Shylock’s Sacred Nation

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Thomas Middleton’s *Triumphs of Honour and Industry* (1617) features a “Pageant of Several Nations” celebrating George Bowles’s election as Lord Mayor of London. The printed quarto includes the following list of “nations” who show Bowles “a kind of affectionate joy . . . which by the virtue of Traffic, is likely ever to continue” on his inaugural procession to and from Whitehall:

- An Englishman.
- A Frenchman.
- An Irishman.
- A Spaniard.
- A Turk.
- A Jew.
- A Dane.
- A Polander.
- A Barbarian.
- A Russian or Moscovian.

Like other Jacobean civic pageants, *The Triumphs of Honour and Industry* defends the civilizing power of commerce. A key function of the civic pageant was to prepare Bowles for his official duty as overseer of a commerce that was increasingly dependent on foreign trade. The Irish were active importers of Flemish spices, silks, and groceries in the sixteenth century, and they expanded their export of hides, yarn, skin, and cloth to England and the Continent in the seventeenth century. The “Barbarian” was probably a Native American or tribal African with whom English merchants and explorers might trade. Both

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would have been categorized by English viewers as infidels who, like the Jews, were potential candidates for religious conversion. Unlike the other nations of Middleton’s pageant, however, the Jews had no homeland to call their own. Why, then, is a Jewish “nation” on this list?

Middleton’s pageant registers a new meaning of such a nation as defined by trade. Following the Jews’ expulsion from the Iberian peninsula in the late fifteenth century, European trading capitals such as Rome, Venice, Prague, and Amsterdam extended denizenship rights of limited residency and restricted trade privileges to Jews in exchange for their mercantile services. These cities hoped that Jewish trading connections would boost import and export duties and help maintain peace between nations. Such Jewish trading “nations” were modeled on Christian European mercantile “nations” of merchants from cities like Genoa and Venice, and they sparked intellectual debate among Christians who were in the process of redefining their own political and economic identities. Christian scholars such as Carlo Sigonio in Bologna and Bonaventure Corneille Bertram in Geneva took new interest in Jewish religious and intellectual traditions. In England, theologian Richard Hooker and legal scholar John Selden could both write of the Jewish nation in their exploration of such diverse topics as divorce, observation of the Sabbath, and the authority of the church.

These and other authors approached the topic of Jewish identity primarily from an international perspective, since there were so few Jews living openly in England. This fact may also help to explain why only one of the dozen or so extant plays with major Jewish characters is set in England. This essay traces the influence of new Jewish trading nations on two of the most prominent representations of Jews in sixteenth-century England: Marlowe’s *Jew of Malta* and Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*. Our historical understanding of Jews in this period tends to focus on negative stereotypes, but there are other, more positive accounts of Jewish integration that have been overlooked. Where some new historicist and postcolonial accounts of these plays read the early modern Jew

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3 See Carlo Sigonio, *De Republica Hebraeorum* (Bologna, 1583), and Bonaventure Corneille Bertram, *De Politia Judaica* (Geneva, 1574). James Shapiro describes unprecedented interest in the Jewish nation as a theological and political category by sixteenth-century English authors, but he overlooks the commercial elements; see *Shakespeare and the Jews* (New York: Columbia UP, 1996), esp. 13–17, 167–80.

4 Shapiro, 174.

as a universal “other,” I show how both plays situate Jews within discourses and practices of early modern political economy.\(^6\)

Between 1492, when Spain began to exile Jews who refused to convert to Christianity, and the late seventeenth century, when Jews achieved new prominence in trade and as members of European courts, displaced Jews gained residency under temporary contracts that granted shelter from religious persecution in exchange for their contribution to what in 1598 Daniel Rodri
gna referred to as the “public good” of well-ordered commerce.\(^7\) From Italy to Poland to the Low Countries, Jews negotiated these rights in numerous commonwealths and under diverse political conditions.\(^8\) By the seventeenth century, Jewish lawyer Martin Gonzales de Celorio
dico defended the Gente de la Nacion Hebre
a (1619) in explicitly mercantilist terms, and Duarte Gomes Solis argued in his Discorso sobre los Comercios de las Indias (1621) that Jews sustained the “‘life blood’” of the Portuguese empire, which he defined as “‘commerce.’”\(^9\) As the Oxford English Dictionary suggests, the emergence of a Jewish “nation” based on trade in sixteenth-century Europe did not supplant earlier definitions of the “nation” as a biblically ordained category of ethnic identity, but rather drew on older models of the biblical nation even as it designated new mercantile structures of early modern Europe.\(^10\)

A Jewish nation based on trade challenged foundational beliefs of some Christians about Jewish identity. Gentiles defined themselves as a nation distinguished specifically from that of the Jews.\(^11\) Authors from Martin Luther to Samuel Purchas associated Jews with homelessness and failed assimila-

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\(^6\) For an influential reading of the colonial context of The Jew of Malta, see Emily C. Bart


\(^8\) For an overview of the charters or condotte governing Jewish trading privileges, see Robert Bonfil, Jewish Life in Renaissance Italy, trans. Anthony Oldcorn (Berkeley: U of California P, 1994), 85–90.


\(^11\) OED Online, s.v. “gentile, a. and n.” 1.
tion. Henry Blount, for example, regarded the Jews he encountered during his travels to the Levant as “a race from all others so averse both in nature and institution.” Andrew Willet likewise determined that Jews were unique in their tendency to remain aliens in Christian nations where they lived: “a Jew . . . whether he journeys into Spain, or France, or into whatever other place he goes to, declares himself to be not a Spaniard or a Frenchman, but a Jew.” Several sixteenth-century Jewish merchants challenged such stereotypes in their petitions for civic charters, which highlighted the potential of Jews to enhance trade as an engine of political power. These claims offer one type of evidence for the strengthening of links between trade and political hegemony in Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Although they petitioned many European capitals for denizenship rights and trading privileges between 1490 and 1570, Jews found little sanctuary anywhere in Europe, with the minor exception of Charles V’s toleration of those Jews who participated in his anti-Protestant campaigns during the 1540s. Rome also offered a temporary safe haven for exiled Jews before Pope Paul IV adopted strict Counter-Reformation policies in the 1550s and 1560s. Largely rejected by Christian Europe, many exiled Jews emigrated to the Ottoman Empire, where they became actively involved in trading networks with both the East and West. Several Italian cities, including Florence, Savoy, and Ancona, admitted Jewish “nations” in the sixteenth century. The commercial empire of Venice was home to at least five legally designated alien communities: German merchants, many from Nuremberg, Ratisbon (Regensburg), or Augsburg; Greek Orthodox immigrants from eastern colonies of the Venetian empire; and three separate populations of Jews—Tedeschi, Sephardic, and Levantine. Venice was also celebrated for its population of aliens: French envoy Philippe de Comynes noted that “most of their people are foreign-

12 Henry Blount, A Voyage into the Levant, 2d ed. (London, 1636), 2 (sig. A2’).
13 Andrew Willet, De Universali et Novissima Iudæorum Iudæorum Vocatione (Cambridge, 1590), sig. 25'; translated and quoted in Shapiro, 168.
Tedeschi Jews of Germanic origin who acted primarily as moneylenders lived in Venice as early as the fourteenth century, but following the 1502 discovery by Portuguese merchants of a new trade route to the East around the Cape of Good Hope, Venice increased its Jewish population in defense of its established trading monopoly. Levantine Jews came from the East (their name is derived from the Latin verb *levare*, referring to the rising sun), while Ponentine Jews came from the West (their name comes from the verb *ponere*, alluding to the setting sun). In the sixteenth century, both sects were largely composed of New Christians who were allowed to engage in trade with the East or West and were given restricted citizenship rights. Both groups of Jews were originally permitted to reside in Venice for only fifteen days a year, but in 1516 the Great Council established the first European “ghetto” for permanent residence by all Sephardic Jews who fled persecution in Spain and Portugal. Venice gave sanctuary to Jewish moneylenders of the Venetian mainland who fled the armies of the League of Cambrai in 1509. Levantine Jews earned admittance to the city after they had adopted Ottoman citizenship and then migrated to Venice, where they were given official status as Ottoman merchants.

Celebrated for its justice, equality, and independence from centralized monarchies like the Hapsburgs, the Venetian Senate nevertheless struggled to accommodate its diverse populations. The Senate officially recognized Levantine Jews in 1541 and suggested that Jews with trading and citizenship rights would have “better reason to bring their merchandise here, to Venice’s advantage.” Thereafter, Venice allowed Jewish merchants to live in the city for

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19 The word “ghetto” refers to the foundry around which the original settlement was arranged. A Jewish district existed in Prague as early as 1262, and many cities of the Holy Roman Empire had Jewish quarters between this period and the sixteenth century. But following the establishment of the Venetian ghetto in 1516, other Italian cities gave the same name to their enclosed, regulated Jewish communities. See Robert C. Davis’s introduction to *The Jews of Early Modern Venice*, ed. Robert C. Davis and Benjamin Ravid (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2001), vii–xix, esp. ix–x.
20 Ravid, “First Charter,” 188.
22 Quoted from and translated in Chambers and Pullan, eds., 344. The Jewish ghetto expanded in 1541 to include the Ghetto Vecchio, the only expansion allowed by the city until the formation of the Ghetto Nuovissimo in 1633. See Brian Pullan, *The Jews of Europe and the Inquisition of Venice, 1550–1670* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble, 1983), 157.
up to two years, although some in the Senate periodically tried to exile Jewish Marranos. Occasional persecution and heavy taxes led Jews to demand official charters, or condotte, that would codify their rights. Venetian authors in the first half of the sixteenth century defined trade as what Manfredo Tafuri called a “foundation of internal harmony” that could restore peace to the Venetian empire. Later, the Jewish merchant Daniel Rodriga petitioned the Venetian senate directly for extended privileges for Jewish merchants, including the right for immediate family members to join their merchant spouses and fathers. Rodriga’s 1589 charter proposed that Jews be given rights equivalent to those of Venetian citizens in order to trade with the Levant. Rejected a number of times, a modified bill was approved by the College of the Senate in 1589 that guaranteed safe conduct to all “Levantine or Ponentine Jewish merchants,” along with their families, and offered them freedom from molestation so long as they remained in the increasingly crowded ghetto. All Jews were required to pay a hundred ducats to the state in exchange for this privilege.

Over the course of the sixteenth century, Jews were forced by law and circumstances to renew their charters of denizenship approximately once a decade, sometimes in the face of vocal objections from Venetian citizens and rival merchants. Efforts by Venetian Christians to expel Jews climaxed in 1638, following a number of robberies falsely attributed to Jewish denizens. One of the most important defenses of the Jewish nation in Europe emerged from this conflict—Rabbi Simone Luzzatto’s Discourse on the State of the Jews, Particularly Those Dwelling in the Illustrious City of Venice. The treatise argues explicitly that the “particular devotion” of Jews “to the mercantile profession” increases import and export duties to Venice, since Jews 1) pay over 70,000 ducats to the state annually, 2) bring goods from remote places to “serve men’s needs as well as to ornament civil life,” 3) supply “the workers and artisans with” the “wool, silk, cotton,” and other goods that they need, 4) export Venetian goods, and 5) promote “commerce and mutual negotiation between neighboring peoples” to

25 Ravid suggests that Jews had the same rights as Venetian citizens; see “The Legal Status of the Jewish Merchants of Venice, 1541–1638,” Journal of Economic History 35 (1975): 274–79, esp. 274. Benjamin Arbel argues that a “closer examination of the charter and the developments related to it indicates that in matters of international trade the republic was not quite ready to put these Jewish merchants on an equal footing with Venetian full-rights citizens.” See “Jews in International Trade: The Emergence of the Levantines and Ponentines,” in Davis and Ravid, eds., 73–96, esp. 88.
26 A translation of the 1589 charter appears in Chambers and Pullan, eds., 346–49.
counter the natural human inclination for warfare.\textsuperscript{27} Echoing previous charters that define the Jews as a trading nation, Luzzatto identifies placelessness as an essential component of Jewish mercantilism:

\begin{quote}
It seems that having the trade handled by the Jews is a perfect help . . . since they do not have their own homeland to which they aspire to transport the possessions they amassed in the City, nor in any place do they have permission and right to acquire real estate; nor, if they had it, would it be in their interest to do so and tie up and commit their possessions while their persons are subject to many changes, since they abide in every place with safe-conducts and permissions of the rulers.\textsuperscript{28}
\end{quote}

Scattered throughout the world, Jews, according to Luzzatto, were naturally suited to assist in the global circulation of goods and money. Deprived of land, vessels, and schools, Jews had to seek permission from Christian rulers to engage in commerce. Luzzatto defends Jews’ continuing presence in Venice on mercantilist principles, emphasizing both a balance of trade and the enhancement of customs revenues through trade.\textsuperscript{29} He suggests that a state based on commerce offers greater stability than one based on war and notes that the “greatest attractor of business is freedom to live and security in one’s possessions, which is what Venice exactly and punctually provides for its inhabitants and its merchants.” These economic privileges provide a “real stimulus to the Jewish nation, naturally diffident due to its weakness.”\textsuperscript{30} Luzzatto measures peace not just as an absence of warfare, but also in terms of the vitality of civic trade. The Discorso emphasizes that Jewish merchants pay duties on exports that are lost when foreigners conduct trade and suggests that Jews are more eager to supply artisans and provide tradesmen for naval service than are representatives of other religions.\textsuperscript{31}

The language of Luzzatto’s discourse—religious toleration, freedom of trade, security of possessions—anticipates the arguments of Bruno Bauer in the nineteenth century, which Marx critiques in his essay “On the Jewish Ques-


\textsuperscript{28} Trans. in Ravid, \textit{Economics and Tolerance}, 62.


\textsuperscript{30} Trans. in Dooley, ed., 392.

\textsuperscript{31} Trans. in Dooley, ed., 393–94.
To the extent that a “Jewish question” existed in early modern Europe, it was focused on mercantile issues. Authors such as Jean Bodin, Barthélémy de Laffemas, Gomes Solis, Lopes Pereira, and Antoine de Montchrétien urged religious toleration of Jews based on their potential mercantile service to the state. Following their example, Luzzatto and others emphasized economic pragmatism over abstract ideals of statesmanship. Bodin’s influential theory of sovereignty, for example, suggests that sound fiscal policy contributed to political stability by helping to temper abuses of royal power. He substitutes a bureaucratic structure for the legal checks on royal power as a means of elevating the ideology of monarchy and implementing practical solutions to theoretical problems. Bodin invokes the Jewish nation in his essay on sovereignty, as well as in his early mercantilist tract on inflation rejecting the “paradoxes” of Malestroit. Bodin also wrote a 1593 essay on religious toleration (Colloquium Heptaplomeres de Rerum Sublimium Arcanis Abditis), which argued for the universal harmony of diverse religions in the service of the state. The Colloquium stages a respectful debate among representatives of Catholicism, Judaism, natural philosophy, Lutheranism, Calvinism, skepticism, and Islam. The dialogue attempts to imagine toleration of belief and suggests that the state should not concern itself with the establishment of a single true religion. Bodin naturally sets his dialogue in Venice:

Whereas other cities and districts are threatened by civil wars or fear of tyrants or harsh exactions of taxes or the most annoying inquiries into one’s activities, this seemed to me to be nearly the only city that offers immunity and freedom from all these kinds of servitude. This is the reason why people come here from everywhere, wishing to spend their lives in the greatest freedom and tranquillity of spirit, whether they are interested in commerce or crafts or leisure pursuits as befit free men.

32 Bruno Bauer first coined the phrase "Jewish Question" or Judenfrage in a pamphlet by that title in 1842. Marx responded with his 1843 essay “On the Jewish Question,” which argued that the political emancipation of the Jews actually demotes religion and property rights to an alienated “civil society” that is also in need of emancipation. See Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society, trans. and ed. Loyd D. Easton and Kurt H. Guddat (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 216–48. Greenblatt (see n. 6 above) reads Barabas in The Jew of Malta as the alienated essence of capitalism, as opposed to Christianity (291–92).

33 See Israel (n. 14 above), 56–57.

34 Israel, 37.

Drawing on this Venetian example, Bodin regards both religious toleration and economic policy, including the maintenance of a stable currency, as essential for the success of the state.

Sixteenth-century studies of comparative religion such as Bodin’s *Colloquium* raised new questions about the place of Jews, pagans, and Native Americans in the Japhetan lineage outlined in the Old Testament. From the genealogical perspective of Mosaic history, Jews played a fundamental role in establishing Christianity’s authority: they witnessed the historical validity of Christ, as marked in the opening passages of Matthew tracing the generations of Jesus back to Abraham, and they embodied the elect nation that was prophetically replaced by Christianity. Like pagan mythology that could be assimilated to Christian truth through the application of allegorical interpretation, Jewish “error” in rejecting the Christian messiah could be redeemed through conversion. Yet, so long as they failed to convert to Christianity, Jews remained obstacles to the universal church. Martin Luther first displayed tolerance for the continued presence of the Jews in Europe but later composed the notoriously anti-Semitic tract *On the Jews and Their Lies* in 1544, which advocated violence against Jews who refused to convert. At the same time, Protestants in England such as John Bale could look forward to the time when the conversion of the Jews would usher in the Second Coming, and John Knox regarded biblical Israel as a precursor for a new English Protestant nation of the elect. In *Acts and Monuments*, however, John Foxe rejects the model of the Jewish nation by denying Jewish election in the first place, equating Judaism and Catholicism as forms of false Christianity that must be overcome. But, as Sharon Achinstein

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argues, Foxe mixes this position with a more sympathetic account of Jews, exemplified by his portrait of the Jewish martyr Gonzales Baez.  

Foxe’s *Actes and Monuments* reflects an ambivalence characteristic of English Protestants who studied Hebrew and Jewish *kabbalah* in the name of purifying the Catholic church. Many such Protestants employed traditional stereotypes of Jews as social and religious pariahs. Foxe, for instance, invokes the myth of the *foetor judaicus* or “Jewish odor” in a story about a Jew who falls into a privy, a tale he links to violence against Jewish rebels in 1189. Foxe’s anti-Semitism follows in the tradition of Luther and Erasmus, who feared that the study of Hebrew by reformers would also lead them away from Christ. Erasmus went so far as to assure Hochstraten, the representative of the Inquisition in Cologne, that he secretly supported antisemitic pogroms, saying, “If it is Christian to hate the Jews, here we are all Christians in profusion.” James Shapiro describes numerous ways that Christians feared Jewish “contamination” and recognized in Judaism the origins of their own religion. As Saint Paul remarks in his epistle to the Romans, the Jews have the “prophets” of receiving “the oracles of God” (Rom. 3:1–2). Early modern Jews could represent, paradoxically, both an intransigent particularism, symbolized by the covenant of circumcision, and a potential universalism, realized in part through trading and other financial activities. Following Paul, Christians revised the literal and exclusionary act of circumcision into a spiritual covenant with God that depends on the heart rather than the external mark of the flesh. But Jewish circumcision contains the seed of Christian universalism, a notion of brotherhood from which civic rights could be derived.

Christian commonwealths emphasized Jewish capacity for maintaining trade and banking services as necessary elements of civic life and political stability. Such is the schizophrenia of a process of state building that, as Walter Benjamin suggests, finds barbarism at the heart of its civilizing principles.

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41 Achinstein, 86, 96.
43 Shapiro, 44–51, esp. 50.
And yet, by dividing trading Jews from moneylending Jews and by isolating both groups in ghettos, European cities preserved Jewish otherness in religious and cultural terms; the emergent “state” (newly defined as a political entity in the sixteenth century) secretly coveted what it publicly despised. In many European cities, Jews could be punished for identifying themselves in public. In Amsterdam, for example, Jews were forced to refrain from observing religious rites and other practices—a rabbi noted in 1616 that “each [Jew] may follow his own belief but may not openly show that he is of a different faith from the inhabitants of the city.” By contrast, the Venetian senate required Jews to express their religious differences, forcing them to enact the very rituals of faith that would have marked them as targets of the Inquisition elsewhere in Europe. This policy directly violated the Pope’s counter-Reformation policies. Fra Paolo Sarpi, a chief apologist for the Venetian senate, draws specifically on Rodriga’s 1589 charter (shown here in italics) in explaining this Venetian practice:

The Marranos cannot be subjected to the office of the Inquisition, having received a safe-conduct enabling them to come and live with their families in the Dominion and leave at their pleasure, with their possessions, living in the ghetto and wearing the yellow hat, and to exercise their rites and ceremonies without hindrance and this permission was granted to them for the public benefit of Christianity, so that they should not carry so much wealth and needed industriousness to the lands of the Turks.

This forced publicity of the Jews—the requirement that they display the external “rites and ceremonies” of their faith—confirmed their status as resident aliens within the commercial state and as emblems of the origins of Christianity. Justifying Venetian policies in mercantilist terms, Sarpi acknowledges that commercial competition necessitates the extension of trading privileges to Jews because they might otherwise aid the Turks, chief military and commercial

47 The first author to use the English word “state” in its modern sense as a political entity was Thomas Starkey in his Dialogue between Pole and Lupset, ed. T. F. Mayer, Camden Royal Historical Society 37 (London: Royal Historical Society, 1989), 40.


49 As Benjamin Arbel argues, the protection of Jewish merchants by the Ottoman Empire spurred the extension of similar privileges in Christian countries of the Mediterranean, especially in Italy. See Trading Nations: Jews and Venetians in the Early Modern Eastern Mediterranean (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), esp. 2–4, 29–54.


competitors to the Venetian empire. In offering protection from the Inquisition, Venice also emphasized Jewish identity as an externalized set of practices and actions, perhaps to distract Christians from Venetian dependence on the Jews as economic agents. In the same spirit, Venetian condotte defined Jews as culturally other, even as they acknowledged their economic utility. Sarpi alludes to the “public benefit” that Jews provided to Christians, defined specifically as the “wealth and needed industriousness” that Jews offered Venice.

The historic emergence of a Jewish trading nation in early modern Europe helps explain key elements of Jewish figures in *The Jew of Malta* and *The Merchant of Venice*. Marlowe’s Barabas is a Levantine Jew engaged in overseas mercantile trade, while Shakespeare’s Shylock is a Tedeschi Jew who practices moneylending and other small-scale banking services. But both plays represent their Jewish protagonists as central to the commercial and political life of their host states in the face of religious and political prejudice. As *The Jew of Malta* opens, Barabas proclaims his membership in a pan-European community of merchants:

They say we are a scatter’d Nation:  
I cannot tell, but we have scambled up  
More wealth by farre then those that brag of faith.  
There’s Kirriah Jairim, the great Jew of Greece,  
Obed in Bairseth, Nones in Portugall,  
My selfe in Malta, some in Italy,  
Many in France, and wealthy every one.

(1.1.118–24)52

Barabas includes at least one actual merchant in his list of fellow Jews, since “Nones” probably refers to the Nunes family of Portuguese Marranos that had connections with the government of Elizabeth I.53 The word “scamble”—to scavenge for money—carries with it the connotations of a disgraceful act, but Marlowe uses the term to signify the improvisatory nature of Jewish mercantilism. Barabas goes on to celebrate the ways in which commerce provides him and his fellow Jews with new types of power, the kind that traders use to “[rip] the bowels of the earth” in search for gold, “making the Seas their servants” (ll. 106, 107). Such power elevates Jewish mercantilism over a Christian poverty that masks “malice, falshood, and excessive pride” (l. 114).


In claiming that his substantial wealth derives from the “Blessings promis’d to the Jews” (l. 102), Barabas links commercial activity to the biblical covenant between God and Abraham, the “father of many nations” (Gen. 17:5). Like several authors of Jewish charters for denizenship in early modern Europe, Barabas regards his successful commerce as biblically ordained. As God says to Abraham: “Knowe this of a suretie, that thy sede shal be a stranger in a land, that is not theirs, foure hundreth yeres, and shal serue them: and thei shal entreate them euil. Notwithstanding the nacion, whome thei shal serue, wil I iudge: and afterward shal thei come out with great substance” (Gen. 15:13–14). God tells Abraham that his “sede” will inherit the land of Canaan in which he is presently a “stranger” (Gen. 17:8). But in the intervening centuries, to the great profit of the rulers of the nation that they inhabit, the Jews will serve as strangers. Paul and other Christians separate Christian “gentiles” from the Jewish “nation.” For instance, Paul explains how Christ has liberated Christians from the “curse of the Law” so that “the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Christ Iesus” (Gal. 3:13, 14). In the process, he isolates Jews from the universality implied in the phrase “many nations” of Genesis, substituting instead a Christian version of abstract universalism.\(^{54}\)

For Barabas, the “blessings” promised to the Jews arrive in the potentially sacrilegious form of money. If Genesis promises the Jews land, Barabas suggests that Jews must reap wealth, since his people are not destined for “principality” (1.1.13). Such a revision of the original biblical injunction demonstrates one way that Marlowe remakes Barabas into a villain, but it also invokes the logic of the sixteenth-century Jewish nation.

As a crossroads of trade famed for its immigrant population, Malta offered Marlowe an appropriate setting for staging conflicts between trading wealth, religious identity, and political power. The island was also historically important for the emergence of Jewish trading nations. A Spanish dominion overseen by Sicily, the island had a community of Jews dating at least as far back as the Roman Empire. Following the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, this community was offered the choice of exile or conversion.\(^ {55}\) Charles V gave the island to the Order of the Knights Hospitaller of St. John in 1530, after the Order was exiled from Rhodes by the Turks eight years earlier. It was only after the arrival of the Knights that Maltese Jews lost their status as citizens, becoming slave-like captives of the newly governing Christians.\(^ {56}\)

\(^ {54}\) I thank Jason Rosenblatt for pointing this out to me.


\(^ {56}\) See Godfrey Wettenger, The Jews of Malta in the Late Middle Ages (Malta: Midsea Books, 1985), 15.
from Auvergne, Provence, France, Aragon, Castile, England, and Italy managed the defense of the island against attack, including the Great Siege of Suleiman I in 1565. This four-month assault, in which 250 Knights and 7,000 soldiers from Malta and Spain defended the island against a Turkish force of more than 30,000 men, was identified as part of an apocalyptic struggle between East and West. As Queen Elizabeth conceded on the eve of the battle, “If the Turks shall prevail against the Isle of Malta, it is uncertain what further peril might follow to the rest of Christendom.”

European Catholics and Protestants alike greeted the failure of the Turkish assault on Malta with relief. Anti-Turkish sentiment increased in England, which regarded the defeat of the Ottoman Empire as essential to its own imperial ambitions. Rather than focus on this recent military victory against alien incursion, however, Marlowe depicts the Governor and Senate of Malta as weak and conniving victims of Spanish and Ottoman power. Instead of framing Malta as a site of heroic defense against Ottoman incursion, Marlowe explores the relationship between Jewish trading wealth and the management of the state. The Jew of Malta displays the religious and political hypocrisy of Malta’s Governor, first in his seizure of the wealth of the Jews and then in his willingness to submit to Spain, represented by Martin del Bosco, in order to avoid paying tribute money to the Turks. This emphasis on the Catholicism of the Knights of Malta allows Barabas, like Faustus, to operate as a crowd-pleasing agent of anti-Catholic farce. Yet the conflict between Christian and heathen gives way to a conflict between the management of the state and the mercantile wealth amassed by Barabas as part of a Jewish nation. Barabas’s praise of his “infinite riches” in the opening soliloquy invokes the idolatrous worship of money familiar from morality plays, but Marlowe shows how this wealth actually maintains political and national stability in The Jew of Malta.

Like other Marlovian heroes, including Faustus and Tamburlaine, Barabas is a radical individualist; he only wants the freedom to accumulate his private wealth and refuses to be lumped together with the “Tribe” from which he is “descended” (1.2.114). His international trading connections offer him a surrogate community, at once cosmopolitan and dispersed. It is not surprising that he strives throughout the play to isolate his wealth from political actions, remaining indifferent about who will “conquer, and kill all” (1.1.149) in Malta “So they spare me, my daughter, and my wealth” (l. 150). But Ferneze and the

59 Simon Shepherd, Marlowe and the Politics of Elizabethan Theatre (Brighton, UK: Harvester Press, 1986), 170. See also Bartels (n. 6 above), 5.
Christian leaders of Malta refuse to let Barabas enjoy his wealth in private, citing the “common good” (1.2.99) in seizing Jewish wealth in order to pay the neglected tribute money to the Turks. As Ferneze explains in response to Barabas’s question (“Is theft the ground of your Religion?” [l. 96]):

No, Jew, we take particularly thine
To save the ruin of a multitude:
And better one want for a common good,
Than many perish for a private man:
Yet Barrabas we will not banish thee,
But here in Malta, where thou gottst thy wealth,
Live still; and, if thou canst, get more.
(ll. 97–103)

The name “Barabas,” of course, is also the name of the murderer set free by Pilate at the request of the crowds, who condemn Christ instead, an event recorded in Mark 15:7 and John 18:40. Marked as both a Jew and a scapegoat who allows Jesus to be crucified, Barabas exemplifies both individualism and nationalism. Echoing the words of Pilate to Christ, Ferneze isolates Barabas as a necessary sacrifice for the good of the commonwealth. Ferneze’s commonwealth ideology rings hollow, shadowed as it is by his executive order against a particular minority. Wealth turns out to be a sign of power for Barabas, but it is not directed toward the state’s stability. Instead of banishing Barabas to a foreign land, Ferneze insists that he remain in Malta as a resident alien, where he can gain more private wealth useful to the state.

*The Jew of Malta* exposes the inadequacies of the ancient system of tribute money, as well as the futility of Ferneze’s attempt to replace the tribute system with Spanish hegemony, represented by the Spanish slave trader Martin del Bosco (2.2.36–56). Ferneze and his fellow Knights compound their incoherent fiscal policy by relying on del Bosco—whom English audiences would have associated with the Spanish Inquisition and with rapacious colonialism—to prop up the kingdom of Malta. Despite the Governor of Malta’s victory over the Calymath and his destruction of Barabas, the play shows trade to be an essential component of political stability: the peace in Malta with which *The Jew of Malta* begins, in which “all the Merchants with all ther merchandize / Are safe arriv’d” (1.1.50–51), dissolves into a violent farce of religious conflict. Barabas begins the play as a merchant whose “credit” is based on his personal reputation, one strong enough to serve as if he himself “were present” (ll. 56,

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60 Luc Borot, by contrast, sees competing political economies in the play: “The Knights are an aristocratic commonwealth, the Turk a tyrant, the Spaniard a traditional monarch, Barabas . . . a short-time tyrant.” See “Machiavellian Diplomacy and Dramatic Developments in Marlowe’s *Jew of Malta*,” *Cahiers élisabéthains* 33 (1988): 1–11, esp. 2.
57) in the custom house. Trade enables his reputation: as he asks, "Tush, who amongst 'em knowes not Barrabas?" (l. 66). It is only after the Governor of Malta makes unjust demands on the Jews that Barabas assumes the stereotypical role of Jewish villain—"We Jewes can fawne like Spaniels when we please" (2.3.20)—against the Christians.

In the same sense that Venice required Jews to wear the signs of their faith externally, Marlowe depicts religious identity as a series of behaviors that can be put on and off in reaction to changing political and economic conditions. Christian hypocrisy breeds Jewish vengefulness and subversion, as Barabas engages in increasingly outrageous plots of murder and deceit. But his character is not merely an expression of Machiavellian policy, and the conventional argument that Marlowe frames religion as a cover for economic exploitation overlooks religion’s importance in the administration of the Maltese state.61

Professions of religious sincerity mask a desire for gold, as suggested by the cross marking the location of hidden gold in Barabas’s house, which is turned into a convent after Barabas refuses to pay tribute money. Yet the play ironizes Martin del Bosco’s famous argument that the “Desire of gold” (3.5.4) rules the world. As G. K. Hunter notes, Barabas’s materialist philosophy also contains specific theological propositions: the language with which Barabas urges his daughter to help him reclaim his wealth is enriched by a second layer of biblical allusions to spiritual profit, and Barabas later tries to claim an individual covenant with God. In addition, the governor’s arguments justifying the seizure of Jewish assets to pay the Turks resemble those used by Peter the Venerable to force the Jews to pay for the Second Crusade.62 Barabas’s increasingly violent schemes—setting the two suitors to his daughter against one another, poisoning the nuns, conspiring with the Turks, murdering the friar and framing his companion—challenge the political and economic stability of the island.

Religious violence thus emerges out of the failed commercial relations in the play. The seizure of Jewish wealth by the Knights of Malta compensates for the immoderate wealth of the individual merchant but compromises the political stability derived from peaceful trade. The short-lived friendship between Barabas and Ithamore, Jew and Muslim, invokes the possibility of what Lupton calls the “universitas circumcisorum” as a means of linking disparate peoples in bonds of civic affiliation.63 Ultimately, wealth and the flow of capital rather than

61 An example of such a conventional reading is that of Howard S. Babb, “Policy in Marlowe’s The Jew of Malta,” *ELH* 24 (1957): 85–94.
63 Lupton, Citizen-Saints, 66.
religious friendship determine both status and personal relationships in the
play, suggesting that only economic bonds can overcome national and religious
differences. Malta falls into chaotic violence because it fails to recognize the
importance of Jewish mercantilism.

*The Jew of Malta* refuses to make stereotypical connections between Jews
and usury. Instead, it stages the centrality of mercantile wealth to political
economy. To this end, Marlowe echoes contemporary treatises on the uses of
money that identify new connections between commerce and national pro-
ductivity. Elizabethan authors such as Thomas Gresham, John Dee, and John
Wheeler tied trade and national defense to the prestige of the British monar-
chy, focusing less on the church’s rejection of usury than on how commerce
could serve God and nation. Although authors continued to attack usury as a
violation of natural law and a crime against Christian unity, Elizabethan tracts
also defined usury in terms of English nationhood. The anonymous author
of *The Lawfull Use of Riches*, for example, argues that wealth is primarily to
be used to glorify God, and then to sustain the commonwealth.64 Thomas
Lodge’s *Alarum against Vsurers* praises the “publyke commoditie” that mer-
chants “bring in store of wealth from forein Nations” while condemning their
“domesticall practices, that not only they inrich themselves mightelye by oth-
ers misfortunes, but also eate our English Gentrie out of house and home.”65
The Preacher in Thomas Wilson’s *Discovrse vpon Vsury* maintains that usurers
deserve death for destroying “not only whole families, but also whole countreys
. . . theire offence hurteth more universallye and toucheth a greater nomber”
than do thieves and murderers.66 In his preface, Wilson targets greed as a crime
against the commonwealth, singling out Rome as a place where “private gaine
thrust oute common profite,” while in the text itself, the Lawyer acknowledges
the centrality of mercantile activity to the state when he says that “treasure is
the welfare of the realme and countreye where you dwel, and where merchants
are not cheryshed, that countreye or realme wyl soone perish.”67 The Lawyer
understands usury in relation to commercial relations with France, Portugal,
and Spain and argues that the courts rather than the church should have juris-
diction over cases of usury.

Elizabethan architects of commercial policy, especially Thomas Gresham
and Gerrard de Malynes, also approach usury from the perspective of national
interest, maintaining a mercantilist insistence on the balance of trade between

64 *The Lawfull Use of Riches* (London, 1578), 4.
66 Thomas Wilson, *A Discovrse vpon Vsury . . . [1572]*, ed. R. H. Tawney (New York: Har-
court Brace & Co., 1925), 186.
67 Wilson, *Discovrse vpon Vsury*, 180, 203.
England and other countries. Such an approach shifts the question of usury from individual ethics to national politics. Marlowe registers this historical shift to the extent that *The Jew of Malta* invites us to reconceptualize the state in terms of the “publyke commoditie” of commerce. By using the figure of the Levantine Jew to explore the relationship between trade, religion, and the state, Marlowe’s play registers the historical dynamic of Jewish assimilation and the scattered trading nations of sixteenth-century Europe.

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare demonstrates his own interest in the historical Jewish nation while revising the specific portrait of the Jewish villain he found in Marlowe. Shylock’s vengeance, unlike that of Barabas, stems from a failed monetary contract. But in both cases the Jewish protagonist connects the play with larger issues of trade, religion, and political economy.

*The Merchant of Venice* includes Jews among the necessary “strangers” in Venice and explores the relation between the Jewish community and political stability. Invoicing the special status of foreign merchants, Antonio explains to Solanio why

\[
\text{The Duke cannot deny the course of law;}
\]  
\[
\text{For the commodity that strangers have}
\]  
\[
\text{With us in Venice, if it be denied,}
\]  
\[
\text{Will much impeach the justice of the state,}
\]  
\[
\text{Since that the trade and profit of the city}
\]  
\[
\text{Consisteth of all nations.}
\]  

(3.3.6–31)

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69 Scholars have been too quick to read the historical setting of most plays about Jews in the Mediterranean as a means for English authors to project their own national anxieties about sexuality, commerce, and social order onto a generalized Other. Phyllis Rackin, for instance, argues that in *The Jew of Malta* as “in *The Merchant of Venice*, the figure of the Jew signals the dangers, both moral and physical, to which the Europeans become vulnerable as they move to the East in pursuit of increasingly remote trading partners.” See “The Impact of Global Trade in *The Merchant of Venice*,” *Shakespeare Jahrbuch* 138 (2002): 73–88, esp. 76.

70 Lupton identifies “three circles of citizenship in the play: the civility of the ruling class; the civil society of economic exchange; and the Jewish community created and maintained by external mandate and internal laws” (*Citizen-Saints*, 82). Drawing on Pauline discourse of universalism, she primarily defines the Jewish nation as an “ethnos, a stranger-people defined by both a religious code and a genealogical imperative that sets them apart from the nations united in Christ” (81).

Antonio here defines the trade of "all nations" as fundamental to the city's survival. It is Shylock who complains that Antonio "hates our sacred nation" (1.3.45; see also 3.1.53) and later feels the "curse . . . upon our nation" (3.1.81) in contemplating the loss of his daughter, Jessica, along with the money and jewels she has taken. Antonio labels Shylock a "stranger," just as Portia will at the end of the trial scene, where she invokes a law that protects citizens against an "alien" (4.1.347) like Shylock. In the short exchange between Antonio and Solanio quoted above, Shakespeare prepares the audience to regard the trial scene as a test of the Jewish nation.

Shakespeare emphasizes the degree to which economic relationships embroil characters in legal, national, and intrapersonal relations: the opening scene presents Bassanio’s "venture" for Portia as a parallel to his friend Antonio's risky overseas trade; the suitors who vie for Portia's hand imagine their prize in terms of the "golden fleece" (1.1.170) of mercantile enterprise; even Shylock ostensibly enters into his bond with Antonio in the name of "love" (1.3.136) and friendship. Shakespeare exposes the networks of financial exchange that prop up aristocratic marriage negotiations. Shylock must procure tangible assets from the wealthy Jew, Tubal, just as Antonio, short of money to lend to Bassanio, finds himself compelled to ask Shylock for a loan. But the play is also interested in defining forms of religious and commercial affiliation on which national identity might be constructed.7

Shakespeare's Venice, like that of Rodriga and Luzzatto, depends in many ways on Jewish commerce, although the play refuses the utopian idea that commerce smooths over religious and national differences.73 Like the pound of flesh at stake in the bond, Shylock cannot be extracted without risking the lifeblood of the Venetian republic. The defeat of Shylock and the conversion of Jessica through marriage to Lorenzo might likewise appear to be a victory of

72 Walter Cohen and Lars Engle give comprehensive accounts of the economics of the play, but they apply anachronistic categories of economic thought in their analyses and misrepresent the historical situation of the Jews in early modern Europe. Cohen suggests that the government of Venice banned Jewish moneylenders from the city and made them give low-interest loans to the poor; see "The Merchant of Venice and the Possibilities of Historical Criticism," ELH 49 (1982): 765–89, esp. 770. Engle reads Shylock's story of Jacob and Laban "as a model for the relationship between usury and venture capitalism" in "'Thrift is Blessing': Exchange and Explanation in The Merchant of Venice," Shakespeare Quarterly 37 (1986): 20–37, esp. 31.

73 A representative example of this view of commerce is found in Russian Emperor John Vasilivich's comments on the establishment of the English Muscovy Company in 1555: "God hath planted all realms and dominions in the whole world with sundry commodities, so as the one hath need of the amity and commodities of the other, and by means thereof traffic is used from one to another, and amity thereby increased. . . . planted to continue, and the enjoyers thereof be as men living in a golden world." See Richard Hakluyt, Principal Navigations, ed. R. H. Evans, 5 vols. (London, 1809), 2:295–96.
provincialism over cosmopolitanism, but Shylock's character cannot be expelled from the play so easily.

The trial scene of Act 4 confirms what Shylock has already acknowledged about his status in Venice—he is a “stranger cur” (1.3.116), valued in moments of necessity but subject to scorn most of the time. As much as Shylock works to humanize himself as a Jew, especially in the notorious speech in which he asks, rhetorically, “Hath not a Jew eyes?” (3.1.55–56), he more often invokes the right to purchase and own property as a foundation for his legal and political claims. In response to Antonio’s insulting description of him as a “stranger cur,” Shylock responds, “‘Hath a dog money? Is it possible / A cur can lend three thousand ducats?’” (1.3.116, 119–20). The same logic appears in his comments to the court in Act 4, where he invokes the legal right of a purchaser of slaves in defending his bond with Antonio:

> You have among you many a purchased slave,  
> Which, like your asses and your dogs and mules,  
> You use in abject and in slavish parts,  
> Because you bought them. Shall I say to you,  
> “Let them be free, marry them to your heirs!”

(4.1.90–94)

Shylock suggests that legal rights in Venice depend on the power of the purse. Rather than appeal to the essential humanity of slaves as an argument for their liberation, Shylock shows how economic exchange underwrites state law. We know that, beginning in the fifteenth century, Venetian citizens purchased African prisoners from Portuguese slave traders and forced them to row as galley slaves up and down the Adriatic Sea. The Duke’s threat to dissolve the court at this moment suggests that Shylock has articulated a difficult truth. The “freedom of the state” of Venice, supposedly at stake in the trial itself, denies subject positions based on economic practice to one group of people while justifying citizenship on economic grounds for another.

Portia frames Shylock’s economic investments as signs of Jewish worldliness, portraying him as a symbol of the Old Law of Jewish vengeance as someone

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74 This definition would have been familiar to English mercantilists such as Gresham who aligned citizenship with the right to engage in mercantile practices like private trading. For an overview, see de Roover.

75 Venice imported slaves of Tartar and Russian descent from Tana before the fall of Constantinople in 1453, creating new slave markets. See Frederick Chapin Lane, *Venice: A Maritime Republic* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1973), 133. In the sixteenth century, both “slaves” and “offenders sentenced to the galleys” were employed by Venice mostly for rowing when manpower was scarce, as during war. See Martin Garrett, *Venice: A Cultural and Literary Companion* (New York: Interlink Books, 2001), 26.
who is blind to the New Law of Christian mercy.\textsuperscript{76} She goes on to assimilate the freedom of state to the theology of Christian universalism in her famous “quality of mercy” speech:

\begin{quote}
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
The thronèd monarch better than his crown. . . .
But mercy is above this sceptered sway;
It is enthronèd in the hearts of kings;
It is an attribute to God himself.
\end{quote}

(ll. 185–87, 191–93)

Portia hopes to assimilate Shylock within a model of universal Christian brotherhood, signified by the Pauline circumcision of the heart, on the condition that he will show mercy. She imagines Venetian law as derived from a “mercy” that is itself above the “sceptered sway” of kings. By this logic, Shylock’s insistence on his bond and the pound of flesh due to him by his contract with Antonio enacts the logic of the Old Law that rejects mercy in the name of vengeance. But the civil law of the state for which Portia stands returns Shylock to the status of “alien” or stranger by virtue of his supposed threat to Antonio’s life. Some readers may regard this legalistic turn of events as a narrative contrivance, but Shylock rejects its logic.

Portia’s speech on mercy also affirms the connection between goods and citizenship. Her own extraordinary wealth allows her to adopt an attitude of aristocratic scorn toward tangible sums of money, offering to pay twelve times the amount of the original debt to Shylock (3.2.299–300). It is the symbolic rather than economic value of objects (such as the ring she gives her husband) that matter to her, just as the pound of flesh finds its ultimate expression in its relation to the “freedom of the state” (l. 278) in the courtroom scene. Like the decisions of the English Chancery court, which was coming into new prominence in the 1590s, Portia’s ruling frames Shylock’s rejection of mercy as a form of idolatry, since his statement that he “crave[s]” (4.1.204) the law would register with Christian audiences as covetousness.\textsuperscript{77} Although Portia’s language recalls the debate between Mercy and Justice as represented in the medieval \textit{Processus Belial}, her speech also addresses the relationship between


\textsuperscript{77} Charles Spinosa argues that Shylock represents the early modern common-law court, while Portia stands for the principles of the more "broad-minded" and "equitable" Court of Chancery; see "Shylock and Debt and Contract in \textit{The Merchant of Venice}," \textit{Cardozo Studies in Law and Literature} 5 (1993): 65–85.
commercial, religious, and political affiliations in the construction of the early modern nation.  

The Duke shows “mercy” to Shylock by offering to spare his life—even as he confiscates his property—but Shylock understands that his life is defined in terms of his house and goods rather than his biological or religious identity: 

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Nay, take my life and all! Pardon not that!} \\
\text{You take my house when you do take the prop} \\
\text{That doth sustain my house. You take my life} \\
\text{When you do take the means whereby I live.}
\end{align*}
\]

(ll. 372–75)

By insisting on property rights rather than rights to engage in commercial activity, Shylock goes a step beyond the Jewish condotte examined above. Indeed, with his pun on “prop” and “property,” Shylock anticipates the equation of property ownership, the marketplace, and political franchise that the Putney debates of the 1640s elevated to the center of English political economy.  

Shylock rejects the assumptions behind the court’s expression of mercy—that he possesses a “life” independent of the “means whereby” he makes a living. This passage alludes to Deuteronomy 24:6: “No man shal take the nether nor ye vpper milstone to pledge: for this gage is his liuing.” But Shylock’s defense of ownership and commerce does not signify Jewish materialism so much as his rejection of Christian mercy defined by Portia and the Duke.  

By invoking such mercy as a component of universal brotherhood, Portia and the court frame the defeat of Shylock’s bond, the seizure of half of his estate, and his forced conversion as a triumph of community over the destructive literalism of the law. But the law that Portia invokes to seize half of Shylock’s goods is one reserved for an “alien” who has sought the life of any “citizen” (4.1.347, 349), so the verdict reaffirms Shylock’s status as a resident alien in Christian communities at the moment that it tries to make him a member of that community. The Duke spares Shylock’s life, but only on the condition that he convert to Christianity and forfeit half of his estate to Antonio and the other half to the state as a “fine” (l. 370). Antonio modifies the terms of Shylock’s punishment at Portia’s request in order to allow Shylock to keep half his goods, provided that he give the other half to Antonio “in use” (l. 381), to administer until Shylock’s death, at which time it will be given to Lorenzo and Jessica. This arrangement contrasts Antonio’s “mercy” (l. 376) with Shylock’s

lack thereof, but it also gives Shylock what he asks for in returning a portion of his goods.

Antonio’s revision of the Duke’s sentence restores Shylock’s possessions that would have gone to the state. Antonio, a native merchant, earns the right to administer justice by seeking to raise funds for the Jew’s daughter, aligning the universalism of Christian mercy with the conversion of the Jew through Jessica’s conversion and that of her father. The private citizen becomes the ultimate conduit of mercy, as the play shifts from the public venue of the courtroom to the private world of Belmont, where romance attempts to smooth over the rough edges of the trial scene. Here, in the final scenes, the economic elements of “credit” (5.1.245), “surety” (l. 253), and mercantile venture (ll. 276–77) are replaced by the romance harmonies of the three married couples—Jessica and Lorenzo, Portia and Bassanio, and Nerissa and Gratiano. In contrast to Marlowe, Shakespeare criticizes a mercantile state that reserves the right of private ownership to an elite class that benefits from the mercantile activities of a politically oppressed group.

Ironically, the economics of Venice undermines Shylock’s efforts to retain his core private and religious identity. Shylock does not shun all kin and society in the way that Barabas does, but he does reject potential associations with the Christians with whom he does business. In response to Bassanio’s invitation to dine with him, Shylock says “I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you, and so following, but I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you” (1.3.33–35). However, like Barabas, Shylock cannot avoid the company of Christians. The victory of the Venetian court over Shylock ensures that, as in The Jew of Malta, the private sphere remains within the province of Christians. The court turns Shylock’s claim that his power to purchase guarantees his rights against him, emptying him of his political and religious rights but leaving him with half of his estate. The containment of Shylock allows the Venetian state to continue to separate its ideals of legal justice and independence from the economic realities of slaveholding and the Jewish ghetto. Shylock’s lust for flesh raises the specter of the Jewish blood libel (the belief that Jews sacrificed Christians and used their blood for ritual purposes), reinforced by many allusions to eating in the play (e.g., Shylock’s reluctant feast with Christians on the night that Jessica elopes with Lorenzo). But the play specifically aligns appetites with economics in Lorenzo’s joke about Launcelot and Jessica. As Jessica reports of Lorenzo: “He tells me flatly there’s no mercy for me in heaven because I am a Jew’s daughter; and he says you are no good member of the commonwealth, for in converting Jews to Christians you raise the price of pork” (3.5.30–34). Lorenzo’s joke reveals how economic laws of supply and
demand trump religious identity in a mercantile nation. At the same time, the Venetian state refuses Shylock a concept of the sacred beyond his material attachments. Where *The Jew of Malta* justifies Barabas’s trading nation as an inherently Jewish enterprise, *The Merchant of Venice* subjects Shylock’s legal and economic materialism to the corrective of Matthew 6:19–21: “Lay not vp treasures for your selues vp on the earth, where the mothe & canker corrupt, & where theues digge through, and steale. But lay vp treasures for your selues in heauen. . . . For where your treasure is, there wil your heart be also.”

Shakespeare attempts to overcome the trial scene’s spectacle of political and religious terror against Shylock in Act 4 by highlighting Jessica’s marriage to Lorenzo and her admission to the upper class of aristocratic Venice in Act 5. Returning to Belmont, the play invokes the power of romantic love to transcend religious difference, as well as the possibility of religious conversion. But from Lorenzo’s opening allusion to Troilus and Cressida to his references to Dido and Jessica’s invocation of Medea in the first fifteen lines of Act 5, Shakespeare also invokes specific obstacles to romantic closure. The reigning trope is a musical one, culminating in Lorenzo’s defense of the Orphic power of music to pacify “savage” nature (5.1.78):

The man that hath no music in himself,
Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds,
Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils;
The motions of his spirit are dull as night
And his affections dark as Erebus.

(ll. 83–87)

Lorenzo’s language suggests that Jessica herself is like the “savages” who should be ruled by the “concord of sweet sounds.” He implies that either music is inherently within a person or it is not, but those who lack music in their souls are threats to society at large: “treasons, stratagems, and spoils” indicate crimes against the state. The passage invokes the thrifty killjoy, Shylock, even as it tries to move beyond the trial scene and to the realm of cosmic harmony. Shakespeare registers his doubts that the theater can create a form of national unity

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80 Kim F. Hall reads the joke as part of the play’s anxiety about miscegenation in “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner? Colonization and Miscegenation in *The Merchant of Venice*,” *Renaissance Drama* n.s. 23 (1992): 87–111, esp. 89.

81 Contemporary readings tend to be split between scholars who emphasize the power of the aesthetic “harmonies” of the play to overcome its discordant notes and those who point to the tensions that disrupt such resolutions. Of the former, the most prominent is Lawrence Danson’s *The Harmonies of “The Merchant of Venice”* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1978). Of the latter, see Cohen (n. 72 above); and René Girard, *A Theater of Envy: William Shakespeare* (New York: Oxford UP, 1991), 245–46.
that would transcend the concrete religious, political, and economic conflicts around which the Elizabethan state formed itself. Such doubt lingers in Jessica’s response to her beloved in her final words of the play: “I am never merry when I hear sweet music” (l. 69).

Shylock invokes his “sacred nation” as a principle of economic rights on which citizenship might be founded, but Portia denies such rights under the banner of Christian universalism. On the surface, the defeated Jew joins the defeated suitors Aragon and Morocco, whose choice of the gold and silver caskets, respectively, symbolizes their materialistic lust. But Shylock’s materialism is of a different sort, grounded as it is on the principles of justice and economic vitality that hold up the Venetian state.