

Shakespeare Sunday

The Scripts: Merchant of Venice

by [Justin Alexander](#)

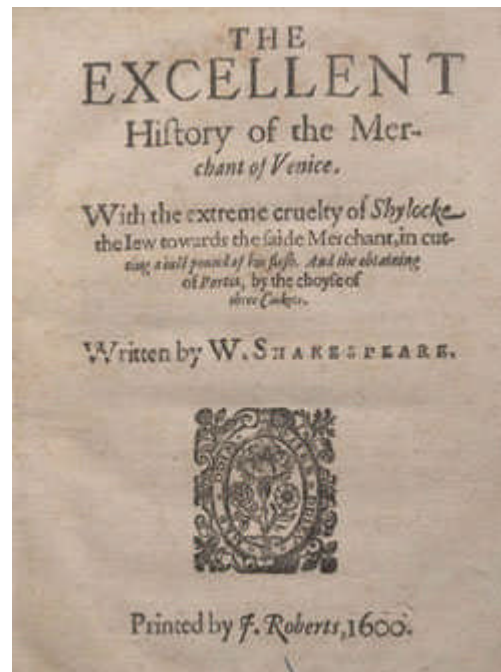
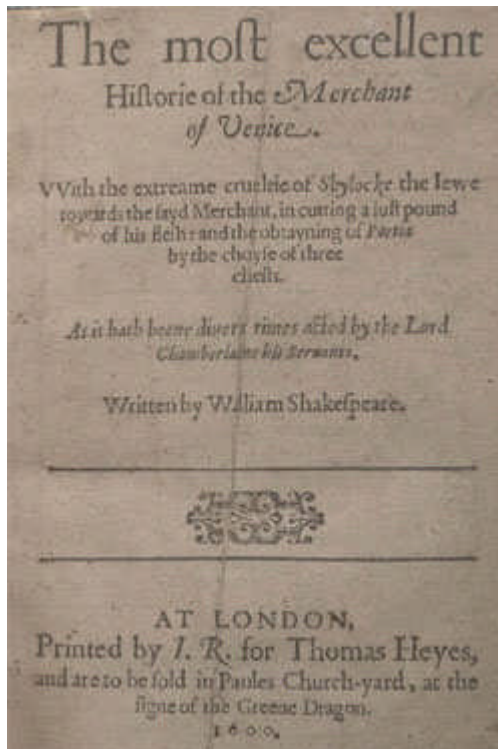
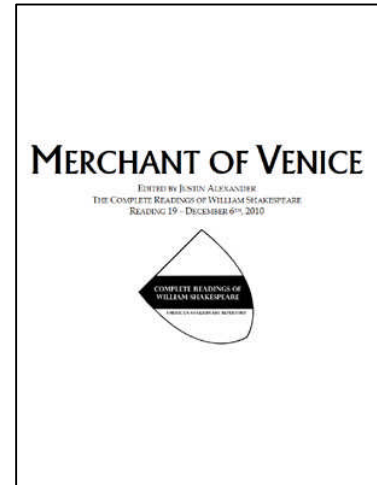
March 29th, 2015

As with the other ASR scripts prepared for the *Complete Readings of William Shakespeare*, the full script presents the complete play. The conflated script, on the other hand, is what we use in actual performance. The conflated script is uncut, but does contain the role conflation which allows us to perform plays which have 30-50 roles with casts of 10-15 actors.

[MERCHANT OF VENICE - FULL SCRIPT](#)

[MERCHANT OF VENICE - CONFLATED SCRIPT](#)

The textual history of *The Merchant of Venice*, while paling in comparison to [the tangle of Hamlet](#), is nevertheless something of a muddle. The confusion in this case arises almost entirely from the relationship between the First Quarto and Second Quarto of the play, both of which, according to the title pages, were printed in 1600:



Editors studying both of these quartos noted that the text we now refer to as the Second Quarto (Q2) appeared to be a superior text in that it corrected several errors found in the First Quarto (Q1). Two theories were postulated to explain the relationship between the texts: First, that Q1 was published first and, when the book went back to press for Q2, errors were corrected. (Possibly a fresh print run was

ordered *because* of the errors.) Second, that Q2 was published first and, when it sold out, a new print run was either hastily ordered, typeset from Q2, or both (introducing fresh errors).

(In order to maximize the confusion, the Q2 → Q1 version of the theory proved most popular and so, for a very long time, the texts were actually referred to using the opposite numbers: The text we now refer to as Q1 was called Q2; the text we now refer to as Q2 was called Q1.)

As it happens, neither of these theories were true.

The truth was ferreted out in the early 20th century by Alfred W. Pollard, W.W. Greg, and William J. Neidig. In 1619, the publishers William Jaggard and Thomas Pavier printed new editions of 10 Shakespeare plays. For reasons which are not entirely clear, but which probably have a lot to do with the fact that they didn't actually have legal right to publish all of these plays, Jaggard and Pavier printed many of these books with false title sheets claiming earlier publication dates and different publishers.

You can see where this is going: The Q2 of *The Merchant of Venice* was, in fact, one of the books published as part of the "False Folio" or "Pavier Quartos" (as these volumes have come to be known).

Once the truth came out, the textual history of *The Merchant of Venice* became a lot easier to figure out: Q1 had been published in 1600 (from either an authorial draft or a scribal copy); Q2 had been published in 1619 (from Q1); and the First Folio text had been published in 1623 (most likely from Q1, but including additional stage directions suggesting the copy may have been used as a theatrical prompt book).

LEGACY OF THE PAVIER QUARTOS

Intriguingly, the Pavier Quartos may have been responsible for the First Folio getting published. William Jaggard, responsible for printing the Pavier Quartos, was contracted just two years later to begin work on the folio. But why would you select a printer who had just attempted (or succeeded?) in pirating Shakespeare's work?

Possibly because Jaggard had one of the few print shops capable of handling a book of the First Folio's size. But also possibly because people who wanted to see Shakespeare's works back in print didn't *care* if Jaggard was ripping off somebody who owned the printing rights to a play but hadn't done anything with it for nearly two decades. (For example, J. Heyes owned the printing rights to *The Merchant of Venice*... but it hadn't been reprinted since 1600.)

The Pavier Quartos were also likely the first attempt to publish a collected edition of Shakespeare's work. (One theory is that the works were released as separate volumes only after the project collapsed. All of the title sheets, for example, were printed at the same time.) Although Ben Jonson's complete works had been published as a folio volume in 1616, attempts to collect the works of other playwrights had failed (and would continue to fail until Shakespeare's First Folio was published in 1623). In fact, it may have been the exact same people coordinating both attempts.

Or even if that isn't true, the publication efforts around the Pavier Quartos *did* have the effect of concentrating the printing rights of many Shakespeare plays into Jaggard's control. Without that first step, the final collection of printing rights which allowed the First Folio to exist at all might not have been possible.

The truth is that we will probably never have the facts necessary to untangle what, exactly, was going on in 1619. But the few documentary trails which remain paint a delightfully convoluted picture of intrigue, conspiracy, and literary piracy.

LEGACY OF THE MOBY SHAKESPEARE

The muddled textual history of *The Merchant of Venice*, however, does highlight a modern oddity of Shakespeare's plays.

If you search the internet for a Shakespeare play, you'll find versions of it scattered around on hundreds of different sites. But virtually all of these texts are derived from the Moby Shakespeare.

The [Moby Project](#) is a collection of public domain lexical resources, many of which are now mirrored by Project Gutenberg. In 1995, the Moby Project released an ASCII text version of the Complete Works of William Shakespeare. This text, in turn, was derived from the 1866 Globe Shakespeare. The Globe Shakespeare was selected because (a) it was in the public domain and (b) it served as a standard reference document for Shakespearean studies for more than 100 years due to its immense popularity. (For example, its line numbering was used by the Norton Facsimile Edition of the plays, which means it's *still* the standard line numbering used in virtually all scholastic papers.)

But the Globe Shakespeare naturally couldn't benefit from any of the advances in scholastic techniques or bibliographic knowledge in the 150 years since it was published. And therefore the Moby Shakespeare didn't benefit from them. And because the Moby Shakespeare is now all-pervasive on the internet, it's having the interesting effect of rolling back decades of scholastic research.

Take *The Merchant of Venice*, for example: When the Globe Shakespeare was published, it was believed that Q2 was the most accurate of the original source texts in representing Shakespeare's original text. We now know beyond a shadow of a doubt that this isn't true, but we don't have time machines, so the Moby Shakespeare (based on the Globe Shakespeare based on Q2) is simply *wrong*.

SEE ALSO

- [Merchant of Venice: The Three Sallies](#)
- [Merchant of Venice: Elizabethans and the Jews](#)
- [Merchant of Venice: The Pound of Flesh](#)
- [Merchant of Venice: The Great Conversion](#)
- [Merchant of Venice: The Soul of Shylock](#)

TEXTUAL PRACTICES

Source Text: First Quarto (1600)

1. Emendations from First Folio in <diamond brackets>.
2. Original emendations in [square brackets].
3. Speech headings silently regularized.
4. Names which appear in ALL CAPITALS in stage directions have also been regularized.
5. Spelling has been modernized.
6. Punctuations has been silently emended (in minimalist fashion).
7. The characters of "Salanio", "Solanio", "Salarino", and "Salerio" have been [corrected and regularized](#).

Originally posted on December 1st, 2010.

Shakespeare Sunday - Merchant of Venice

The Three Sallies

by [Justin Alexander](#)

April 5th, 2015

In the original text for *The Merchant of Venice* there are, arguably, four different characters with similar names: Salanio, Solanio, Salarino, and Salerio. (Salarino is also spelled Salaryno, but that's a fairly self-evident variant.) The Second Quarto in 1619 changed all the instances of "Solanio" to read "Salanio", and since the Q2 text was preferred for the next few centuries most modern editions still follow this practice and narrow the list to Salanio, Salarino, and Salerio.

John Dover Wilson referred to these character as the "Three Sallies" in his efforts to unravel the rather vague identities of these characters for the New Shakespeare edition of the play. My own work on the Q1 text confirmed that his conclusions were generally sound, and the ASR script for *The Merchant of Venice* generally follows his practices.

First, there is the character of Salanio/Solanio. This character first appears in 1.1 and is identified in the first stage direction and speech heading as "Salanio". But the character is then referred to consistently as "Sola." in the remaining speech headings and then "Solanio" in the stage direction for his exit. Similarly, in his next appearance in 2.4, the character is identified as "Salanio" in the first stage direction before becoming "Solanio" in the first speech heading and then "Sol" for the rest of them. In 2.8 the character is "Solanio", "Sola", and "Sol". And, finally, in 3.1 he is "Solanio", "Solan", "Sola", and then "Solanio" again.

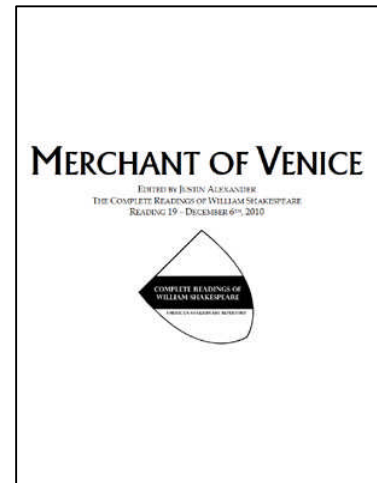
In the balance, I am forced to agree with John Dover Wilson that the text's overwhelming preference for "Solanio" would be respected by more modern editors if the 1619 quarto hadn't arbitrarily corrected the name to the form of its first, irregular spelling.

In the ASR script, therefore, the character is "Solanio".

Second, there is the character of Salarino/Salerio. As "Salaryno" the character appears in the first stage direction in 1.1, then as "Salarino" in his first speech heading. He then becomes "Salar" once, "Sala" once, "Sal" once, and then "Salarino" for his exit. In 2.4 he is "Salaryno" once again for his entrance, "Salari" once, and then "Sal" for the rest of his speech headings. (It is notable that the distinction between "Sol" for Solanio and "Sal" for Salarino/Salerio in these scenes requires the spelling of "Solanio" and not "Salanio".) In 2.8, he is once again "Salarino" in the stage direction and then "Sal" in all speech headings. In 3.1, he remains "Salarino" in the stage directions but becomes "Salari" for all speech headings.

At this point, both Solanio and Salarino disappear from the play. They are replaced by a completely new character named "Salerio" who shows up in Belmont for 3.2 ("Sal" in speech headings), teleports back to Venice for 3.3 ("Sal" and "Sol" in speech headings), and then appears in the courtroom in 4.1 (where he's given no entrance, but is referred to as "Salerio" in both his speech headings).

John Dover Wilson argues that "Salerio" must be either Solanio or Salarino, and I'm forced to agree: It makes little sense for the other two characters to simply disappear from the play while being replaced by a third character out of wholecloth. The most likely error is that "Salerio" and "Salerino" should be the



same character, misread by the compositors of Q1. Between the two, Wilson argues that "Salerio" must be the correct form because (a) it is the only form found in actual dialogue and (b) it matches scansion in the dialogue where it does appear while "Salarino" does not. (This, to my eye, appears to be a little loose. But it is true that "Salerio" matches the scansion perfectly in most cases and acceptably in the rest, whereas "Salarino" causes far more problems if you choose it.)

But the reality of the situation is more complicated than that, because it appears that Salerio's appearance in 3.3 is a completely different error: First, he leaves Belmont with Bassanio and Gratiano at the end of 3.2, so it makes little sense that he has somehow gotten back to Venice ahead of the others without mentioning their approach to Anthonio. Second, his appearance would require an exit at the end of 3.2 and then an immediate re-entrance at the beginning of 3.3 (a practice Shakespeare never engages in for obvious reasons). Finally, the character's identity is somewhat confused in any case: In the Q1 text he appears as "Salerio" in the stage direction, "Sol" in his first speech heading, and then "Sal" in his second speech heading.

The Q2 compositors apparently recognized the problem and corrected the character to "Salarino". But since Salarino and Salerio are the same character, this obviously doesn't solve the problem. The First Folio, on the other hand, correctly changes the character's name to Solanio.

Taking all of that into consideration, therefore, we take our Four Sallies and reduce them to two: "Salanio" and "Solanio" are both Solanio. "Salarino", "Salaryno", and "Salerio" are all Salerio (except for 3.3, where Solanio is restored to his proper place).

Originally posted on December 7th, 2010.

Shakespeare Sunday - Merchant of Venice

Elizabethans and the Jews Part 1: The Dark Reflection

by [Justin Alexander](#)

April 12th, 2015

Elizabethan England was a fundamentally tumultuous society. By the time Shakespeare started writing his plays in the last decade of the 16th century, the country had been completely disrupted by a century of successive crises. Its success in rising to these crises had transformed England into a nascent world power, but in the process its identity had been torn apart.

Today we might talk about the Elizabethans looking for their national identity, but the very concept of a “nation” was a significant part of their philosophical confusion. “Nationalism”, as we think of it, was a concept in the process of being invented, and there were a lot of questions about how, exactly, a “nation” should be defined: Was it a political entity? A geographic boundary? A religious community? A racial group? Or some combination of all four?

In struggling with these questions, Elizabethan philosophers and political thinkers turned their attention to the Jews. Jews deeply unsettled theories of “nation” because they were a nation without geographic borders or political power. (While simultaneously being prophesied, by some, to regain those things.) At the same time, Jews had been banished from England in 1290 and in their “absence” (they had never been completely expelled) they also served as a convenient example of something inherently “not English” at a time when the entire country was struggling to evolve the nationalistic concept of what it meant to *be* English.

Of course, Elizabethan England was also a place of religious crisis. The grandparents of Shakespeare’s generation had converted to the Church of England under Henry VIII; their parents had returned to Catholicism under Queen Mary; and they themselves had grown up Protestant once again under Queen Elizabeth. In a time when people were struggling to define what it meant to be *really* Christian, the Jews once again provided a universal contrast that easily exemplified what it meant to be “not Christian”. At the same time, conversion to Judaism was a cessation of one’s Christianity in a particularly regressive fashion, which meant that the Protestants would accuse the Catholics of having secretly become Jews while the Catholics would accuse the Protestants of the same.

But at the very time that the Jews were becoming a convenient embodiment of the Other — the non-Christian, non-English outsider against which a divided society could collectively unify itself — the Jewish identity itself was fracturing.

The primary epicenter of the problem lay in the heart of Elizabethan England’s greatest rival: Spain. Catholic Spain had begun forcibly converting Jews in the late 13th century. When the Jews were finally exiled from Spain in 1492, it was an effort to expunge the most recalcitrant of the Jewish hold-outs. By that point, however, it was too late. Forced conversions, apparently, weren’t all that effective and paranoia was erupting: How many of the Jews-turned-Christians (now referred to as “marranos”, a



Spanish term which was adopted into Elizabethan English) were still secretly Jews only pretending to be Christians? It was a “crisis” which could only be “solved” by unleashing the Spanish Inquisition.

The Spanish Inquisition, of course, was a horror show which resolved nothing. But in its wake it left the legacy of the “secret Jew” and the burning question of how one could identify a Jew. (These were not easy questions to resolve: Even Jewish authorities of the time were deeply divided on whether not the marranos should still be considered Jews. And the question of whether blood, belief, or physical circumcision define Judaism is one which continues today both within and without the Jewish community.)

The idea of the “secret Jew” quickly grew beyond the boundaries of the marranos communities. For example, the ease with which members of the Church of England could accuse Catholic leaders of being secret Jews (and vice versa) depended on an underlying belief that not only could Jews be *anywhere*, but that at any moment faithful Christians could suddenly turn into (or reveal themselves to be) Jews.

From there it was a pretty short leap to, “The secret Jews are corrupting our children!” In more rational discourse (comparatively speaking), this belief took the form of, “If we make it legal for Jews to live in England again, then they’ll convert us all to Jews!” In the populist wilds of urban legend, however, Jews began kidnapping children and forcibly circumcising.

And it wasn’t long before “they’re kidnapping our children to circumcise them!” became “they’re kidnapping our children to circumcise them, murder them, and then eat them!”

The Jew was a boogeyman.

Originally posted on December 4th, 2010.

Shakespeare Sunday - Merchant of Venice

Elizabethans and the Jews

Part 2: The Jewish Boogeyman

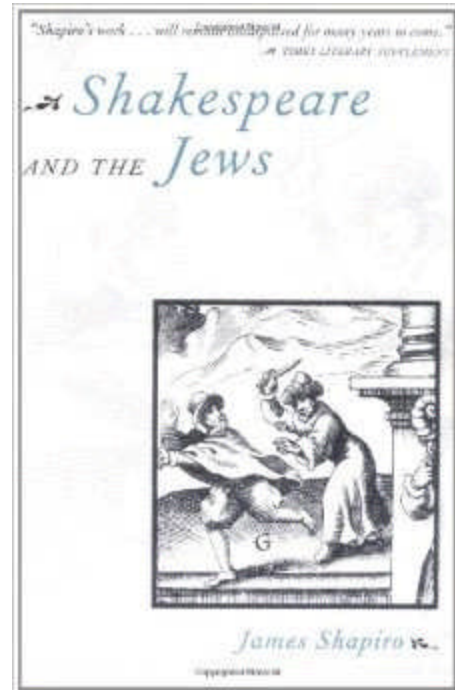
by [Justin Alexander](#)

April 19th, 2015

The exiled Jew could be treated politically, religiously, and racially as the antithesis of "Englishness". He was simultaneously a secret, corrupting threat. As James Shapiro expresses it in [Shakespeare and the Jews](#), "The Jew as irredeemable alien and the Jew as boogeyman into whom Englishmen could be mysteriously 'turned' coexisted at deep linguistic and psychological levels."

Perhaps the purest expression of the Jewish boogeyman can be found in the widespread tales of Jewish ritual murder which sprung up like wildfires throughout England during the 16th century. In the *Jew of Malta*, Christopher Marlowe collected these tales and personified them all in the villainous Jew Barabas, who brags:

I walk abroad o' nights,
And kill sick people groaning under walls:
Sometimes I go about and poison wells;
And now and then, to cherish Christian thieves,
I am content to lose some of my crowns,
That I may, walking in my gallery,
See 'em go pinion'd along by my door.
Being young, I studied physic, and began
To practice first upon the Italian;
There I enrich'd the priests with burials,
And always kept the sexton's arms in ure
With digging graves and ringing dead men's knells:
And, after that, was I an engineer,
And in the wars 'twixt France and Germany,
Under pretence of helping Charles the Fifth,
Slew friend and enemy with my stratagems:
Then, after that, was I an usurer,
And with extorting, cozening, forfeiting,
And tricks belonging unto brokery,
I fill'd the gaols with bankrupts in a year,
And with young orphans planted hospitals;
And every moon made some or other mad,
And now and then one hang himself for grief,
Pinning upon his breast a long great scroll
How I with interest tormented him.
But mark how I am blest for plaguing them—
I have as much coin as will buy the town.



The *Jew of Malta* might have been fiction, but it reflected dozens of similar stories which were being published as nonfiction every year with virtually no written rebuttal or questioning of their veracity.

Interestingly, the first known repudiation of the charge that Jews committed ritual murder in the history of the world was also one of the few published in Elizabethan England. It was made available when Thomas Lodge translated Josephus' rebuttal of Appion's charges of Jewish ritual murder. (This becomes even more interesting when one considers that Thomas Lodge was an author well known to Shakespeare. Shakespeare would later adapt Lodge's *Rosalynde* to the stage as *As You Like It*, but his entire early career was heavily influenced by the book's cross-dressing heroines and comic conceits. It doesn't take much imagination to say that Shakespeare was a fan of Thomas Lodge, making it likely that he was familiar with this Jewish self-defense.)

Shapiro writes again in *Shakespeare and the Jews*:

"Lodge's translation describes how Antiochus, who invaded and desecrated the Jews' Temple in 168 B.C., came upon a man held prisoner in the Temple. The man told Antiochus that 'he was a Grecian' who, 'travelling in the country to get his living ... was suddenly seized ... and brought unto the Temple and shut up therein.' He had been 'fed or fatted with all dainties that could be provided,' which 'at first ... made him joyful, but afterward he began to suspect it.' Finally he demanded of his jailors why he was being kept there, and learned to his horror that 'the Jews' annually take 'a Grecian stranger and feed him [for] a year'. At that time they 'then carry him to a wood, and there ... kill him and sacrifice him according to their rites and ceremonies, and ... taste and eat of his entrails.' Afterwards they cast the 'residue of the murdered man ... into a certain pit.'

The story contains all of the defining features of native versions of the accusation circulating in Lodge's England: the yearly crime, the initial imprisonment of the victim, the cannibalistic devouring of the body, and the attempt to hide traces of the body and the crime. What sets Lodge's book apart from earlier English accounts of Jewish ritual murder is his decision to include Josephus' repudiation of this 'forged lie'. This 'fable', Josephus argues, 'is not only stuffed full of all tragical cruelty' but is 'also mingled with cruel impudency'. Josephus contested the accusation on factual grounds, and asks 'how is it possible that so many thousand people as are of our nation, should all eat of the entrails of one man as Appion reporteth?' Josephus first refutes the charge point by point and then concludes that it is 'ignominious ... for a grammarian not to be able to deliver the truth of a history' and accuses Appion of 'great impiety and a voluntary forged lie' in spreading this myth.

In understanding the full scope of how the Jew existed as both Alien and Monster in Elizabethan culture and thought, we can now turn our attention towards Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* within the specific context in which it was written.

Originally posted on December 4th, 2010.

Shakespeare Sunday - Merchant of Venice

The Pound of Flesh

by [Justin Alexander](#)

April 26th, 2015

One of the two main plots in *The Merchant of Venice*, of course, revolves around the pound of flesh which Anthonio forfeits to Shylock when he fails to repay his bond. Although an Italian collection of stories entitled *Il Pecorone* is usually cited as the primary source of this plot (insofar as it most closely resembles the story in Shakespeare's play), the truth is that there were dozens of variations of this story to be found and it's likely that Shakespeare was familiar (or at least acquainted) with several of them. (There are even versions in which it is the Christian who is attempting to claim a pound of flesh from the Jew.)

One of these stories is Alexander Silvayn's *The Orator*, which shares certain turns of phrase with *The Merchant of Venice* and contains one particular passage which highlights a potentially revealing continuity glitch in the play:

Neither am I to take that which he oweth me, but he is to deliver it me. And especially because no man knoweth better than he where the same may be spared to the least hurt of his person, for I might take it in such a place as he might thereby happen to lose his life. What a matter were it then if I should cut off his privy member, supposing that the same would altogether weigh a just pound?

Combined with the fact that Elizabethan playwrights often used "flesh" as a pun for "penis" (Shakespeare does it multiple times in *Romeo & Juliet*, for example), it certainly raises the question of exactly what Shylock means when he says "an equal pound of your fair flesh to be cut off and taken in what part of your body pleaseth me" (Act 1, Scene 3). The sexual pun that also evokes the castration imagery of circumcision certainly isn't a slam dunk from a textual standpoint, but it is a legitimate option.

Of course, by the trial scene the nature of the bond has transformed. Instead of being taken from "what part of your body pleaseth me", Portia describes the bond as allowing "a pound of flesh to be by him cut off nearest the merchant's heart".

This sort of continuity glitch is far from unusual in Shakespeare's plays. (In fact, strict continuity is a modern bugaboo that Shakespeare often ignored in favor of the immediate needs of dramatic effectiveness.) But this particular glitch may be deliberate.

One of the key distinctions drawn between Jews and Christians by Elizabethan theologians focused, perhaps unsurprisingly, on the matter of circumcision. While the Jews believed in a physical circumcision marking their covenant with God, the Christians made a metaphorical circumcision of their hearts (as described by Paul). Thus, by shifting the pound of flesh from Anthonio's "privy member" to his Christian heart, Shakespeare is shifting from one sort of circumcision to the other. More than that, Shylock's surgery takes a metaphorical Christian ritual and turns it into a literal Jewish ritual, while simultaneously allowing him to take from Anthonio the very thing which makes him Christian. (Consider, too, that



Antonio in this same scene is given a long speech explicitly calling out the hardness of Shylock's "Jewish heart", emphasizing this Elizabethan distinction between Jew and Christian.)

The ritualized nature of Shylock's intended murder of Antonio is now obvious. What's particularly compelling about it, however, is that it is ritualized *through the legal system*; i.e., through the system of laws which defines the nation. In combination with the religious elements inherent in the circumcision imagery, Shakespeare successfully unifies all of the societal disruptions personified by "the Jew" in Elizabethan consciousness into the Jewish boogeyman of ritualized murder.

The poetic justice of Shylock's punishment also becomes clear as the full importance of the "pound of flesh" is revealed. Shylock's forced conversion is often viewed by modern readers and commentators as a needless cruelty, and its harshness is not tempered when one learns that it is a creation unique to Shakespeare's version of the story. But Shylock was not threatening merely Antonio's life; he was threatening to take from him his Christianity. In the giving of justice, therefore, it lies with Antonio to now "better the instruction" (in Shylock's words) and "hoist him by his own petard" (in Hamlet's). As Shylock tried to unmake Antonio as a Christian, so his punishment is to be unmade as a Jew.

Originally posted on December 4th, 2010.

Shakespeare Sunday - Merchant of Venice

The Great Conversion

by [Justin Alexander](#)

May 3rd, 2015

The source of the Jew's alien threat in the Elizabethan consciousness, of course, lies in their religious ostracism. Curiously, however, the religious perception of Jews in Elizabethan England was a double-sided one of both villification and hope. On the one hand, the ancient slander that the Jews had murdered Christ and were thus cursed by God were alive and well (and "explained" for some why God refused to let them assimilate into society like other immigrants). On the other hand, they were still considered to be play an important role in God's ultimate plan.

Specifically, English Protestants, in their conflict with Catholics, needed some explanation for why God had allowed the false faith of the Catholic Church to rule for hundreds of years. To greatly simplify the matter, they looked for their answers in the Book of Daniels and the Book of Revelation:

And I saw an Angel come down from heaven, having the key of the bottomless pit, and a great chain in his hand. And he took the dragon, that old serpent which is the devil and Satan, and he bound him a thousand years.
(Revelation 20:1-2)



This passage, taken from the Geneva Bible of 1587, was interpreted to mean that the Catholic Church had, in fact, been doing Satan's work for a thousand years. The Pope was thus transformed into the Antichrist and the fact that God had allowed the false Catholic Church to flourish was, in fact, all part of the divine plan leading to Christ's return. The rise of the Church of England was interpreted as the breaking of Satan's chains, the fulfillment of God's promise, and the beginning of the end of days.

And at that time Michael shall stand up, ye great prince, which standeth for the children of thy people, and there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there began to be a nation unto that same time: And at that time thy people shall be delivered, every one that shall be found written in the book.
(Daniel 12:1)

Combined with the visions of Revelation, the visions interpreted by the prophet Daniel linked the salvation of the Jews to the end of the world. For the Elizabethans, this meant a mass conversion of the Jews to Christianity. (How else could they be saved?)

So if they were right and the Catholic Church was wrong, it meant that the end of the world was nigh. And if the end of the world was nigh, then the Jews should all be converting very, very soon now. In other words, Elizabethan Protestants *needed* the Jews to convert in order to prove them right.

Around this time there was a major debate regarding whether the Jews should be allowed to return to England. There were, of course, political and economic factors driving this debate. But the major reason

cited by proponents of a Jewish return was that Jews should be brought to England *so that they could be converted* in God's chosen land (and, thus, bring about the end of the world).

When Shakespeare has Shylock (and then Gratiano) name Portia a "second Daniel" repeatedly throughout the final trial scene of *The Merchant of Venice*, there is a specific invocation of a millenaristic prophecy which was directly tied in the popular mind to the conversion of the Jews... which is then immediately sequenced by the conversion of a Jew.

Many modern texts will gloss the reference to Daniel as referring specifically to the tale of Susannah (in which Daniel saved Susannah from false accusation in a public court by cleverly questioning her accusers). If so, the choice is interesting: The tale of Susannah is not, in fact, part of the Jewish Tanakh and appears only in Christian scripture. Shakespeare would likely have been aware of this, because the tale of Susannah was also explicitly excluded from being a part of official church doctrine in the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England (for similar reasons). Thus, in a religiously charged sequence, Shakespeare may be choosing to specifically allude to a key division between both Jews and Christians, and also between Catholics and Protestants.

But I'm not certain Susannah is the essential crux here, as Daniel was generally understood to be "ten times better than all the enchanters and astrologians that were in all [King Cyrus'] realm" (Daniel 1:20). Daniel was, in particular, given a particular speciality in the matter of visions and dreams (Daniel 1:17), and in that role he interpreted the dreams of Nebuchadnezzar while under the false name of Belshazzar (just as Portia is appearing under the false name of Balthazar).

In either case, the allusion to Daniel in general ties the conversion of Shylock to a more universal debate regarding the importance of converting Jews to Christianity. Which, in turn, raises questions regarding the universal quality of the conversion-as-punishment: Shylock sought to unmake Anthonio's Christianity; so the punishment meted by Anthonio is to unmake Shylock as a Jew. So (in the Elizabethan conception) did the Jews seek to destroy Christ and would be converted in the due course of God's plan. And Daniel evokes Christ for us by revealing Nebuchadnezzar's vision of a statue of gold, silver, brass, and iron (in a play where gold, silver, and lead caskets are similarly given symbolic meaning) destroyed by a great stone (later interpreted as Jesus) cut from a mountain (as the flesh is to be cut from Anthonio).

Have we delved deep? Are we now staring into our own navels instead of the play? Perhaps.

But what is certain is that the religious content of *The Merchant of Venice* is not a thin glaze applied to coat Shylock's villainy. The Biblical allusions are thick in this play, and the scriptural questions often explicit. If the play thus opens itself to the rich ambiguities inherent in the apprehension of the religious experience it is almost certainly to the play's credit.

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Shakespeare Sunday - Merchant of Venice

The Soul of Shylock

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When Shakespeare sat down to write *The Merchant of Venice*, he was tapping into the well-established Elizabethan genre of the “Jewish Villain”. After *The Merchant of Venice* itself, Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta* is the most famous example of the genre, but it was only one among a dozen or more plays of the same type which had been written in the 1580’s and early 1590’s.

And the genre was currently hot stuff.

In 1594, Queen Elizabeth’s personal physician, Rodrigo Lopez, was convicted as part of a conspiracy to poison the the queen. Lopez was a converted Jew from Portugal, and his identity as a marrano (or hidden Jew) played a major role in the publicity surrounding his trial.

The salacious nature of the case hyped interest in Jewish villain plays. For example, *The Jew of Malta*, originally produced in 1589, enjoyed renewed success and a fresh spike of interest that lasted for several years (as indicated in Henslowe’s Diary by the frequent performances it received). So *The Merchant of Venice*, like a modern Hollywood blockbuster, was pretty much calculated to take advantage of the current theatrical trends.



One can see the influence of the genre on *The Merchant of Venice* when Shylock first turns to address the audience and, like Marlowe’s Barabas, uncloaks his villainy:

How like a fawning publican he looks.
I hate him for he is a Christian:
But more for that in low simplicity
He lends out money gratis, and brings down
The rate of usance here with us in Venice.
If I can catch him once upon the hip,
I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him.
He hates our sacred nation, and he rails
Even there where merchants most do congregate
On me, my bargains, and my well-won thrift,
Which he calls interest: Cursed be my tribe
If I forgive him.

But in the process of creating Shylock, Shakespeare applied his natural instincts as a playwright. There are few authors in the history of the world with Shakespeare’s grasp of human psychology or his ability to evoke it in his characters. Shakespeare couldn’t simply conjure up the image of a Jewish boogeyman on the stage; he needed to understand the root and nature of it. He needed to create Shylock’s soul. And a few lines later, he begins to find it:

Signior Anthonio, many a time and oft
 In the Rialto you have rated me
 About my moneys and my usances:
 Still have I borne it with a patient shrug
 (For sufferance is the badge of all our Tribe);
 You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog,
 And spit upon my Jewish gaberdine,
 And all for use of that which is mine own.
 Well then, it now appears you need my help:
 Go to then, you come to me, and you say,
 "Shylock, we would have moneys", you say so:
 You that did void your rheum upon my beard
 And foot me as you spurn a stranger cur
 Over your threshold, moneys is your suit.
 What should I say to you? Should I not say
 "Hath a dog money? Is it possible
 A cur can lend three thousand ducats?" Or
 Shall I bend low, and in a bondman's key,
 With bated breath and whisp'ring humbleness,
 Say this: "Fair sir, you spit on me on Wednesday last,
 You spurn'd me such a day, another time
 You call'd me dog: And for these courtesies
 I'll lend you thus much moneys"?

What would drive a man to such depths of villainy? Revenge. Revenge for his way of life being mocked. Revenge for his livelihood being threatened. Revenge for being treated like a dog. Revenge for his daughter being stolen from him.

The result is a deeply unsettling play because, even as it takes the form of an anti-semitic genre, Shakespeare's gifts create a completely believable, psychologically rich, and utterly believable Jewish character to serve as its villain. It is much easier to deal with bigoted literature when it stars vapid, mindless caricatures. But it is deeply disturbing when a genius finds exactly the buttons necessary to turn the soul of man into the most horrific stereotypes and then proceeds to relentlessly *push them*.

It has been argued that *The Merchant of Venice* was designed from the beginning to highlight Christian hypocrisy and the painful dangers of bigotry. I don't know if that's true (there's much to suggest that it isn't). But as we delved into the play, I became increasingly certain of this: As he explored the hateful depths of the Christian bigotry he used to create Shylock's villainy, Shakespeare found that he didn't like it very much.

Beyond the ambiguous boundaries of the play itself, consider Shakespeare's later contribution to *Sir Thomas More*. More has confronted a riot of Englishmen seeking to attack and exile immigrants:

Grant them removed, and grant that this your noise
 Hath chid down all the majesty of England;
 Imagine that you see the wretched strangers,
 Their babies at their backs and their poor luggage,
 Plodding tooth ports and costs for transportation,
 And that you sit as kings in your desires,
 Authority quite silent by your brawl,
 And you in ruff of your opinions clothed;
 What had you got? I'll tell you: you had taught

How insolence and strong hand should prevail,
How order should be quelled; and by this pattern
Not one of you should live an aged man,
For other ruffians, as their fancies wrought,
With self same hand, self reasons, and self right,
Would shark on you, and men like ravenous fishes
Would feed on one another.

Shakespeare characterizes those who would act on their racist impulses as specifically destroying “the majesty of England” in one of the most effective evocations of the dangers of irrational bigotry in all of English literature. How easy is it to see Gratiano’s bull-headed racism in *The Merchant of Venice* as one of those “other ruffians” that “with self same hand, self reasons, and self right would shark on you”?

And then there’s this: Phrases like “I am a Jew if I don’t do X” and “if you don’t do X, then you are a Jew” were a common parlance in Elizabethan English. Given this important context, consider anew Shylock’s most famous speech:

I am a Jew: Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh? If you poison us do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villany you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.

I am a Jew. In saying that, Shylock is claiming for himself something which was inherently shunned in the language of the time. And then he transforms it and humanizes it. He forces the audience to put themselves into his shoes.

Shakespeare, too, had used the “I am a Jew” turn of phrase routinely, turning it into a punchline for *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (twice), *Henry IV Part 1*, and *Much Ado About Nothing*. He also used other Jew jokes in *Love’s Labours Lost* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

But after writing *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare abruptly stopped using Jew jokes. In fact, depending on when one dates the composition of *Much Ado About Nothing*, after writing *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare *never* used another Jew joke (although he would continue writing for another 15-20 years).

We know this wasn’t a shift in the language: Other writers were still using the phrase. But in writing *The Merchant of Venice* something had shifted in Shakespeare. In creating the soul of Shylock, he had transformed his own.

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