelessly defended against the encroachments of the “Jewish” dogs who were bent, in a figure of typological reversal, on reclaiming both the “bread” and the title of being the “children” for themselves.<sup>9</sup> By the late Middle Ages, this exegetical figure of the “Jewish” dog stealing the bread of Christian children had come to be understood in eucharistic terms as a desecration of the Host and the cannibalistic murder of Christian children. And with particular relevance to *The Merchant of Venice*, Stow notes that the payment of interest or penalty on contractual bonds was often equated in the Christian typological imaginary with eucharistic martyrdom. Jewish moneylenders were perceived as “dogs” stealing anew the eucharistic food of the “children” and “sucking” the blood of the Christian community which stood for the collective *Corpus Christi*.<sup>10</sup> As a figure of typological reversal, “Jewish” moneylending was thus perceived as an attempted inversion of the supersessionary fulfillment of the historical roles of “dogs” and “children.” Nevertheless, as we will see, the frequent designations of Shylock as an “inexcrable dog” and “stranger cur” in Shakespeare’s play are not confined to the realm of theological allegory. To begin with, the reference to dogs generally appears in Shakespeare’s work in negative connotations. As Laurie Shannon noted, the dog serves as Shakespeare’s

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Chazan, *Reassessing Jewish Life in Medieval Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 177.

<sup>9</sup> Kenneth Stow, *Jewish Dogs: An Image and Its Interpreters* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 4.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

“likeliest figure for revulsion and violent ejection from human company. [...] To be a dog is to suffer imminent condemnation or precipitous ejection from a community.”<sup>11</sup> As a social metaphor, the dog does not function in Shakespeare’s work as a figure for friendship or companionship—a relatively modern notion that gained hold with the emergence of pet-ownership in early modern England. Rather, as Bruce Boehrer pointed out, at stake is in an older and more deeply engrained identification of dogs “with slaves and other abject individuals, and the association of dogs with predatory outsiders.”<sup>12</sup> This dual role of the dog as a “tamed foe,” who serves both as an Opponent and Helper of the Christian faith, found its equivalent in the identification of “Jews” as witness-people whose hostile energy is harnessed for the defense of the Church. As Leonid Livak observed, “this trope treats dogs and wolves as two faces of the same animal, who can symbolize either a shepherd or a foe of Christ’s flock.”<sup>13</sup> Shylock, too, is generally considered among scholars in terms of the transition from “dog” to “wolf.” For example, Boehrer argued that the invectives against Shylock refigure him “not as domestic slave but rather as interloping carnivore; hence the smooth transformation of ‘dog’ into ‘cur’ into ‘wolf.’”<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Shannon noted that “the discourse of currishness in *Merchant* [...] [figures] a hostile insider, a quasi-citizen and familiar who turns predator within the community. [...] This currishness makes [Shylock] not just any dog, but a malicious one, and therefore no ordinary dog, but one to be prosecuted by the state.”<sup>15</sup> More recently, Jay Geller wrote that

because Jews were often found within the Gentile polis, they were more associated with those domesticated cousins of wolves, dogs. Not the good dogs—the noble hunting dogs that accompanied the aristocracy or that guarded the boundaries of the polis—but the bad dogs: shameless, servile,

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<sup>11</sup> Laurie Shannon, *The Accommodated Animal: Cosmopolitanism in Shakespearean Locales* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 241-243.

<sup>12</sup> Bruce Boehrer, “Shylock and the Rise of the Household Pet: Thinking Social Exclusion in The Merchant of Venice,” *Shakespeare Quarterly*, no. 2 (1999): 152-170, 163.

<sup>13</sup> Leonid Livak, *The Jewish Persona in The European Imagination: A Case of Russian Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 75.

<sup>14</sup> Boehrer, “Shylock and the Rise of the Household Pet,” 163.

<sup>15</sup> Shannon, *The Accommodated Animal*, 244-245.

and salacious curs. But the Jewish dog at times betrays the rapacious cruelty characteristic of another canid, the omega wolf.<sup>16</sup>

These interpretations grasp Shylock's transition from "dog" to "wolf" as a hallmark of his "Jewish" identity. However, they also tend to overlook the terms in which Shylock's cannibalistic tendencies are actually described in the play. As we will see, at stake in the identification of Shylock as a wolf is not simply a theological metaphor for "Jewishness," but an index to an alternate prehistory—to a natural-historical account that invokes Pythagorean metempsychosis rather than Christian typology. Here, then, is the key passage in which Gratiano, a character with a reputation for speaking "an infinite deal of nothing" (1.1.121), describes Shylock's "wolvish" ancestry:

O, be thou damn'd, inexecrable dog!  
And for thy life let justice be accused!  
Thou almost makest me waver in my faith  
To hold opinion with Pythagoras,  
That souls of animals infuse themselves  
  
Govern'd a wolf, who hang'd for human slaughter,  
Even from the gallows did his fell soul fleet,  
And, whilst thou lay'st in thy unhallow'd dam,  
Infused itself in thee; for thy desires  
Are wolvish, bloody, starved, and ravenous. (4.1.130-140)

When reading this passage, let us first note that while he formally disavows the Pythagorean doctrine of transmigration of souls, Gratiano nevertheless follows its internal logic to make the audacious claim that the spirit of a wolf has reincarnated in the body of a "Jew." Of course, the natural-historical account that he presents is invoked as a triviality, since it is based on the decidedly false (pagan) notion of metempsychosis or transmigration of souls—a notion that, as Gratiano admits,

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<sup>16</sup> Jay Geller, *Bestiarium Judaicum: Unnatural Histories of the Jews* (New York, Fordham University Press, 2018), 200.

contradicts the tenets of Christianity. Nevertheless, this impossibility is considered in poetic detail and with syllogistic precision. Shannon accordingly notes that “early moderns loved to mock the Pythagorean argument for a transmigration of souls up and down the scale of being, according to a judgment or verdict on the morality of one’s life. But like Gratiano, and despite their scandal or merriment, they could not shake the metaphorical power of Pythagoreanism to describe the animated universe they observed. Its apt imagery expressed a cosmos in which the dynamic operations of justice reach well beyond the confines of a human community.”<sup>17</sup> Despite its incompatibility with Christian beliefs, the pagan doctrine of metempsychosis is invoked in the play as a natural-historical explanation for Shylock’s cannibalistic appetites. According to this explanation, the soul of a murderous wolf has infused itself into Shylock’s body while he was still in the womb, foreshadowing his desire for human flesh as an adult. To be sure, at stake is not merely a negative metaphor for “Jewishness,” but a natural history that disrupts the traditional typology of the “Jew.” The polemical force of Pythagoreanism in the above quoted passage undermines precisely what Boehrer has called “the smooth transformation” of Shylock from “dog” into “cur” into “wolf.” Whereas the “dog” and “cur” figures function primarily as manifestations of typological thinking, Gratiano’s description of Shylock as a wolf explicitly belongs in a mythic view of humans and their place in the world. We will examine the ways in which the peculiar conjunction of Pythagoreanism and wolfishness provides a natural history of the “Jew,” but before doing so, we must first clarify why the notion of metempsychosis remained incompatible with established Christian views, and consequently, what role the figure of the wolf played in this constellation of thought. Simply put, the pagan doctrine of the transmigration of souls was incompatible with the Christian view because it assumed a continuum of life that linked humans and animals.<sup>18</sup> Such a continuity was already denied by early church fathers, and subsequently found its authoritative refutation in Augustine’s *City of God*, where he argued that the existence of human-animal hybrids such as werewolves was a theological impossibility. According to Augustine, since human beings are created in the image of God, and animals are

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<sup>17</sup> Shannon, *The Accommodated Animal*, 246.

<sup>18</sup> Joyce E. Salisbury, *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 141.

not, the transformation from human to animal and vice versa would imply a shift from one ontological category to another. Therefore, Augustine argued that in accounts of bodily transformation what people really experienced was either an illusion or a phantom produced by a demonic effect.<sup>19</sup> Augustine's distinction between illusory and actual change was influential, and subsequently came to inform the church's position on the question of the human-animal divide. As Dennis Kratz put it, "so monstrous are the implications of a man whose human soul has been replaced by an animal soul, that to attribute such a transformation even to God is irreconcilable with the central Christian doctrine of divine charity. At issue are the fundamental concepts of rationality, sin and salvation."<sup>20</sup> And yet, this is precisely how Gratiano describes Shylock, as a wolf reincarnated in the body of a "Jew." By doing so, Gratiano invokes the specter of a world without grace, a mythic world in which a continuum of life does indeed link "Jews" and animals. At stake, of course, is not just any animal, but a wolf, because according to Gratiano it is the carnivorous appetite of a wolf that has "transmigrated" to Shylock from a previous life. Thus, Shylock's "wolvish" appetite for human flesh forms the crucial nexus in which the natural-historical account constellates non-synthetically with a typology of "Jewish" cannibalism in *The Merchant of Venice*. To be sure, there was nothing new about Gratiano's invocation of the wolf-metaphor for the degradation and bestialization of human beings. There was a long-standing literary tradition that ascribed a host of negative associations to wolves, and Christian thought was informed in this regard by a wide range of sources, most notably from the Bible and the writings of church fathers, as well as from pagan writers such as Pliny, Ovid, and Petronius.<sup>21</sup> Throughout the Middle Ages, the bestial violence of the wolf exerted a strong influence on the Christian imagination, and in medieval bestiaries the wolf was typically depicted as a figure

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<sup>19</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, 18.8. See also Dennis M. Kratz, "Fictus Lupus: The Werewolf in Christian Thought," *Classical Folia* 30 (1976): 57-80, 61-62. Caroline Bynum rightly observed that Augustine did not oppose all metamorphosis, and scholars have tended to confuse his position on human-animal transformation with his attitude toward any kind of metamorphosis. Caroline Bynum, "Metamorphosis, or Gerald and the Werewolf," *Speculum* 4 (1998): 987-1013, 1007, n. 89.

<sup>20</sup> Kratz, "Fictus Lupus," 67.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 57-80. Kratz cites an example from *Ezekiel* 22:27 in which the comparison with wolves emphasizes the ravenous greed of the lords of Jerusalem: "Its officials within it are like wolves tearing the prey, shedding blood, destroying lives to get dishonest gain."



of rapacity, the image of the devil himself: the devil bears the similitude of a wolf: he who is always looking over the human race with his evil eye, and darkly prowling round the sheepfolds of the faithful so that he may afflict and ruin their souls.<sup>22</sup> In the traditional Christian worldview, the association with wolves thus appeared as a figural representation of the human capacity for evil. But in Shakespeare’s play *Shylock* is not simply depicted as a wolf, but as a wolf “hang’d for human slaughter”—an identification that for Shakespeare’s contemporaries touched upon a particularly haunting set of cultural associations. Aside from the traditional depiction of the wolf as a figure of rapacity, Gratiano refers to the practice of hanging wolves for crimes, a practice that by Shakespeare’s time was outlandish, since at that point England had been entirely free of wolves for centuries.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, the custom of hanging dogs was still alive both in England and on the Continent for various legal offenses (primarily manslaughter and bestiality). As Boehrer notes, “by replacing the hanged dog of England’s countryside with the figure of a wolf, Shakespeare revises common English experience, transforming it into a spectacle of strangeness which emphasizes Shylock as both foreign and bloodthirsty.”<sup>24</sup> To be sure, this “spectacle of strangeness” is more than just a quaint anachronism. As Boehrer suggests, it serves as an uncanny reminder of a forgotten prehistory: namely, “the expulsion of wolves from England [...] parallels and prefigures the expulsion of England’s Jews, accomplished in 1290 by Edward I.”<sup>25</sup> In this sense, the mythic figure of the wolf in Gratiano’s speech encapsulates a repressed historical experience: namely, the experience of exile and banishment from the human community. Shylock is exposed to such abandonment by the law during his appearance at the Duke’s court. After Portia successfully argues her case that Shylock has plotted against the life of a Venetian citizen, the right of judgment and mercy that under Venetian law lay in the hands of the litigant, is wrenched from Shylock and delivered to the Duke of Venice, whose political sovereignty is suddenly reaffirmed. Toward the end of the play, Shylock is divested of the various legal, social, and civil ties that

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<sup>22</sup> *The Book of Beasts: Being a Translation from a Latin Bestiary of the Twelfth Century*, trans. Terence Hanbury White (Madison: Wisconsin, 2002), 59.

<sup>23</sup> Boehrer, “Shylock and the Rise of the Household Pet,” 164.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

bound him as a legal alien to Venetian civic life. Yet despite his exclusion, he remains bound to Venetian law in a relation of abandonment, standing before the law as “bare life.”<sup>26</sup> Scholars have responded to such a political-theological reading of the play by refining the terms in which Shylock’s exclusion from the human community is formulated. As Shannon argues,

the notion of Shylock as simply dehumanized by the play depends partly on a modern sense of animals as wholly outside the law or political community rather than as the subjects of law they could be in the early modern imagination. [...] The proximity between answerable animals and this ‘stranger cur’ in Venice places them all inside the multikinded, justiciable cosmos to which it testifies.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, Shannon argues against Agamben’s theorization of “bare life” as a state of exclusion and banishment from civic life, since in late medieval and early modern Europe animals “were not only at large in cities but also habitually cognizable to the law in its formal and informal expressions.”<sup>28</sup> According to this line of interpretation, the designation of Shylock as a wolf does not necessarily mean that he is thereby bestialized or placed outside the law, but rather, “like a ‘malicious’ animal, the measure of Shylock’s marginal social inclusion registers in his ability to make himself vulnerable to process” by triggering liability under criminal law.<sup>29</sup> Shannon’s points are certainly valid, but her reading of Shylock’s wolfishness nevertheless appears to be overdetermined by the juridical context in which it is framed. Consequently, the reference to the implicit correlation between wolves and “Jews” in Gratiano’s speech—namely, to the repressed historical memory of eradication, banishment, and exile—is marginalized in her account. Yet insofar as this repressed memory remains a haunting presence in the play, Shylock’s “Jewish” life is reduced in some measure to a “bare life” with respect to the law. As we will see, since this “wolfishness” becomes a problem for the Venetian state, Gratiano’s

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<sup>26</sup> For the concept of “bare life” in relation to the figure of the wolf in medieval thought, Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 104–111.

<sup>27</sup> Shannon, *The Accommodated Animal*, 247.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.

speech offers the stark realization that primordial cannibalistic forces have returned to haunt the free capitalist market—and they remain unchecked in their new, modern guise.

### A State of “Nature”

Notwithstanding the claims of eucharistic theology to explain the cannibalistic tendencies of “Jews,” Gratiano invokes in his speech a different tradition: namely, the mythic identification of cannibalistic appetites in human beings with a “wolfish” nature. Undoubtedly, the *locus classicus* of this tradition is found in the tale of Lycaon, the mythic king of Arcadia who was transformed into a wolf by Zeus because of his cannibalism. Although the story appeared in several antique sources, the most popular version remained the one reported by Ovid in the first book of the *Metamorphoses*. According to Ovid, Lycaon was a murderous king who, in an attempt to discredit Zeus, served him a feast of human flesh. Zeus, however, was not tricked and as a punishment for Lycaon’s deeds, he was banished from his kingdom and subsequently transformed into a wolf:

Lycaon himself fled in terror, and when he reached the silence of the countryside, he began to howl—he was trying to speak but he could not: his madness had been gathered in his mouth. His lust for slaughtered flesh made him attack flocks of sheep: He still loved to guzzle blood. His clothing turned to fur, his arms to legs: He was changed into a wolf, but kept some signs of his original form. The same grayness is there, the same violence in his face, the same glowing eyes, the same vicious look.<sup>30</sup>

Caroline Bynum noted that Lycaon is not only an impious tyrant who attempts to morally corrupt his people by inciting them against the gods; he is also a transgressor who breaks the primal taboo on cannibalism: “the two vices are both boundary crossings, mirroring each other and mirrored in the tyrant’s subsequent

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<sup>30</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Michael Simpson (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 14.

transformation. Lycaon violates both the division between human and god, by preparing to kill Jove, and the boundary between human and human, by killing a hostage for cannibalism; hence his own species boundaries are violated by the metamorphosis into wolf.”<sup>31</sup> In other words, Lycaon does not transform into an ordinary animal. Rather, he becomes the very image of beastly savagery with his “madness [...] gathered in his mouth.” The lust for human flesh emerges in this case as an appetite naturally shared by both depraved people and wolves. As Bynum observes, “this wolf-person as *imago* is *imago* not of humanity’s proper exemplar, the gods, but of a corruption, a bestiality, that is what Lycaon is.”<sup>32</sup> Lycaon’s cannibalistic “bestiality” entails the suspension of the divine law of the gods, marking a natural-historical regression to a pre-mythical state. Lycaon’s moral “corruption” is hurled as a challenge at the cosmic order in an attempt to reclaim a forgotten prehistorical world. Accordingly, the mythic punishment for such a transgression is a loss of humanity and banishment from human society, as Lycaon is condemned to a solitary predatory existence. His madness, however, stands in sharp contrast to subsequent depictions of werewolves in medieval Christian literature, where these monstrous hybrids retain their human consciousness, morality, and rationality despite their bodily transformation. Rather than signaling the devolvement of humans into beasts, werewolves in medieval romances such as the *Lay of Bisclavret*, *Arthur and Gorlagon*, or *Guillaume de Palerne* were portrayed as victims, cursed heroes who had been changed into wolves, often through the plots of evil women, and ultimately restored to their original human shape. These figures are “sympathetic” werewolves that exemplify the non-essential nature of metamorphosis, thereby avoiding the prospect of interchangeability of human and animal souls.<sup>33</sup> In this sense, medieval werewolf stories implied a rejection of two interrelated aspects of

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<sup>31</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Zone Books, 2001), 169.

<sup>32</sup> Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity*, 170; Leonard Barkan, *The Gods Made Flesh: Metamorphosis and the Pursuit of Paganism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 24-27.

<sup>33</sup> Kirby F. Smith, “An Historical Study of the Werewolf in Literature,” *PMLA* 9, no. 1 (1894): 1-42; Kate Watkins Tibbals, “Elements of Magic in the Romance of William of Palerne,” *Modern Philology* 1 (1903-1904): 355-371; Charles W. Dunn, *The Foundling and the Werewolf: A Literary-Historical Study of Gauillaume de Palerne* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1960), 116-18; Kratz, “Fictus Lupus,” 69-71.

Pythagorean metempsychosis that were incompatible with the Christian worldview: namely, that God can divorce a living person from the possibility of redemption; and that a human being can commit a sinful act for which he is not responsible.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, in Christian theology the possibility of divorcing a person from the prospect of redemption was not altogether inconceivable. According to Paul, all of created nature is defined precisely in terms of its exclusion from the promise of righteousness; that is, from the prospect of a life according to the law. In *Romans* 8:19-21, Paul referred to the relation between creation and redemption in these terms: for the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to futility, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. In other words, creaturely life cannot attain redemption by its own means, but remains essentially dependent on the believers who possess the “first fruits of the Spirit” (*Romans* 8:23). Standing in a non-relation to the law, created nature is personified in Paul’s thought: it groans under the burden of futility, under the weight of a bare, earthly life without hope of salvation. By manifesting a “wolfish” spirit, Shylock’s actions are framed in Shakespeare’s play within a creaturely world that remains excluded from the sphere of justice and law. In these terms, Antonio acknowledges that any attempt to reason with the “Jew” to show mercy is futile:

[one] may as well go stand on the beach  
 And bid the main flood bate his usual height;  
 You may as well use question with the wolf  
 Why he hath made the ewe bleat for the lamb. (4.1.72-5)

As a wolf, the “Jew” exhibits the characteristic futility of creaturely life. Yet Venetian civil law allows this fallen existence to articulate itself juridically and to even possess certain legal rights within the civic community. When Shylock takes Antonio to court for breach of contract, he wields sovereign power over Antonio’s life, and thereby introduces a legal avenue by which the civic order can devolve, by

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<sup>34</sup> Kratz, “Fictus Lupus,” 78.

purely legal means, into a lawless state in which members of the community engage in reciprocal acts of violence with no governing authority to hold them in check. This is effectively a state of civil war, and thus Shylock's cannibalistic contract creates a "miniature state of emergency, a situation in which someone—in this case, the Duke—must step above the merely civil law and make a decision concerning life and death, reinstating a moment of political theology within the legal regime of Venetian constitutionalism."<sup>35</sup> Since Venetian constitutionalism prevents the Duke from stepping above the law when business transactions are involved, the decision over Antonio's life initially remains in the hands of Shylock. That is why Portia, who masquerades as Antonio's lawyer, makes her argument for mercy by appealing to Shylock, not to the Duke.<sup>36</sup> Antonio, too, readily recognizes this problem:

The Duke cannot deny the course of law;  
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. (3.3.29-34)

Shylock is, of course, likewise aware of this overriding constitutional bind, and he does not fail to remind the Duke that withholding his legal compensation would jeopardize the unique status of Venetian civil law:

I have possessed your Grace of what I purpose,  
...To have the due and forfeit of my bond.  
If you deny it, let the danger light  
Upon your charter and your city's freedom! (4.1.36-39)

Thus, both Antonio and Shylock agree that "the justice of the state" must be maintained at all costs, even at the price of Antonio's life. But when this justice is

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<sup>35</sup> Lupton, *Citizen-Saints*, 96.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 88-89.

abused by the “Jew,” what measures can the State take to protect the lives of its citizens? This is the point in which the figure of the wolf is invoked in the play. Simply put, the problem that Shylock poses for the Venetian state with his business contract is not only an ethical one, but more fundamentally, it is a political problem. This is because Shylock’s contract undermines the power of the State to maintain peace and order within the boundaries of the civic community. As Gratiano declares, Shylock’s existence within Christian society violates the principle of justice: as a “dog” or a “cur,” Shylock may fall within the premises of the “multikinded, justiciable cosmos” of early modern law; but as a wolf, he stands “before” the law as “bare life” on the brink of extinction and banishment. The point is that the “Jew” poses a grave threat to emerging forms of social and economic organization, and this threat cannot simply be resolved by conventional legal means (namely, by civil law). Indeed, Shylock’s case seems to call for the very same measures that were employed back in the day against marauding wolves—namely, the eradication of the threat to the community through the direct intervention of the political sovereign. By designating Shylock as a wolf “hang’d for human slaughter,” Gratiano is drawing on an old political mythologeme: namely, that of the werewolf as the figure of a man who has been banned from the human community. According to Agamben, medieval German and Anglo-Saxon legal codes were “founded on the concept of peace (*Fried*) and the corresponding exclusion from the community of the wrongdoer, who therefore became *friedlos*, without peace, and whom anyone was permitted to kill without committing homicide.” Notably, these “Germanic and Anglo-Saxon sources underline the bandit’s liminal status by defining him as a wolf-man,” thereby marking his life as a life that “is not a piece of animal nature without any relation to law and to the city. It is, rather, a threshold of indistinction and of passage between animal and man, *physis* and *nomos*, exclusion and inclusion.”<sup>37</sup> A few decades after Shakespeare, Thomas Hobbes will conceptualize this “peaceless” existence under the rubric of a pre-social “state of nature” in which people treat each other like wolves: *homo hominis lupus*. For Hobbes, this naturally violent and lawless existence justifies the absolute power of the sovereign, who, in order to maintain internal peace, must assume monopoly over all means of violent coercion within

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<sup>37</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 104-105.

the political community.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, in *The Merchant of Venice*, the restoration of the Duke's sovereign power occurs at the intersection of the boundaries between civil and criminal law. To be sure, Shylock's contract undermines the foundational principle of political sovereignty by legal means, but the real problem lies in Shylock's insistence on a narrow or literal interpretation of the law, which he posits in direct opposition to the foundational principle of political sovereignty—namely, to maintain “peace” within the boundaries of the civic community. In this sense, Shylock's adherence to a legalistic notion of justice—as opposed to a more flexible interpretation of the law informed by the doctrine of Christian mercy—proves to be a mere extension of his “wolfish” appetites. Devoid of mercy, Shylock insists on the bare literality of “bond” and “justice” without being able to provide any reasonable justification for his refusal to receive monetary compensation for Antonio's flesh:

You'll ask me why I rather choose to have  
A weight of carrion flesh than to receive  
Three thousand ducats. I'll not answer that,  
But say it is my humor. Is it answered?  
What if my house be troubled with a rat,  
And I be pleased to give ten thousand ducats  
To have it baned? What, are you answered yet? (4.1.41-47)

In the absence of a governing Christian principle of mercy, Shylock's contractual demand can only be justified as retribution for personal injuries that he suffered at the hands of Antonio. When asked by Salarino what possible use he could have with Antonio's flesh, Shylock answers:

To bait fish withal; if it will feed nothing else,  
it will feed my revenge (3.1.52-53)

and elsewhere he confirms that

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<sup>38</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, ed. and trans. Richard Tuck and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 3-6; Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (London: Penguin, 1982), 133-175.



if I can catch [Antonio] once upon the hip,  
I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him. (1.3.46-47)

Shylock's insistence on a literal interpretation of the law to "feed" his revenge corresponds to the typology of a "Jewish" vengeful plot against Christian society. Although by Shakespeare's time medieval tales of "Jews" poisoning wells and desecrating hosts have long passed into the realm of legend, the belief in the fundamentally antagonistic attitude of "Jews" toward Christian morality, justice, and established forms of social and political organization remained intact. In the Elizabethan period, this "Jewish" attitude of vengeful hostility was epitomized in the practice of moneylending. At that time, the legal constraints on moneylending were undergoing a rapid revision with the introduction of the usury statute of 1571 that legalized the lending of money at an interest rate of 10 percent. The crime of usury remained in force, but its meaning was changed to include only those individuals who charged excessively high rates of interest (incidentally, a crime of which Shakespeare's own father had been accused).<sup>39</sup> With the rapid habituation of moneylending at interest among Elizabethans, there was an increased need to distinguish Christian attitudes and practices toward commerce from so-called "Jewish" business ethics, that is, with what Elizabethans identified as "Jewish" practices, since at that time no Jews were living in England.<sup>40</sup> As James Shapiro noted, "English depictions of Jews as usurers during this period when the concept of lending money at interest was undergoing such rapid and startling revision strongly suggest that such representations were in part

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<sup>39</sup> Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews*, 98-99; Charles R. Geisst, *Beggar Thy Neighbor: A History of Usury and Debt* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 58-96.

<sup>40</sup> The presence of Jews in England during Shakespeare's time remains a matter of academic debate, with scholars such as James Shapiro and Janet Adelman arguing that Jews were present in small numbers in sixteenth-century England. Others, most notably David Nirenberg, have argued to the contrary that Adelman and Shapiro "are misguided in their confidence in the 'Judaism' of the few-dozen descendants of Spanish and Portuguese converts they discover living in Shakespeare's London—none of whom confessed to being anything but Christian [...] [And] more important, their insistence that Christian anxieties about Judaism depend on the existence of 'real Jews' ignores the ability of Christian thought to generate Judaism 'out of its own entrails'." Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism*, 271-2; Janet Adelman, *Blood Relations: Christian and Jew in The Merchant of Venice* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2008), 4-12.

projections: Jews enabled the English to imagine a villainous moneylender whose fictional excesses overshadowed their own very real acts of exploitation.”<sup>41</sup> To be sure, Shapiro’s evocation of Shylock as a “villainous moneylender” falls squarely within the parameters of typological thinking. As we have seen, payment of interest or penalty on contractual bonds was often equated in the Christian typological imaginary with eucharistic martyrdom. Accordingly, Shylock’s insistence on the “legal” or literal meaning of the “pound of flesh,” rather than on its figurative or “spiritual” significance, implies a “Jewish” refusal to look beyond the meaning of the written word to the spirit behind the letter. As a representative of the dead letter of the law, Shylock appears to the Duke as a

stony adversary, an inhuman wretch,  
Uncapable of pity, void and empty,  
From any dram of mercy. (4.1.4-6)

Salerio, too, describes Shylock in similar terms:

Never did I know  
A creature that did bear the shape of man  
So keen and greedy to confound a man.  
He plies the Duke at morning and at night,  
And doth impeach the freedom of the state  
If they deny him justice. Twenty merchants,  
The Duke himself, and the magnificoes  
Of greatest port have all persuaded with him,  
But none can drive him from the envious plea  
Of forfeiture, of justice, and his bond. (3.2.286-295)

Here we can see how Shylock’s insistence on the bare literality of the contractual bond echoes Paul’s description of the Jews as “Israel after the flesh” and the entire Pauline trope of the distinction between letter and spirit. However, in Shakespeare’s play this characteristic “Jewish” insistence on the literality of the law

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<sup>41</sup> Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews*, 99.

is not only un-Christian; it is also markedly inhuman. To be sure, Shylock does not insist on the “justice” of the dead letter for moral or religious reasons. Neither are financial considerations at stake, because Shylock clearly recognizes that the legal demand for a pound of flesh contradicts capitalist exchange value. Instead, Shylock’s insistence on the dead letter of the law stems from his cannibalistic desires. As he states:

I crave the law,  
The penalty and forfeit of my bond. (4.1.213-4)

It is this perverse desire for human flesh—masquerading as a legal process—that renders Shylock an “inhuman wretch” and “a creature that did bear the shape of man.” As a wolf in human guise, Shylock is a far cry from the “sympathetic” werewolf of medieval literary traditions. His cannibalistic appetites recall those of his predecessor Lycaon: a murderous tyrant whose craving for human flesh ultimately brings about the dissolution of the civic order. In this sense, we can say that when Shakespeare’s characters conceive of the otherness of the “Jew,” they are not confined to the premises of typological thinking. Despite differences in social stature and temperament, there is an implicit agreement among the non-Jews in the play—Gratiano, Antonio, the Duke, Salerio—regarding Shylock’s fundamental inhumanity. Shylock is an “inhuman wretch” whose spirit is “wolvish, bloody, starved, and ravenous”; he is merciless and unreasonable as a prowling wolf; a “creature” that confoundingly bears the shape of a man. These examples suggest that Gratiano’s Pythagorean tale of metamorphosis, far from serving as a trivial digression in the play, is key to understanding the way in which “Jewish” identity is conceived in it. To put the matter differently, Gratiano’s natural-historical account of Shylock’s “wolfish” origins is not invoked in the play as a philosophical or theological notion. It is, rather, a political myth whose purpose is to justify and facilitate a sovereign decision on Shylock’s life. This decision amounts to Shylock’s civic death: a state in which he remains utterly exposed to the “mercy” of the Duke as “bare life.” In this respect, Shylock’s “villainous” acts ultimately provide justification for the doctrine of absolute political sovereignty. The play attempts to limit emerging capitalist forms of economic rapacity by transferring their potential threatening power of physical

violence (achieved by means of a business contract) to the political theology of absolute monarchy. However, by designating Shylock as a wolf, the play does not only provide a *political* distinction between a criminal under civil law (a “cur”) and an enemy of the State (a “wolf”). It also mobilizes a *theological* distinction concerning the absolute difference of “spirits” between Christian and “Jew”—as demonstrated by the account of Shylock’s “wolfish” ancestry. This indelible difference in “spirits” facilitates the exclusion of the “Jew” from the law’s protection (while assuming that even “dogs” and “curs” possess certain legal rights within the Venetian polity). And although Christian theology did assume a fundamental difference in “spirits” between Christians and “Jews,” this difference was conceived in terms of the typological distinction between spirit and letter, rather than as a natural history. In other words, for Paul, “Jewishness” is not a naturally inherited trait, but is predicated on a certain interpretation of the law. Significantly, this “carnal” or literal interpretation is not a fixed relation to the law, but a contractual one. As such it can be overcome by a “circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code” (*Romans 2:29*). As opposed to the Jewish rite of circumcision, which leaves a permanent mark inscribed on the Jew’s body as a sign of his exclusive ethnic and religious affiliation, the purview of “spiritual” circumcision through baptism is universal and can be attained by Jews and non-Jews alike. In this sense, Gratiano’s speech serves as a site in which two incompatible representations of “Jewish” identity—the natural-historical and the figural-typological—coincide non-synthetically. By formulating a Pythagorean account of the insurmountable difference of spirits between Christian and “Jew,” Gratiano advances the un-Christian view that Shylock is human in outer form only, but not in spirit. This mythical configuration is superimposed on the familiar typology of a “Jewish” adherence to the literal interpretation of the law—by establishing itself as the primordial “natural” cause of the “Jewish” insistence on literality. Gratiano’s description of Shylock’s wolfish origins is thus at bottom an allegorical operation that recovers a hidden meaning (“wolfishness”) by declaring the phenomenal human appearance of the “Jew” to be pure surface. Consequently, Shylock’s humanity is preserved in the play only as a *semblance*, an empty image-being. Its allegorical designation is none other than the specter of a prehistorical “state of nature” in which people treat each other like wolves: *homo homini lupus*.

### Conversion and Exception

In his discussion of Shakespeare’s “Jewish Questions,” David Nirenberg noted the ambiguity that underlies Shylock’s humanity when he wrote that despite his conversion at the end of the play, Shylock remains “in some sense ontologically alien” to Christianity.<sup>42</sup> But Nirenberg does not specify in what sense this difference is to be understood. He consequently fails to note that the determination of ontological otherness of the “Jew” in *The Merchant of Venice* does not rely exclusively on a typological distinction between letter and spirit, but on a natural-historical account superimposed on the traditional typology of the “Jew.” Janet Adelman identified this non-contractual difference as a “proto-racial distinction” that emerges as a recurring motif in Shakespeare’s play: “Although “Jew” might function primarily as a religious category when it is opposed to “Christian,” it becomes an incipiently racial category when it is opposed to “gentle/gentile.” In that opposition, “gentile” invariably functions as a marker of those races or nations that are not Jewish.”<sup>43</sup> Thus, Shylock’s insistence on the bare literality of “bond” and “justice” marks not only his allegiance to a “Jewish” literal interpretation of the law; it also serves as a mark of his indelible racial alterity, his un-“gentle” spirit. As Adelman notes, “the persistent association of [Shylock’s] hard-hearted Jewishness with natural phenomena—the wolf, the sea, the stone—has the effect of naturalizing it in him, making it fixed and immutable.”<sup>44</sup> Focusing on Antonio’s sarcastic remark:

Hie thee, gentle Jew  
the Hebrew will turn Christian; he grows kind (1.3.173-174)

Adelman argues that this formulation “illustrates the process of racialization as a response to the prospect of Jewish conversion”:<sup>45</sup> Though a Jew might conceivably turn Christian, a Hebrew by definition cannot turn gentile. And this appeal to the realm of inalterable “natural” differences is signaled by the tricky word “kind,”

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<sup>42</sup> Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism*, 275.

<sup>43</sup> Adelman, *Blood Relations*, 75.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

which undercuts Shylock's apparent turn to kindness by invoking exactly that inalterable realm. Like his nation (*gens*), his nature (*kind*) is reassuringly fixed: this Hebrew will never become gentle/gentile, will never lose his Jewish obduracy, the stony-heartedness that allows Christians to recognize him; he will never change his nature and "grow kind." And whether or not he is forced to convert, he can never join the kind of the Christian: even at the end of the play, he remains "the rich Jew" (5 .1 .291).<sup>46</sup>

It is thus possible to identify two strands of anti-Jewish thought at work in *The Merchant of Venice*: the first casts Shylock as a personification of the negative image of the "Jew" in the Christian typological imaginary; the other affirms the absolute, non-contractual difference of "spirits" between Christian and "Jew" as the product of a distinct natural-historical development. As we have seen, this "natural" difference is epitomized in the play by the tendency of non-Jewish characters to identify Shylock as canine. But this canine character, although fixed in its essence to the "Jew," never remains the same, fluctuating between the various designations of "dog," "cur," and "wolf." The distinction between these canine figures, far from being trivial, has legal as well as theological implications. However, among scholars there is a tendency to subsume these different canine designations under the single rubric of the nonhuman "animal." For example, Paul Yachnin identifies the characterization of Jews as nonhuman as a prevalent feature of Shakespeare's historical culture. According to Yachnin, this was a culture in which the boundary between human and animal was not distinctly drawn:

The characterization of Jews as nonhuman belongs to the play as a whole. That is the case because Shakespeare's culture is one for which not all creatures that bear the shape of a man are men. While is a fundamental principle of modern political culture that all persons are entitled to the recognition of their human dignity, it was not so to Shakespeare and his contemporaries. Shakespearean characterization is based, in this view, not on an ideal of equality among human creatures but rather on an idea that humans are strung out along a hierarchy of capabilities and entitlements

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

that coordinates to differences of sex, ethnicity, race, religion, and social rank (or breeding or blood). That means that some characters in Shakespeare are far closer to animality than are other characters.<sup>47</sup>

Although Yachnin is certainly right in emphasizing the permeability and instability of the “human/animal threshold”<sup>48</sup> in *The Merchant of Venice*, he fails to take note of the porousness of the category of the “animal” itself. At stake is not simply the inherent instability of the human-animal distinction, but the accommodation of two different conceptions of animality: one belonging in Christian typology, and the other rooted in a mythical natural history. The tension between these views is not resolved in the play. Instead, it is “spatialized” in the empty image-being, the *semblance*, of Shylock’s human appearance. This human semblance, despite its negligible ontological status, plays an important role in *The Merchant of Venice*, not only because it contains and obfuscates the tension between typology and natural history, but also because it serves as the means by which Shylock—a veritable wolf—can express himself on the public stage in the Venetian court of law. Like a number of other “animal-people” in Shakespeare’s plays, Shylock seeks to gain a public voice and a public audience without casting off his animal “nature.”<sup>49</sup> Thus, as Yachnin notes: “However marked is his appearance in court by obduracy, impertinency, and the threat of violence, Shylock is noteworthy because he seeks a public rather than a private revenge against his enemy Antonio.”<sup>50</sup> According to Yachnin, Shylock is “noteworthy” because his very appearance in court defies the ancient consensus that animals are neither public nor political. Since Aristotle’s designation of humans as *zoon politikon*, a firm line has been drawn between humans and animals on the basis of the exclusive human capacity for speech, moral judgment, and political action.<sup>51</sup> But Shylock’s public demand for a pound of flesh in a court of law is also notable for another reason: in contrast to the blood libel charges, which depicted “Jewish”

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<sup>47</sup> Paul Yachnin, “Shakespeare’s Public Animals,” in *Humankinds: The Renaissance and Its Anthropologies*, eds. Andreas Höfele and Stephan Laqué (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 185-198, 192.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

cannibalism as secretive acts, in Venice Shylock can execute his cannibalistic plot legally and in broad daylight by virtue of a contractual bond that grants him sovereign power over the life of a Venetian citizen. To be sure, although Shylock receives a public hearing—he is, after all, a *talking* animal—he is not thereby rendered a *political* animal. On the contrary, Shylock’s business contract and his refusal to accept compensation for Antonio’s flesh demonstrate that his goal is to undermine the founding principle of political sovereignty and devolve the Venetian civic order to a prehistorical “state of nature.” The play spells out the implications of typological reversal in political terms: namely, as a regression to a pre-social state in which people treat each other cannibalistically, like wolves. But—and this point is crucial—the characters in Shakespeare’s play make the claim about Shylock’s wolfishness by resorting to an alternative prehistory. They invoke the mythic framework of a distinct natural-historical development rather than employing the typology of a contractual difference between Christian and “Jew.” By explicitly or implicitly endorsing the claim of Shylock’s “natural” otherness, Shakespeare’s characters engage in a revision of the figure of the “Jew” as a typological representation of Christianity’s prehistory. From the perspective of political theology, “Judaism” appears as the lawlessness of a prehistorical or pre-social state. However, the characters in Shakespeare’s play insist that this condition is not contractual but “natural.” This “nature” is fixed, so that Shylock’s spiritual constitution is essentially different from that of the Christian, and it is a difference that no act of conversion can undo. In this context, Adelman rightly argued that the emergence of such a fixed category of “proto-racial difference” in Shakespeare’s play is linked to a

set of anxieties about sameness and difference, nature and nations [...]—anxieties for which racialized thinking provided an easy remedy, whether or not racial categories were fully in place in the early modern period. By the time of *Merchant*, Christian societies had been worrying about the instability of Jewish difference for generations.”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Adelman, *Blood Relations*, 78-79.



As Adelman points out, these anxieties historically surfaced in the aftermath of mass conversions that took place in Spain throughout the sixteenth century:

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.<sup>53</sup>

Transposed into the terms of our analysis, Adelman’s description suggests that Gratiano’s account of Shylock’s wolfish origins is invoked in response to the erosion of traditional categories of typology and eucharistic theology in the early modern period. In the Christian typological imaginary, “Jews” were traditionally identified as manifestations of Christianity’s prehistory, but state-enforced conversions threatened to collapse this typological difference—with the increased assimilation of converted Jews into Christian society. Shakespeare’s play registers the tensions surrounding the crisis of state-enforced conversions by locating Shylock’s own conversion in a Venetian court rather than in a church. Against this background, the characters in Shakespeare’s play continuously assert the fixed “natural” difference between Christian and “Jew,” whether by blood,<sup>54</sup> spirit, or a shared humanity. In this context, the allegory of Shylock as a wolf in human guise assumes an implicit political resonance: namely, it points to the suspicion that converted Jews who had assimilated into the mainstream of Christian society continue to work against this society from within, by means of civil law. As we have seen, the play advocates the political theology of absolute monarchy in response to this threat. In this sense, Shylock’s legal demand for a pound of flesh triggers what Carl Schmitt has called a “state of exception,” in which a given

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 79-80.

<sup>54</sup> See Adelman’s discussion of Jessica’s conversion in *Blood Relations*, 66-98.

political system can no longer guarantee the security of the legal order. According to Schmitt, the exception is that “which is not codified in the existing legal order, [and] can at best be characterized as a case of extreme peril, a danger to the existence of the state, or the like. But it cannot be circumscribed factually and made to conform to a preformed law.”<sup>55</sup> Under these circumstances, the sovereign must suspend existing laws in order to save them. And that is precisely what takes place in the court scene in *The Merchant of Venice*: Shylock is divested of the various legal, social, and civil ties that bound him as a legal alien to Venetian civic life. In this sense, the Duke’s “merciful” offer to pardon Shylock’s life (that is, to grant Shylock the mercy that he never extended to Antonio) serves as a mere façade behind which Shylock’s state of exclusion from the Venetian polity is perpetuated:

That thou shalt see the difference of our spirits,  
I pardon thee thy life before thou ask it:  
For half thy wealth, it is Antonio’s;  
The other half comes to the general state,  
Which humbleness may drive unto a fine. (4.1.384-388)

The Duke’s sovereign act of Christian “mercy” reduces Shylock’s status within the polity to the simple reality of his “bare life”: Shylock is not only denied a civic or legal affiliation, but he also forfeits his financial means, thereby remaining excluded from all civil ties to Venetian society. And Shylock understands this point all too well. In his downfall, he exposes the violence that underlies sovereign decision:

Nay, take my life and all; pardon not that:  
You take my house when you do take the prop  
That doth sustain my house; you take my life  
When you do take the means whereby I live. (4.1.390-393)

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<sup>55</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 6.

At this point, Antonio’s intervention is required to restore Shylock’s civil affiliations, and he “mercifully” offers to rescind the money owed him by Shylock on condition that Shylock convert to Christianity and that his remaining wealth will pass after his death to his converted daughter and Christian son-in-law. Antonio’s offer mitigates the Duke’s decision by restoring Shylock to the circle of Venetian civil life. And Shylock, in turn, is forced to accept Antonio’s offer upon pain of death, as the Duke declares that

[Shylock] shall do this, or else I do recant  
The pardon that I late pronounced here. (4.1.407-8)

Far from establishing itself as a “spiritual” or religious transformation, conversion thus appears in Shakespeare’s play purely as an instrument of political power. As Yachnin noted, it becomes “a way for rulers to exercise control over the inward as well as the outward lives of their subjects.”<sup>56</sup> Shylock’s conversion accordingly takes place in a “state of exception,” when Shylock is reduced to “bare life.” This reduction of the legal person to a state of “bare life” serves in the play as a kind of legal-existential precondition for Shylock’s reentry into Venetian society—facilitating a political reenactment of a theological scene of “redemption” by means of state-enforced conversion. To be sure, Shakespeare leaves us with little doubt as to the authenticity and “spiritual” worth of such a conversion, as demonstrated by Shylock’s last words in the play:

I pray you, give me leave to go from hence;  
I am not well: send the deed after me,  
And I will sign it. (4.1.392-5)

In his compliance with the Duke’s decree, the “wolfish” spirit in Shylock is broken, and the danger that he poses for the Venetian polity is removed. In his last words

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<sup>56</sup> Yachnin likewise notes that conversion “served as a justification of wars of conquest that were said to be dedicated to converting whole new populations to Christian rule or, through the period of the Reformation, to the true form of Christian rule.” See Paul Yachnin, “Shylock, Toleration, Conversion” in *Imagining Religious Toleration: A Literary History of an Idea, 1600–1830*, eds. Alison Conway and David Alvarez (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019): 18-34, 25.

in the play, Shylock no longer voices any threats or complaints, yet his conversion by no means implies an acceptance of a new faith. On the contrary, Shylock states that he is “not well” and must depart. His statement is not an indictment of absolutist monarchy, but rather a *testimony* of the operation of sovereign power in a “state of exception.” As Eric Santner argued, under such conditions the subject is reduced to a creaturely estate.<sup>57</sup> Or, in other words, Shylock is rendered *creaturely* because he stands in a non-relation to the law. In order to “redeem” his social and political status within the Venetian polity, he must first stand “before” the law as a creature condemned to the futility of natural history. At any rate, Shylock’s conversion does not release him from his previous identification as a “Jew”: namely, as one who fails to internalize the “spirit” of the law. Yet in his reduction to creaturely life, Shylock also expresses a “natural” messianic impulse: the anguished anticipation of all creation to be redeemed from bondage to death and futility. In this sense, Shylock’s “I am not well” corresponds to what Paul Celan, in his “Meridian” speech, called a “counterword” [*Gegenwort*]: namely, the poetic phrase that bears witness to the unbridgeable gap between experience and expression, physis and meaning.<sup>58</sup> As a *talking* animal, Shylock partakes in creaturely life and yet is able to express himself in human language. In his downfall at the public forum of the Venetian court, he emerges as a representative figure; an “advocate for all creatures, and at the same time their highest embodiment.”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> On the relation between sovereign power and creaturely life, see Eric Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 1-42.

<sup>58</sup> Noam Pines, *The Infrahuman: Animality in Modern Jewish Literature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018), 124-125.

<sup>59</sup> Benjamin described certain characters in Leskov’s stories in these terms. See Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, 1935–1938, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Harry Zohn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 158; translation modified.

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