

“We Are No Soldiers”:

Jewish Unmanliness in English Renaissance Drama

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Abstract

This article explores the denigration of Jewish manhood on the English Renaissance stage and the ways that the inherently performative space of the theater and the collective experience of spectatorship created the ideal conditions for reconstructions of Jewish-Christian power relations. I argue that canonical late sixteenth-century plays incorporated emasculating humor about Jewish men to exercise control over those that challenged white Christian dominance. By analyzing a dramatic culture that represented Jewish male figures as being unfit for martial action, humiliatingly emotional, and physically inferior, I show how gendered constructions of Jewishness provide evidence of Renaissance theater’s celebration of Christian supremacy in one of the most popular secular spaces of the day at the same time that it secured associations of Jewish unmanliness in the English cultural imagination for centuries to come.

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Introduction

In 4.1 of *The Merchant of Venice* (c. 1598), Shylock and his debtor Antonio face off in a court scene.¹ A mediator, introduced as a doctor of laws, emerges to arbitrate the case and to determine whether Shylock may move forward with the cutting of Antonio's pound of flesh, as is promised to him in a mutually agreed-upon contract drawn up at the play's start. This doctor—"so young a body with so old a head"—is actually a woman called Portia dressed as a man named Balthazar, whose purpose is to intervene on Antonio's behalf (4.1.165).

Within moments of arriving, Portia-as-Balthazar famously asks, "Which is the merchant here? And which the Jew?" (4.1.176). Her questions invite audiences to consider what actual points of distinction exist between Jews and Christians. Indeed, despite scholarly arguments about what performance practices, including props and costuming, would have individuated Shylock, Portia's lines suggest that it was still difficult to determine, upon sight, which character was meant to be the Jewish one.² The line also draws attention to Portia's poor fit to adjudicate in this matter. However, within some 160 lines, she assertively tells Shylock, "If thou tak'st more / or less than a just pound ...nay, if the scale do turn / But in the estimation of a hair, / Thou diest, and all thy goods are confiscate" (4.1.340-346). The danger for Antonio quickly deescalates, while it spirals for Shylock, whose own life is at stake should he err "but in the estimation of a hair." The scales used for measuring flesh come to symbolize the scales of justice, which are righted after the threat of Jewish disruption. The good Christian ultimately walks free, while the bad Jew suffers the consequences of overreaching.³ And the audience,

¹ William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, eds. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Washington Square Press, 2002). All subsequent references to the text of this play are to this edition.

² A contentious debate in the field of Shakespeare studies concerns Shylock's "Jewish nose," a prosthetic piece that would have communicated racial difference as much as comic effect. Most recently, Laurie Johnson has argued against this practice having been a part of early modern performance, but the argument has long been a part of *Merchant's* performance history discussions. For more, see Laurie Johnson, "The Nose Plays: Nasiform Negotiations at Newington Butts," *Shakespeare* (2023): 24-37.

³ Ultimately, Shylock's punishment is that he must convert to Christianity and promise to give "of all he died possessed unto his son Lorenzo and daughter Jessica" (4.1.405-406).

watching the delicious takedown of the bloodthirsty Jewish stage figure, celebrates at Shylock's defeat.

This scene is a reversal of the Crucifixion narrative, in which Jesus and Barabas are presented before a crowd. In the New Testament account, the Jewish criminal goes free, while the innocent (proto-)Christian man is executed. In Shakespeare's version, however, in what Janet Adelman describes as "threaten[ing] to replay the killing of Christ," the virtuous Christian is freed, while the wicked Jew receives intense penalties.⁴ For an audience primed to hate Jews, this result would have been a satisfying one. The salient role of a Christian woman in this story intensifies the humiliation of Shylock's downfall, further stimulating spectators' delight.

In this article, I examine such moments of Jewish humiliation in canonical English Renaissance plays, showing how both actors and audiences celebrated the shame of Jewish characters by staging and savoring their failures, weaknesses, and losses for crowds of viewers used to liturgical traditions which touted anti-Jewish rhetoric and sentiment. Jewish male stage figures served "as a reference group to which the English could relate in order to determine their own position," just as they had served in the European medieval chronicle.⁵ But in the early modern period, the "collective fantasies" of these dramatic representations breathed new life into anti-Jewish recreational practice.⁶ Shakespeare's usurer and characters like him were designed to reenact episodes of white Christian powers dominating the Jewish Other for the entertainment of London crowds.⁷ A historicized study of these theatrical constructions reveals how anti-Jewish thought was upheld in secular settings as in religious ones, how English performance culture popularized visions of the "unmanly Jew," and how the western literary canon has preserved these injurious inventions centuries after they were first concocted. As Sander

⁴ Janet Adelman, *Blood Relations: Christian and Jew in The Merchant of Venice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 3.

⁵ Sophia Menache, "Faith, Myth, and Politics: The Stereotype of the Jews and Their Expulsion from England and France," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 75, no. 4 (1985): 351-374.

⁶ Lara Bovilsky, *Barbarous Play: Race on the English Renaissance Stage* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 67-68.

⁷ The varied geographic settings of the English Renaissance plays examined in this essay demonstrate how the English saw the trope of the "unmanly Jew" as universal. Rather than formulating the Jewish male stage figure as a unique product of the English imagination, therefore, playwrights such as Shakespeare were participating in broader supersessionist culture when contriving characters like Shylock.

Gilman avers, “The nature of the male Jew and his representation... lies at the very heart of western Jew-hatred.”⁸ The English Renaissance stage contributed significantly to this portraiture.

I begin by considering the displays of physical incapacity, including mockery, associated with perceived indisposition to military prowess in Christopher Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta* (c. 1589). I also explore the backdrop of the courtroom as a crucial context for this anti-Jewish presentation. Then I turn to the conflation of circumcision and castration in popular English culture, and the loss of patriarchal status that derives from that emasculating association. I focus, in particular, on its application in *The Merchant of Venice*, which further features visions of Jewish impotence and undesirability through the erosion of female companionship. And finally, I show how these recurring patterns operate within the broader imaginary of Jewish corporeal denigration, which the popular English theater of the early modern period significantly reinforced and helped to sustain.

Synthesizing Sermon and Spectacle

In an address delivered at Christ Church, Oxford on Good Friday in 1621, a preacher argues that there is no precedent as disturbing as the Jews’ participation in the execution of Jesus Christ even in the furthest reaches of historical chronicles or the most outrageous efforts of the literary imagination:

History or inuention has anciently told vs of some altars, where-on wild deuotion sacrificed men: but durst Poetry euer faigne a people that sacrificed their God? Would any man haue thought that the Iew would haue beene the first Antichrist of his Messias? That the children of Abraham would murder the God of Abraham? That the partakers of the Lords glory, would crucifie the Lord of glory?⁹

⁸ Sander Gilman, *The Jew’s Body* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 5.

⁹ Barten Holyday, *Three sermons upon the Passion, Resurrection and Ascension of Our Sauior preached at Oxford, by Barten Holyday, now archdeacon of Oxford. EEBO British Library records - unstructured* (London: Printed by William Stansby for Nathaniell Butter, and are to be sold at his shop at Saint Austines Gate in Pauls Church-yard, 1626), 6. Early English Books Online (13619).

The escalating rhetorical questions launch the retelling of the Crucifixion narrative, and audiences gathered on the day intended to commemorate the event are petitioned to embrace the irrevocable damnation of the Jews. Though this particular sermon was devised for a holiday setting, the Crucifixion story was regularly deployed at Christian assemblies. A sermon delivered at St. Paul's Cross in London in 1608 refers to the Jews as "the cruel butchers of Christ."¹⁰ One delivered in 1617 asks, "And as for the *Jewes*, had not they then crucified our Lord and Sauuour?"¹¹ John Donne's *Holy Sonnets* does something similar when it notes that "They kill'd once an inglorious man..."¹² The recitation of the Jews' participation in the death of Christ kept this portrait of the Jews as killers sharp in English imaginations, even at a time when Jews were nearly invisible in contemporary life.¹³

The theater of the period brought the liturgical practice of anti-Jewish rhetoric to popular performance culture. An essential example of this effort is Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, which presents the figure of Barabas as an English Renaissance super-villain.¹⁴ Having a name that instantly recalls the Crucifixion narrative, the protagonist fuels anti-Jewish conspiracy theories by delivering lines about slaying friends and enemies, by "extorting, cozening, forfeiting," and by generally boasting about vile and violent conduct (2.3.175-201). His interference in political affairs, like his obsessive dedication to personal vengeance, demonstrates

¹⁰ *Pharisaisme and Christianity compared and set forth in a sermon at Pauls Crosse*, May 1, 1608. By I.H. Vpon Matth, 65. Early English Books Online (12699).

¹¹ *A sermon preached in Italian, by the most Reuerend father, Marc' Antony de Dominis, Archb. of Spalato, the first Sunday in Aduent, anno 1617. In the Mercers Chappel in London, to the Italians in that city, and many other honorable auditors then assembled. Vpon the 12. verse of the 13. chapter to the Romanes, being part of the Epistle for that day.* First published in Italian by the author, and thereout translated into English, 22. Early English Books Online (7004).

¹² John Donne, "Holy Sonnet 7," in *The Divine Poems*, ed. Helen Gardner (Oxford: Oxford University Press; Oxford Scholarly Editions Online, 2012).

¹³ The Jews' expulsion from England in 1290 meant that those living in London during Marlowe's lifetime would have been part of small enclaves, generally unobserved by the swelling Christian English population of the capital city. This continued, shadowy presence on English soil, despite Edward I's thirteenth-century Expulsion Edict, contributed to the popular sentiment of Jewishness as both an historical and mythical construction.

¹⁴ Christopher Marlowe, *The Jew of Malta*, in *Doctor Faustus and Other Plays*, eds. David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen (New York - Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 247-322. All subsequent references to the text of this play are to this edition.

his broad commitment to Christian destruction. But Marlowe's stage-Jew complicates the familiar depiction of viciousness by way of his apparent unwillingness and stated incapacity to take up arms.

In an early scene of the play, the Maltese Governor Ferneze resolves to pay off a debt to Turkish authorities with monetary support from the Jews, commanding, "call those Jews of Malta hither" (1.2.34). The scene that follows involves a peculiar verbal exchange in which Barabas worries aloud that he and the other Jews will be asked to support Malta in a military capacity:

FERNEZE. ...and, Hebrews, now come near.
From the Emperor of Turkey is arriv'd
Great Selim Calymath, his highness' son,
To levy of us ten years' tribute past:
Now, then, here know that it concerneth us.

BARABAS. Then, good my lord, to keep your quiet still,
Your lordship shall do well to let them have it.

FERNEZE. Soft, Barabas! there's more 'longs to't than so.
To what this ten years' tribute will amount,
That we have cast, but cannot compass it
By reason of the wars, that robb'd our store;
And therefore are we to request your aid.

BARABAS. Alas, my lord, we are no soldiers!
And what's our aid against so great a prince?

FIRST KNIGHT. Tut, Jew, we know thou art no soldier:
Thou art a merchant and a money'd man,
And 'tis thy money, Barabas, we seek.¹⁵

¹⁵ Marlowe, *The Jew of Malta*, 1.2.38-53.

The court-like setting, not unlike the trial scene in *The Merchant of Venice*, reenacts foundational Christian visions of Jews interrupting judicial processes, made apparent when Barabas refuses to cooperate with the Maltese authorities.¹⁶ He describes Malta’s political climate as “*your* quiet,” and adds, “*your* lordship shall do well to let them have it” to communicate his clear disinterest in supporting Malta in its moment of need. These lines reflect his characteristic sauciness as well as his “boisterous burlesque.”¹⁷ But it is in the scene’s attention to Barabas’s physical weakness that Marlowe delivers an innovative construction of anti-Jewish representation; namely, the frailty of Jewish men.

“Alas, my lord, we are no soldiers!” Barabas protests. He admits both to his interlocutors and to the audience that he is physically inadequate, grouping all Jews together as one stock-type with his use of the pronoun “we.” The diction recalls anti-Jewish literary and historical precedents that Geraldine Heng traces in medieval English texts as much as it reveals the continuity of premodern racial profiling that remained popular in the Renaissance period.¹⁸ It is no accident that

¹⁶ The Geneva Bible—the religious text which both Marlowe and Shakespeare would have used—records this foundational vision well. The multitude votes to execute Jesus, and “Then said the governor, But what evill hath hee done? Then they cryed the more, saying, Let him bee crucified.” The Jewish communal participation in this moment, the lack of evidence in their arbitration, and the use of the word “tumult” in subsequent lines all contribute to the presentation of a scene in which the Jewish populace disrupts established judicial processes and violates legal protocol. Matt. 27:23

¹⁷ This descriptive language comes from a now-infamous essay by Elmer Edgar Stoll, in which he asserts the use of a red wig and prosthetic nose as essential props that adorned the body of the English Renaissance stage Jew, a claim which has since been challenged by scholars. For more, see Elmer Edgar Stoll, “Shylock,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 10, no. 2 (1911): 236-279; 249.

¹⁸ While Geraldine Heng explores the “panopticon” of English politics in the medieval world, her observations about England as a racial state offer context for this moment in Marlowe’s popular premodern drama. Heng writes, “It is a politics of race that transforms a few individuals who are visible and conspicuous into symbolic icons that represent, and stand for, an entire abominated population”; that is certainly the operating principle in this moment of *The Jew of Malta*, if not in the entirety of the play’s treatment of Jews. For more, see Geraldine Heng, *England and the Jews: How Religion and Violence Created the First Racial State in the West* (New York - Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 47.

Barabas's confession of being unfit for military service suggests that all Jews are similarly indisposed.¹⁹

The knight's immediate corroboration of Barabas's claim—"Tut, Jew, we know thou art no soldier"—first addresses the widespread belief of Jewish unmanliness and then offers a ripe transition point to request funds. "Thou art a merchant and a money'd man, and 'tis thy money, Barabas, we seek," he states. It is not merely that Jews are yoked to economic concerns rather than military ones but that Jewish men, in particular, are valuable only inasmuch as they offer monetary support. The multidimensional layers of contemporary anti-Jewish logic in these lines would have excited audiences who were primed to enjoy the caricaturization of Jews in a play which unabashedly announces its thematic interest in Jewishness.²⁰ Celebrating Jewish diminution was a common practice in early modern England, when Josephus's texts depicting Jewish military defeat at the hands of the Romans were widely read in newly translated editions by Peter Morwyng (1558) and Thomas Lodge (1602).²¹ Both translations went through numerous rounds of publication in the decades after their releases, testaments to their broad readership and the public's demand for texts that commemorated Judea's defeat. It was in Elizabethan England, as Freyja Cox Jensen observes, that Josephus "enjoy[ed] a particularly favorable reception."²² Beatrice Groves's work²³ on the power of Jerusalem's destruction in the English imagination supports Jensen's findings, and those of Martin Goodman and Joanna Weinberg, among others. Scholars of Jewish studies and English literature have addressed the ways in which Josephus's historical works affected early modern culture, but there is much work to be done on the ways in which the Elizabethan theater participated in this trend; it was in

¹⁹ The language also operates as a historical reference to the military dispensations that Jews received centuries before Marlowe penned this play. For more, see Saskia Zinsser-Krys, *The Early Modern Stage-Jew: Heritage, Inspiration, and Concepts* (New York: Peter Lang, 2017).

²⁰ The play's full title is *The Famous Tragedy of the Rich Jew of Malta*, inviting audiences to anticipate these types of connections between Jews and money.

²¹ For more, see Carol A. Morley, "Critical Introduction to *The Jewes Tragedy*," in *The Plays and Poems of William Heminge*, ed. Carol A. Morley (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2006), 44-45.

²² Freyja Cox Jensen, "What Was Thomas Lodge's Josephus in Early Modern England?," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 49, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 3-24.

²³ Beatrice Groves, *The Destruction of Jerusalem in Early Modern English Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

these public gathering spaces that audiences assembled in communal celebrations of Jewish defeat. Exhibits of white Christian dominance over the Jews, as Marlowe's work demonstrates, provided mutual benefit for political powers whose anti-Jewish policies were still active, the playwrights whose commercial concerns drove ticket sales, and the English public whose sense of superiority could be confirmed by the subjugation of Jewish characters through humiliation and/or overthrow.

The stage was, after all, a commercial space that solicited continued patronage from "a large and committed crowd of hearers," and wove in-demand features into language and performance.²⁴ Whether those features were celebrity actors, displays of spectacle, or even engagement with supernatural figures like ghosts, the stage was a public site hosting performances designed for popular consumption at the same time that it satisfied its political overseers.²⁵ An audience member paying somewhere between one and sixpence²⁶ for a play titled *The Jew of Malta* was expecting a production that engaged with all of the cultural and racial associations of Jewishness. This exchange between Barabas, the Maltese governor, and a knight should be regarded as a delivery on that promise for the audience's enjoyment, exploiting anti-Jewish stereotypes while advancing those feelings by promoting Jewish impotence.

Performance history records offer a valuable resource in discerning this scene's entertainment value, since we know that Edward Alleyn played Barabas from the time that *The Jew of Malta* opened in the 1590s until his death in 1626.²⁷ A man of great physical stature, he was well cast for the eponymous lead in Marlowe's

²⁴ Andrew Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London* (New York - Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 3.

²⁵ After a playwright penned a script, a prompter removed problematic text, including swear words, and then passed the play on to the Master of the Revels, who ensured seditious or blasphemous language did not make it to the stage. As Tiffany Stern writes, "The Master of the Revels himself would also make his own amendments to the text, censoring bits he disapproved of, before returning the play to the theatre." For more, see Tiffany Stern, *Making Shakespeare: From Stage to Page* (London: Routledge, 2004), 144-145.

²⁶ The cost of admission for public outdoor theaters like the Globe started at just one penny for the cheap spots directly in front of the stage. For more, see Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London*.

²⁷ Lois Potter, "Marlowe in Theater and Film," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christopher Marlowe*, ed. Patrick Cheney (New York - Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 262-281; 262.

earlier play *Tamburlaine* (c. 1587), which begins with the Prologue describing him as “threat’ning the world with high astounding terms and scourging kingdoms with his conquering sword” (Prologue, 5-6).²⁸ Alleyn’s imposing presence made perfect sense when depicting a formidable mercenary that commands armies. S. P. Cerasano has asserted that it was Alleyn’s performance in *Tamburlaine* that made him an English Renaissance superstar.²⁹ “Distinguished by his unusual height and his thundering voice, and an actor well suited to the large, intense characters that allowed him to claim the limelight,” Alleyn had, according to Cerasano, “unique swagger” as well as a large fanbase.³⁰ Playgoers enjoyed his performances as a man of valor, vigor, and virility.

Alleyn’s status as a dramatic hero makes him a fascinating choice for Marlowe’s Jew, for while his theatrical record and notable stage presence correlate to precisely the level of egomania that playing Barabas entailed, any performance of meekness or timidity would not align with Alleyn’s stage history or general physicality. When he frets about taking on a militaristic role in *The Jew of Malta*, he is acknowledging this paradox, a joke that audiences would have been in on. The fact that he poses his concern as a question—saying, “And what’s our aid against so great a prince?”—further emphasizes the jocular nature of his claim to military unfitness. In other words, this question functioned as a “nod-nod-wink-wink” moment for spectators who perceived the ridiculousness of such a line. It was not that Alleyn was feeble, but that the Jewish man he was playing was meant to be. Likewise, it was not that Barabas was uniquely ill-adept for soldierly duty, but that *all* Jewish men were.

This casting corroborates Matthew Biberman’s claim that the early modern period drew from medieval stereotyping, especially “the conflation of Judaism with a range of hypermasculine behavior, most especially a penchant for physical violence, duplicitous bargaining, and impulsive, irrational decision making.”³¹ As a performer with hypermasculine associations due to other theatrical roles, Alleyn

²⁸ Christopher Marlowe, *Tamburlaine the Great, Part I*, in *Doctor Faustus and Other Plays*, eds. David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen (New York - Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1-68.

²⁹ S. P. Cesarano, “Edward Alleyn, the New Model Actor, and the Rise of the Celebrity in the 1590s,” *Medieval & Renaissance Drama in England* 18 (2005): 47-58.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 49-50.

³¹ Matthew Biberman, *Masculinity, Anti-Semitism and Early Modern English Literature: From the Satanic to the Effeminate Jew* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2016), 21.

was the consummate choice for the performance of “misogyny, contemptuousness, resourcefulness, cynicism, egotism, and avarice” required for the Barabas part.³² But as a speaker of lines attesting to fear of conflict or physical incapacity, his casting would complicate the caricature. Barabas was thus an amalgamation of Biberman’s “Jew-Devil” and “Jew-Sissy,” delighting audiences with the familiar Crucifixion-era tropes while undermining the threat of Jewishness with language of fear and confessions of fragility.

It must also be noted that the main weapon of choice for Barabas is poison, an inherently un-masculine method of murder. Piotr Sadowski has persuasively argued that, “as a form of premeditated violence, poison has been almost universally judged as dishonourable and unmanly, and for that reason often associated with women, members of other disempowered social and ethnic groups, and, as perceived in Renaissance England, with Machiavellian politics from continental Europe, especially Italy.”³³ Even if, therefore, Marlowe’s villain encapsulates a “problematic hypermasculinity stigmatized by normative Christian ideals,” as Biberman rightly observes,³⁴ Barabas also manages to undermine that excessive male-ness by virtue of enacting revenge through seemingly feminized media.

At once a depiction of passivity and femininity, a Jewish character opting out of conflict reduces any threat brought on by his presence. For a nation with a long literary and historical record attesting to the Jews as violently anti-Christian, with homicidal, if not cannibalistic, fantasies,³⁵ this dramatic interpretation repositions Jewishness as the very antithesis of danger. Lack of machismo, strength, or bodily autonomy is a crucial element of undermining Jewish men in early modern England.

³² Ibid., 19.

³³ Piotr Sadowski, “‘Foul, Strange and Unnatural’: Poison as a Murder Weapon in English Renaissance Drama,” *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, 53, no. 3 (Sept. 2020): 139-154.

³⁴ Biberman, *Masculinity, Antisemitism and Early Modern English Literature*, 19.

³⁵ The insidious myths of Blood Libel and Host Desecration both contributed to these violent associations. Magda Teter’s recent work on the former explores how the proliferation of printed materials enabled the spread of that harmful canard, while Miri Rubin’s book on the latter provides an excellent framework of the development and dissemination of Host accusations. For more, see Magda Teter, *Blood Libel: On the Trail of an Antisemitic Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020). Also Miri Rubin, *Gentile Tales: The Narrative Assault on Late Medieval Jews* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

Manufacturing Jewish Emasculation

The sermonic and the secular coalesce around the figure of the male Jew as a locus of condemnation and ostracization in early modern England. If in *The Jew of Malta* the emphasis is on the Jew's military incapacity, in *The Merchant of Venice* it is on the Jew's domestic incompetence. After Shylock discovers that his daughter Jessica eloped with a Christian man named Lorenzo, taking with her an armful of money, he becomes distressed. His embarrassing outburst is not only demonstrative of an unmanly level of emotion, but of an altogether hysterical nature:

SOLANIO. I never heard a passion so confused,
So strange, outrageous, and so variable
As the dog Jew did utter in the streets.
“My daughter, O my ducats, O my daughter!
Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats!
Justice, the law, my ducats, and my daughter,
A sealèd bag, two sealèd bags of ducats,
Of double ducats, stol'n from me by my daughter,
And jewels—two stones, two rich and precious
stones—
Stol'n by my daughter! Justice! Find the girl!
She hath the stones upon her, and the ducats.”

SALARINO. Why, all the boys in Venice follow him,
Crying “His stones, his daughter, and his ducats.”³⁶

Citing passion, confusion, outrage, and variability, Solanio's language describes Shylock as exhibiting a ridiculous concoction of emotions.³⁷ The inclusion of the

³⁶ Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, 2.8.12-25.

³⁷ David Sterling Brown observes a similar show of unmanliness in *Hamlet* when the eponymous prince displays “incessant grief” and “rejects the rigid boundaries of white masculinity and exhibits feminine behavior.” While Brown's assessment links blackness with disrupted social behaviors, similar links emerge in *The Merchant of Venice* with Jewish characters disrupting Christian conduct. For more, see David Sterling Brown, “Code Black: Whiteness and Unmanliness in

word “strangeness” reveals how Shylock’s identity as a Jew is a crucial contributing factor in the moment’s humor, as the term encompasses both the befuddled nature of the outburst as well as Shylock’s foreignness.³⁸ It is important for audiences to remember his Jewishness to understand that this display is funny³⁹; otherwise, playgoers may sympathize with the violation of filial piety that’s also at stake. As Mary Janell Metzger explains, “Patriarchal authority was divinely ordained... Jessica’s disregard for that authority thus creates the first obstacle to a Christian audience’s expectations of her as a Christian.”⁴⁰ Turning the attention to Shylock’s behavior instead, this scene refocuses the audience’s judgment from Jessica to her humiliated father.

Solanio makes a similar effort when he describes Shylock as “the dog Jew,” a term that unmistakably conveys derision.⁴¹ James Shapiro has explained that “the word Jew had entered into the English vocabulary in the thirteenth century as a catchall term of abuse,” a linguistic development that lasted well through the early modern period.⁴² The addition of the word “dog” clarifies the insulting nature of Shylock’s Jewishness, though this racial slur is meant to inspire comedic response just as the rest of this scene’s narrative. The fact that “all the boys in Venice follow him,” as Salarino says, further demonstrates the buffoonery associated with Shylock’s emotions, since this diction illustrates not only how the boys in Venice trailed behind Shylock through his public humiliation, taunting him as he moved, but also how they followed his example, imitating his physical and verbal paroxysms.⁴³ The scene being described by Solanio and Salarino links Jewish

Hamlet,” in *Hamlet: The State of Play*, eds. Sonia Massai and Lucy Munro (New York: The Arden Shakespeare, 2021), 101-127; 111.

³⁸ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “strange (adj. and n.),” www.oed.com/view/Entry/191244, accessed December 22, 2023.

³⁹ The word “strange” in this context is overlooked in scholarship. When Janet Adelman counts the use of the word “stranger” in *The Merchant of Venice*, she does not include this moment among that number. See Adelman, *Blood Relations*, 10.

⁴⁰ Mary Janell Metzger, “‘Now by My Hood, a Gentle and No Jew’: Jessica, *The Merchant of Venice*, and the Discourse of Early Modern English Identity,” *PMLA* 113, no. 1 (1998): 52-63.

⁴¹ For an overview of the ways that Christianity deployed “dog-Jew” rhetoric over time and across contexts, see Kenneth Stow, *Jewish Dogs: An Image and Its Interpreters* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2006).

⁴² James Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 24.

⁴³ A version of this observation appears in my dissertation, in a chapter focused on the performativity of Jewishness in English Renaissance drama and what was meant by “acting Jewish”

masculinity with hyper-emotionality. It fits perfectly within the nexus of fabricating Jewish difference, as it is entirely described by Christian characters who construct the hysteria while the audience watches, a meta-demonstration of the invention of Jewish unmanliness in the popular English imagination and the ways that theater both exploited and reinforced such stereotypes.

Emasculating wordplay performs a significant role in the humor of this moment, by way of the heavy-handed catalog of paired losses. “Two sealèd bags,” “double ducats,” “two stones, two rich and precious stones”—there is little left to the imagination in Shylock’s loud, public confession of having been castrated. This admission would have made sense to contemporary audiences who were familiar with the Jewish circumcision ritual but erroneously conflated it with castration. It was widely believed that Jews were marked by a permanent kind of genital mutilation, a signifier of aberration that connected un-Christian practices to diminished manhood.⁴⁴ Julia Reinhard Lupton has shown that the early modern English were not only aware that Jews were circumcised, but that the circumcision ritual was a major symbol of somatic difference between Christians and the other Abrahamic religions.⁴⁵ Thus Shylock’s humiliation is wrapped up in gendered ‘funniness’. The exchange between Solanio and Salarino draws out that humor, denigrating Jewish men in public theater, inviting audiences to join in their ridicule, and confirming the shared superiority of Christians over the superseded Jew.

Shakespeare’s novel contribution to the “unmanly Jew” is the demise of family lineage. When proclaiming, “O my daughter! Fled with a Christian!,” Shylock is declaring a loss of paternity, not dissimilar from the effects of castration. The dispossession of power—in being unable to control his daughter’s movement, in being unable to express himself clearly in his distress, and in being unable to reclaim Jessica or the riches she took when departing—further emphasizes this

at that time. For more, see Becky S. Friedman, “‘The Badge of All Our Tribe’: Contradictions of Jewish Representation on the English Renaissance Stage” (PhD diss., University of Massachusetts, 2021), 175-226.

⁴⁴ James Shapiro addresses anxieties connected to the Jewish circumcision ritual and explains succinctly how it was misconstrued specifically to emasculate Jewish men. For more, see *Shakespeare and the Jews*.

⁴⁵ Julia Reinhard Lupton, “Othello Circumcised: Shakespeare and the Pauline Discourse of Nations,” *Representations* 57 (1997): 73-89; 82.

emasculatation. It can even be linked to other Shakespearean episodes about paternal failures; *King Lear* (c. 1606) features a freshly blinded Gloucester whose “precious stones”—eyes, in Gloucester’s case—are lost after his son Edmund betrays him (5.3.226).⁴⁶ The bodily corruption suggested by this recurring phrase likens the domestic chaos in both plays, though Gloucester’s story is regarded as pitiable, enshrined as it is in a tragedy, while Shylock’s is regarded as amusing, contained within a comedy. Shylock’s subsequent call to get Jessica back, saying, “Find the girl! She hath the stones upon her, and the ducats,” is as much a desire to regain his paternal status as it is to restore his wealth and his bodily integrity. His call goes unanswered, confirming the fecklessness of Shylock’s words and their emotional rather than productive nature.

There is no doubt that Jessica’s agency in this moment is contrasted with Shylock’s. She willfully casts off her Jewish difference at the same time that she abandons her father. She is even given joint authority of a Belmont estate, as Portia leaves and says, “I commit into your hands the husbandry and manage of my house [...] My people do already know my mind and will acknowledge you [Lorenzo] and Jessica in place of Lord Bassanio and myself” (3.4.24-40). The statement equates Jessica with Christian nobles, and even more, contrasts Jessica’s ability to manage a house with her father’s demonstrated failures.

Metzger has argued that “representations of Jessica [...] turn on alternating characterizations of her as a latent Christian and as a racialized and thus integrable Jew.”⁴⁷ This reasoning is especially cogent when juxtaposed with the ways that Christian characters describe Shylock. If he is the “cruel devil,” she is a “most beautiful pagan” (4.1.225; 2.3.10-11). And whereas he is a “cutthroat dog,” she is “gentle Jessica” or “fair Jessica” (1.3.121; 2.4.21; 2.4.43). These linguistic disparities reveal how anti-Jewish attitudes in English Renaissance drama were applied to representations of Jewish men but not their female counterparts. The fact that Jessica participates in this culture of denigration—saying, “Our house is hell” before escaping from it (2.3.2)—further communicates the extent of the gendered animus; Jewish women detest Jewish men as much as Christians do, reinforcing the collective impression of Jewish men as undesirable.

⁴⁶ William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, eds. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Washington Square Press, 2002).

⁴⁷ Metzger, “‘Now by My Hood, a Gentle and No Jew’,” 52.

The lack of Jewish wives is another meaningful detail in texts that seek to isolate and derogate Jewish men. The subtle references to a wife in *The Merchant of Venice* suggest that Shylock has been abandoned. At one point, he laments the loss of a ring given to him by someone named Leah, but her absence is never explained.⁴⁸ Neither Shylock nor Jessica shares anything about her, and, when Lancelet the servant jests that Shylock's wife had been unfaithful, Jessica does not deny it:

LANCELET. 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!

LANCELET. Truly, then, I fear you are damned both by
father and mother; thus when I shun Scylla your
father, I fall into Charybdis your mother. Well, you
are gone both ways.⁴⁹

Jessica's response to the claim that her mother committed adultery is remarkable; she does not reject the insinuation, even if she admits to hoping it isn't true. Neither does she clarify her mother's whereabouts or even get angry at the suggestion that her mother deceived her father. Lancelet observes how she does not challenge the accusation and then compares Leah to a mythical monster from Greek antiquity.⁵⁰ This abusive commentary insults Leah and Jessica, but is also injurious to Shylock whose wifelessness becomes a question of his ability to maintain domestic order. The unexplained absence of Leah is another item in a

⁴⁸ Shylock learns that Jessica traded this ring for a monkey and exclaims, "It was my turquoise! I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor. I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys" (3.1.119-122).

⁴⁹ Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, 3.5.9-13.

⁵⁰ The comparison should be familiar to readers of Adelman, who has shown how "contaminating mothers" may have contributed to the monstrous differences of the Jews. See Adelman, *Blood Relations*, 34.

long inventory of Shylock's losses, constructing a vision of male Jewishness which is marked by erosion, abandonment, and failure.

The mockery of Jewish ritual, the jokes about castration, the failure of Jewish fatherhood, the desertions perpetrated by a Jewish daughter, and the absence or attrition of a wife all contribute to an imaginary space where Jewishness hurtles towards an inevitable extinction. This vision of a world without Jews, staged in the popular context of early modern England's public theater, offers us a glimpse of the shared, robust fantasy of white Christian hegemony. At the end of *The Merchant of Venice*, the audience is left feeling as though order has been restored when Shylock is made to convert and then disappears. This outcome is consistent with medieval English texts engaging with Jewish questions and characters. As Lisa Lampert-Weissig has described it, such "movement[s] from disorder to order, from fragmentation to wholeness" capture the supersessionist fantasy.⁵¹ There is little doubt that the canonical works from the late Elizabethan period function precisely this way and use the emasculation of characters like Shylock to enable those conclusions.

The Shakespearean Legacy of Enfeebling Jewish Men

The performativity inherent in drama has enabled playwrights and players significant opportunity for denigrating Jewish characters. When Shylock asks, "Shall I bend low" in his negotiations with Antonio at the start of *Merchant*, for example, he demonstrates how the text and performance of Jewishness worked synchronously to present the Jew's position as inferior to his Christian stage peers (1.3.133-134). Shylock elucidates what Jewish behavior should be performed in the presence of Christians, and also how the actor should conduct himself when reciting those lines, since "he [was] free only to act as the text wished [him] to."⁵² Such physical lowering is not only recalled but demanded at the play's conclusion, when Portia addresses Shylock, saying, "*Down*, therefore, and beg mercy of the

⁵¹ Lisa Lampert-Weissig, *Gender and Jewish Difference from Paul to Shakespeare* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 104.

⁵² Stern, *Making Shakespeare*, 84.

Duke” (4.1.378; emphasis added). This language encapsulates the rightful display of Jewishness, and invites audiences to witness its inferiority.

The direct call for the performance of Jewish subordination demonstrates how popular English culture reproduced socio-political hierarchies in the theater, where reconstructions of power relations could be staged for the entertainment of spectators. When Christian authorities triumph over the threat presented by the Jewish figure, audiences would encounter the denouement with satisfaction that justice had won out. The direction to get “down” thus confirms the appropriate arrangement of Venice’s social order. If, at the beginning of the comedy, Shylock’s question is, “Shall I bend low,” this scene provides the answer.

Elizabethan dramas attest that the Jewish male body is undesirable, coursing with blood as corrupt as the Jews’ sense of morality, and adorned with physical features that are objectively repulsive:

SHYLOCK. I say my daughter is my flesh and my blood.

SOLANIO. 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.⁵³

The invocation of jet and ivory provides a fitting analogy for a text that engages so directly with questions of difference and likeness, composed at a time when categories and formations of race were being invented. Solanio’s claim discloses contemporary associations of fairness with favorable feeling and darkness with negativity, while his insistence that these somatic traits are not passed on from father to daughter reveals how the English were grappling with the heritability of race, religion, and nationhood.⁵⁴ *Merchant’s* incorporation of a Prince of

⁵³ Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, 3.1.37-41.

⁵⁴ Kim Hall’s work on the interconnections of evil, darkness, and race formation in the early modern world provides context for this contemporary thought well. For more, see Kim Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

Morocco as a suitor to Portia offers more evidence of the text’s broader questions about these themes, even if this character is quickly dismissed from the narrative. According to David Nirenberg, “The idea that the reproduction of culture is embedded in the reproduction of the flesh” proliferated in the premodern Iberian peninsula.⁵⁵ It was in this setting, where burgeoning populations of Jewish and Muslim converts and their descendants lived, that the fifteenth-century Spanish doctrine concerning the purity of blood (*Limpieza de sangre*) asserted the superiority of ‘Christians by nature’.⁵⁶ England embraced this racial logic, establishing a national identity, in part, by fabricating difference among Christian, Jewish, and Muslim bodies.⁵⁷ It is thus historically accurate for Shylock to cite his flesh and blood as proof of similitude between himself and his daughter. Solanio’s denial of those shared traits, however, indicates that there were competing theories on the subject. This argument concerning the affinities and variances between Jewish men and women captures the period’s rapidly evolving negotiations of communal exclusion and belonging. Shylock is understood to have the somatic features of a Jew, while Jessica, by contrast, is spared.

Merchant’s engagement with the problematization of Jewish male bodies and the theater’s continued investment in their somatic difference is reflected in performance history records. The Folger Shakespeare Library’s Digital Image Collections (LUNA), for example, contain a copious array of portrayals of Shylock as he was depicted in theater over a period of several hundred years.⁵⁸ Despite the range of media—including engravings, pencil illustrations, pen and ink drawings, watercolors, prints, photogravures, and more—Shylock is rendered with impressive consistency. He crouches, hunches, and crawls. He leers, sneers, and scowls. He also grasps, highlighting his constant engagement with material objects, whether they be moneybags, scales, or knives. When he appears in pictures with

⁵⁵ David Nirenberg, “Was there race before modernity? The example of ‘Jewish blood’ in late medieval Spain,” in *The Origins of Racism in the West*, eds. Miriam Eliav-Feldon, Benjamin Isaac, and Joseph Ziegler (New York - Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 256-257.

⁵⁶ The former were variously referred to as *Cristianos nuevos, confesos, conversos, marranos*, while the latter were described as *Cristianos de natura* and *cristianos viejos*.

⁵⁷ Jean Feerick, *Strangers in Blood: Relocating Race in Renaissance Literature* (Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2010).

⁵⁸ See the LUNA Collections online database: <https://luna.folger.edu/luna/servlet/allCollections>, accessed December 22, 2023.

other characters from *The Merchant of Venice*, his costuming is distinctive, darker than the garb of the Christian stage figures, or plainer in comparison. Often, he wears a robe or a loose shroud, demonstrative of his “Jewish gaberdine” as much as his unstylishness (1.3.122).



Fig. 1. Felix Octavius Carr Darley, *Shy*. “What should I say to you? ... I’ll lend you thus much monies?” *The merchant of Venice*, act I, scene III [graphic] / F.O.C. Darley, 1884, Indian ink wash with white pigment highlights, 409 x 318 mm, 1884, used by permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library.

Consider this late nineteenth-century drawing by Felix Octavius Carr Darley (Figure 1). The black-and-white illustration shows Shylock in a long tunic, adorned with utilitarian buttons and a circular badge on the upper-right sleeve.

This latter feature may be a reflection of Shylock’s own reference to “the badge of all our tribe” (1.3.120), or to the injunctions across Europe which had called for Jews to wear a badge in order to distinguish them in public.⁵⁹ He bows before two bored-looking Venetians, Bassanio and Antonio.⁶⁰ In stark contrast to Shylock’s bland, unornamented costume, the two men wear hats with feathers, embroidered garments, tights, swords, and elaborate footwear and jewelry. Their ornate sleeves and coiffured presentation all communicate superiority, and their haughty expressions and postures likewise convey their high rank. From costume to comportment, the performance of Jewish-Christian social differences as they were depicted in *Merchant* are preserved in Darley’s drawing.

My interest in this illustration is the diminished nature of Shylock’s body. He is old, a fact communicated by his white hair and wrinkles, and he carries a cane, a signifier not only of his corporeal weakness but also of the way his physicality is reduced. He may be bowing in this depiction, but even if he weren’t, his body would still be lower to the ground than Antonio’s or Bassanio’s. The cane bespeaks a general state of incapacity and emerges with regularity in the LUNA archive, revealing not only how the stage sought to deteriorate Shylock’s corporeal integrity in the early modern imagination but also how the legacy of enfeebling Jewish men was reproduced in the centuries after *Merchant* was composed.⁶¹ The preservation of the late sixteenth-century English stage-Jew in performances and depictions through the nineteenth century shows how popular culture latched on to visions of Christian dominance and Jewish subordination. The body of Shylock sustained the calculated performativity of Jewishness as weak, antiquated, and unmanly.

⁵⁹ This mandate came from the Fourth Lateran Council in the early thirteenth century, when a convocation of Catholic authorities produced a number of canons, including the enforcement of “a difference of dress...” so that non-Christians (“Jews or Saracens”) could “be distinguished in public from other people by the character of their dress.” See Norman Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 266.

⁶⁰ The penciled-in notes on the bottom of the image provide the quote for context: 1.3.130-139.

⁶¹ See the search results for “Shylock” in the LUNA Collections online database: https://luna.folger.edu/luna/servlet/view/search?search=SUBMIT&cat=0&q=%22shylock%22&dateRangeStart=&dateRangeEnd=&sort=call_number%2Cmpsortorder%2Ccd_title%2Cimprint&QuickSearchA=QuickSearchA, accessed December 22, 2023.

While most of the LUNA images date from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,⁶² these visualizations communicate associations of Jewishness that had circulated in early modern London. Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), for example, alleged that the Jews suffered from biologically determined maladies. In his encyclopedic study, Burton writes that "voice, pace, gesture, and looks [are] likewise derived with all the rest of [the Jews'] conditions and infirmities."⁶³ The diagnostic claim is useful not only in better accessing contemporary attitudes about Jewish bodies and their differences, but also in visualizing those "conditions and infirmities." This scientific rhetoric offers valuable support for early modern English theories of Jewish debility. Many of the Shylock illustrations in LUNA, particularly those featuring Charles Macklin, draw attention to the Jewish man's body via rounded shoulders or a hunched back, indicative of the infirmities associated with Jewish corporeality as well as the performance of physical lowness that became a part of "acting Jewish" in the centuries after Shakespeare's lifetime.

⁶² Emma Smith explores the Victorians' explosive interest in Shakespearean production and the figure of Shylock in particular in "Was Shylock Jewish?," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 64, no. 2 (2013): 188-219.

⁶³ Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy: What It Is, With All the Kinds, Causes, Symptomes, Prognostickes and Severall Cures Of It*, ed. Holbrook Jackson (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 211-212.

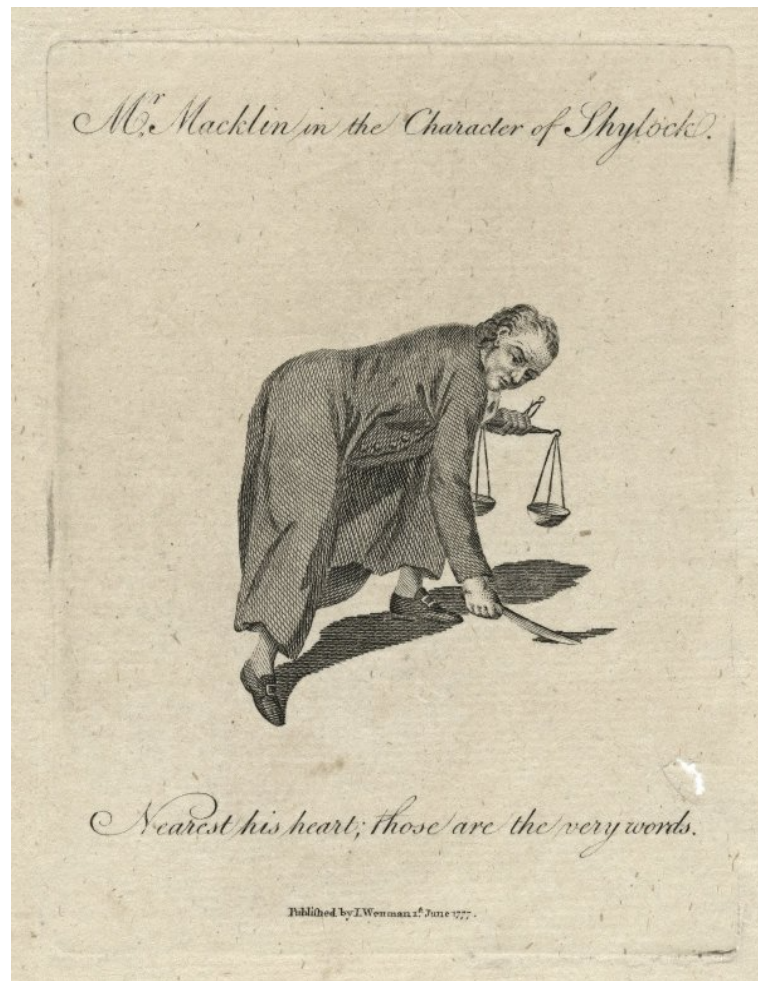


Fig. 2. I. Wenman, *Shy. Mr. Macklin in the character of Shylock [in Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice]: Nearest his heart, those are the very words [graphic]*, print engraving, 4 1/2 x 3 1/2 in., on sheet 8 1/2 x 5 1/4 in., 1777, used by permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library.

Figure 2 communicates how that posture could be read as humiliating and undignified even if it was also meant to convey violence. Macklin's front is facing away from the viewer, positioning his head low to the ground, his haunches directly before the audience's gaze. The comical presentation matches the combination of racism and humor that Peter Berek showed were intrinsic to early modern productions of *Merchant*.⁶⁴ Performativity was an important part of

⁶⁴ "Making characters 'look Jewish' was a way of making them funny," writes Berek. For more, see Peter Berek, "Looking Jewish on the Early Modern Stage," in *Religion and Drama in Early Modern*

Jewish male stage representation in Shakespeare's lifetime and after, and the manipulation of the body was a central mechanism of conveying that amusement. The Macklin etching also depicts how Shylock's access to space was thwarted on the stage, echoing the limitations on his access to social advancement.⁶⁵ It is a prime example of "space foster[ing] and troubl[ing] the antisemitism at work in English texts," which Kathy Lavezzo has observed in the entangled connections between the Jew, built environments, and spatial concerns.⁶⁶ While the familiar props such as the knife and scales accompany the stage figure, it is the pose that reveals the performativity of male Jewishness and the way that the theater enabled spectacles of debasement and subjection. Popular drama of the English Renaissance period capitalized on playgoers' established ideas about Jewish inferiority to produce such visualizations, and the canonicity of Shakespeare has made these visions an essential part of western imaginations through the enduring interest in and reproduction of *The Merchant of Venice*.

Conclusion

This article has shown how the English Renaissance stage manipulated the inherently performative space of the theater and the collective experience of spectatorship to exercise control over power relations that challenged white Christian dominance. Jewish male characters served as productive figures over which English Renaissance playwrights and audiences asserted superiority, appealing to religious, political, and social sensibilities all at once. Whether by exploiting jokes about their un-militaristic nature, feminine displays of emotion, and incapacity to be authoritative, or by capitalizing on ideations concerning their bodily difference or personal failures as fathers and husbands, the stage and the anti-Jewish culture of early modern England produced an icon of unmanliness.

England: The Performance of Religion on the Renaissance Stage, eds. Jane Hwang Degenhardt and Elizabeth Williamson (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), 55-70; 69.

⁶⁵ This theatrical rendering of Jewish social and spatial limitations is another form of ghettoization. Dana E. Katz explores this phenomenon in "'Clamber not you up to the casements': On ghetto views and viewing," *Jewish History* 24, no. 2 (2010): 127-153.

⁶⁶ Kathy Lavezzo, *The Accommodated Jew: English Antisemitism from Bede to Milton* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016), 8.

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This gendered construction of Jewishness provides a valuable lens for the ways that contemporary popular culture celebrated Christian supremacy and ensured its longevity by canonizing non-Christian others as rightfully, and laughably, inferior.

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Keywords: Jewishness, Masculinity, Performance, Early Modern, England

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