

performance is a sign of power—she must impersonate whom she wants but no one else must be allowed to represent her. Once she has lost political power, and knows she will no longer be able to control the terms of the performance, she stages her suicide, the last performance she can script. Similarly, the extent to which Antony 'goes native' or remains a 'Roman' is determined by his need to gain a foothold in Egypt, a place from which he can assert himself against Caesar. His oscillations are controlled by Cleopatra on the one hand, and Caesar on the other because his position in Egypt depends upon the former, and in Rome upon the latter.

Thus the play suggests that to be an Egyptian or a Roman is to play certain roles which are defined by their difference from one another. But this does not mean that these roles can just be chosen at will, put on and discarded when one likes. Rather, they are shaped by long histories as well as political and cultural antagonisms. Individuals give these roles their particular meanings and force, but do not entirely control them. By showing us how identities which we call ethnic, or cultural or racial are fluid and yet not, for that reason, easy to manipulate, *Antony and Cleopatra* captures the contradiction that lies at the heart of race.

Ania Loomba,
— Shakespeare, Race, and
Colonialism —

16

Religion, Money, and Race in The Merchant of Venice

Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* is the story of the marriage between a Christian girl and a Jewish man of Cochin, India, and of their child, who is called the 'Moor' both because his skin is dark, and because his mother lovingly nicknames him 'mór' ('peacock' in Hindi). In telling his saga about strife and love in a multi-religious, multiracial land, Rushdie harks back to the various migrations of Muslims, Christians, and Jews into India from the West. The Portuguese Christians came in search of trade, the Jews much earlier in order to escape persecution in Spain and Portugal, and the Muslims for both those reasons. All of them were to eventually fight over control of the pepper trade, but also to intermarry and consort with one another, and indeed with other communities in India. In narrating their tale, Rushdie goes back to *The Merchant of Venice* (1596–7) and *Othello*, both of which speak of similar tensions and loves, and to the period in history they dramatize, when outward journeying catalysed the internal tensions of Europe.

Rushdie contrasts his Aurora, who defies her family to marry a Jew, with Portia, who can only bring herself to address Shylock twice by his name, and who will not flout her father's will that she marry the man who chooses between three caskets of gold, silver, and lead to find the one that contains her picture. Portia, 'the very archetype of justice', Rushdie notes, is rather pleased when the 'tawny' Prince of Morocco fails to choose the right casket:

A gentle riddance. Draw the curtains, go.
Let all of his complexion choose me so.

(2.7.78-9)

Rushdie comments that Portia is 'No lover of Moors... I adduce all this evidence to show why, when I say our tale's Aurora was no Portia, I do not mean it wholly as a criticism'.¹ Although Christian, his Aurora is not European; she is 'near the height of her very Indian beauty'. In Shakespeare's play Bassanio compares such beauty to a 'dangerous sea' as he explains that he chose the right casket by being able to distinguish between appearance and reality:

Ornament is but the guiled shore
To a most dangerous sea, the beauteous scarf
Veiling an Indian beauty; in a word,
The seeming truth which cunning times put on
To entrap the wisest.

(3.2.97-101)

The phrase 'Indian beauty' is oxymoronic, since 'Indian' indicates a dark skin, which Portia has already called repulsive. The lady (assuming it is a lady because the gender of the 'beauty' is not spelt out) is like 'cunning times', unattractive but made alluring by her beauteous scarf. If the beholder is fooled and fails to recognize her danger, the result will be miscegenation, a subject that haunts the caskets episode and the play as a whole. Rushdie concludes that the terms on which both justice and romance are developed in *The Merchant of Venice* demand that Moors, Indians, and Jews be 'waved away' (115).

A large and international group of suitors establishes the worth of Portia's 'sunny locks', but only an insider can win Portia, because only an insider can recognize the difference between inner and outer selves, appearance and reality. Ironically, Portia herself refuses to make this distinction in the case of Morocco, admitting that even if he were a saint, she would not be able to overlook his blackness: 'If he have the condition of a saint and the complexion of a devil, I had rather he should thrive me than wive me' (1.2.126-8). Portia informs Morocco that he must

swear before you chose, if you chose wrong
Never to speak to lady afterward
In way of marriage.

(2.1.40-2)

Some critics suggest that this injunction is reserved for Morocco alone, failing to notice that the Prince of Aragon also promises 'never... | To woo a maid in way of marriage' should he fail to win Portia (2.9.12-13). Portia confirms that every suitor of hers must swear to abide by this rule. Thus, although she expresses her dislike for Morocco in stronger and undoubtedly more racialized terms, both he and the Spaniard are cast as outsiders to a culture that encompasses both Venice and Belmont. Sexual reproduction must be tightly controlled, and those who foolishly imagine they can cross cultural boundaries must not be allowed to reproduce at all.

In England, Spain was commonly regarded as the site of rampant miscegenation: in Edmund Spenser's *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, Irenius laments that although the Moors were 'beaten out by Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella his wife, yet they were not so cleansed but that, through the marriages which they had made and mixture with the people of the land during their long continuance there, they had left no pure drop of Spanish blood... So that, of all the nations under heaven, I suppose the Spaniard is the most mingled and most uncertain'.² Although the play builds upon many features of contemporary Italy, such as its cosmopolitanism, its international trade, and the wealth of its upper classes, it uses them, as does *Othello*, to address specifically English anxieties about commerce, race, and sexuality.

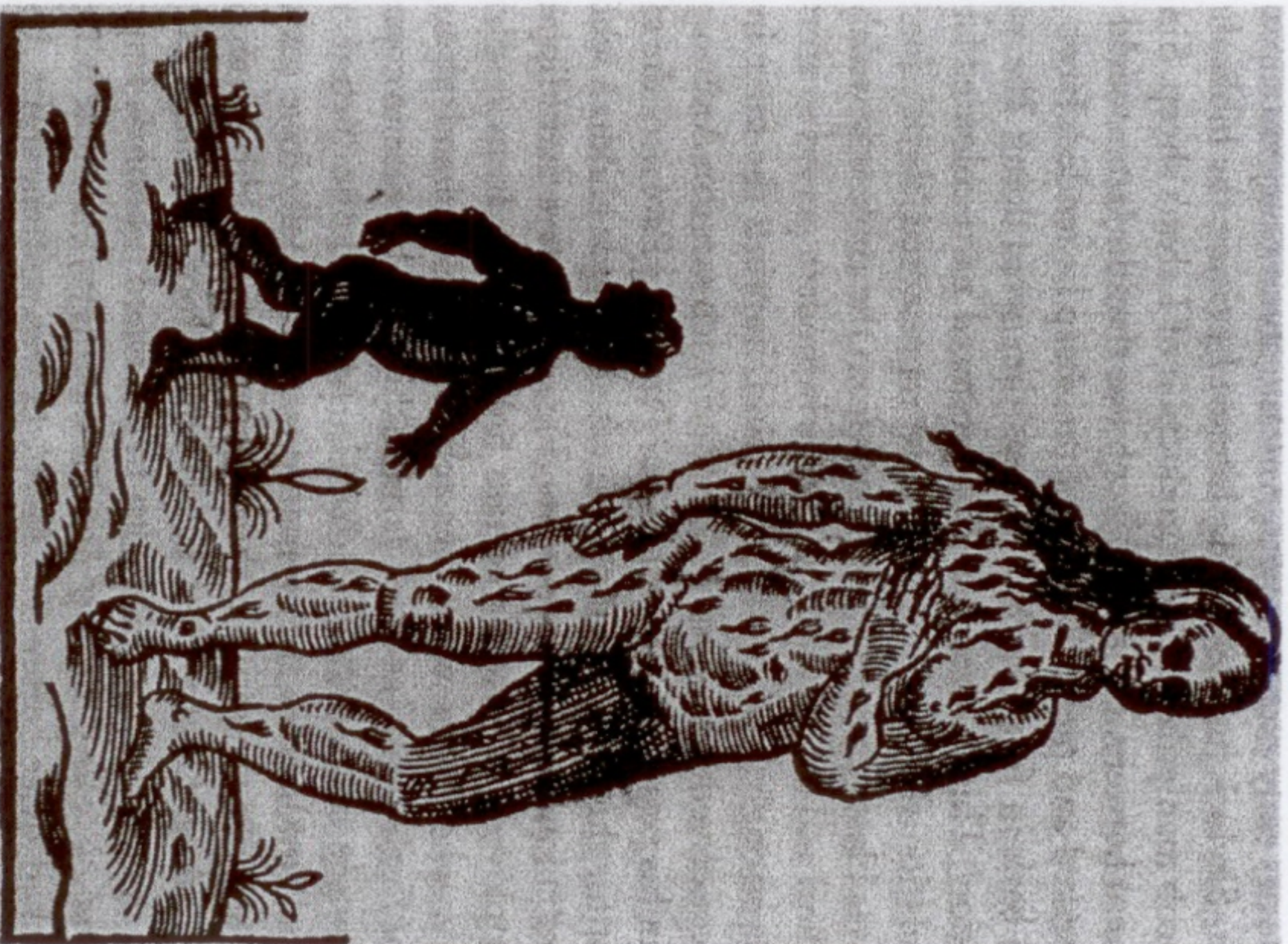
The play makes clear the overlaps as well as crucial differences between sexual and economic traffic. Strangers, Antonio says, have great 'commodity' in Venice because 'the trade and profit of the city | Consisteth of all nations' (3.3.27, 30-1). In such a society, where the reproduction of wealth depends upon international traffic, the dangers of miscegenation run high. Precisely because trade with Morocco was highly desired during this period, the desires of its prince for a white Christian woman must be strictly regulated. That is partly why Morocco is cast, not as a trader, but as a Muslim warrior, brandishing a 'scimitar', a curved sword used by Turks and Persians. Such a figure is

reminiscent of the Crusades, although he makes it clear that he has used his sword to vanquish other Muslim princes rather than Christians.

But while some border crossings are taboo, others are encouraged. Portia, the rich Christian heiress, is like the 'golden fleece' who must be protected from the 'many Jasons [who] come in pursuit of her' (1.1.172), but Jessica, the wealthy Jew's daughter, can be allowed into the Christian family, especially because she promises to 'gild myself | With some more ducats' (2.6.49-50). Her passage is not necessarily smooth, as we learn from the exchange between Launcelot Gobbo and Jessica later in the play. Launcelot assures Jessica that despite her marriage, she is 'damned' by her Jewish lineage. When she protests that she will be 'saved by my husband', who 'hath made me a Christian', Launcelot grumbles that such conversions will only result in hardships for other Christians because by increasing the Christian, pork-eating population, they will 'raise the price of hogs' (3.5.17-22). Lorenzo puts an end to these complaints by evoking the spectre of a far more untenable crossing of racial lines—the 'getting up' of a 'Negro's belly' by Launcelot himself. Such a liaison, Lorenzo reminds Launcelot, can be even less justified to the 'commonwealth'; it cannot be sanctified by matrimony, because the lady is black. The 'Moor' in question is dismissed by Launcelot: 'if she be less than an honest woman, she is indeed more than I took her for' (3.5.39-40). In this context, it is worth recalling that one of the grounds on which Elizabeth I evicted 'Negars and Blackamoors' from England in 1596 was 'the annoyance of her own liege people that want the relief which those people consume'.³ Earlier, Launcelot had claimed that he was being 'famished' in Shylock's service. Now, it is revealed that he has produced another non-Christian mouth to feed, a crime worse than Lorenzo's. Lars Engle points out that Launcelot's Moor, like so many in Christian households of the time, may have been a slave; the possibility that Portia is a slave owner prepares the audience for the next scene in which no one rebuts Shylock's accusation that the Christians have 'many a purchased slave | Which ... You use in abject and in slavish parts | Because you bought them' (4.1.89-92).⁴ The links between conversion and inflation in this scene underline the play's interest in interweaving sexual and racial exchanges with economic ones.

Shylock's early exchange with Antonio about usury anticipates this interest. Shylock justifies taking interest by citing the biblical tale of how Jacob manipulated the reproduction of Laban's sheep. Since the agreement between Laban and Jacob was that the latter would get all the 'streaked and pied' offspring of the sheep he tended, Jacob waved striped bark in front of the sheep as they were doing 'the work of generation'. This ensured that they produced 'parti-coloured lambs', a manipulation that, in Shylock's view, represented 'thrift', for which Jacob was blest (1.3.84-8). This story from the Bible was widely cited by medical and other writers in the early modern period to affirm that 'what is strongly conceived in the mind, imprints the force into the infant conceived in the wombe', as the French surgeon Ambroise Paré wrote in his popular *Of Monsters and Prodigies*.⁵ Paré uses the story to account for the birth of 'monsters', which include children who are a different colour from their parents (Fig. 9). He says that Hippocrates also employed it to free 'a certain noble woman from suspicion of adultery, who being white her self, and her husband also white, brought forth a child as black as an Ethiopian, because in copulation she strongly and continually had in her mind the picture of the *Aethiope*' (978). Here the woman does not actually have sex with a black man, but the result is the same—a black child born to a white woman, which George Best had cited as proof that blackness was a kind of 'inflection' that passed on in the blood.⁶ Thomas Lupton's *A Thousand Notable Things of Sundrie Sorts* (1579), a book which was republished twice before *The Merchant* was written, shifts the same story to Spain which was widely associated with inter-religious sex. In its version, a 'noble matron' of Spain produced a black child, and was accused of having 'lain with some one of the slaves of the Saracens'. A wise man inspected her bedchamber which had the picture of an Ethiopian, and pronounced, citing the story of Laban's sheep, that although the woman was innocent, the 'great Ethiopian was the father of the child'.⁷ Thus Shylock's defence of usury and economic growth evokes a scenario that was widely connected to miscegenation.

Antonio challenges Shylock's comparison between economic and sexual reproduction, claiming that the sheep were naturally produced ('fashioned by the hand of heaven'), and implying that, in contrast, Shylock's money-making is unnatural:



9. A black child born to white parents, shown alongside a hairy woman in Ambroise Paré's *Works*.

The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose.
An evil soul producing holy witness
Is like a villain with a smiling cheek,
A goodly apple rotten at the heart.
O, what a goodly outside falsehood hath!

(1.3.97–101)

If Morocco has the devil's appearance, Shylock has his cunning. Antonio casts him as a white devil whose outward appearance belies his inner reality, and who can distort the scriptures to support his

point of view. Such comparisons between Jews and the devil were commonplace in medieval writings but, according to James Shapiro's thickly documented study of Jews in early modern England, they had 'virtually disappeared' in sixteenth-century England. Shapiro argues that this period was as a 'crucial conduit' between the ages, a time when some medieval notions about Jews were discarded, and others appropriated to be recast as 'medically or scientifically sound evidence'.⁸ We have traced similar processes in relation to ideologies about blacks, Muslims, and 'Egyptians'. Antonio resurrects the stereotype of the devilish Jew in order to articulate contemporary anxieties about Jews.

The Merchant of Venice is the only play in which Shakespeare pays extended attention to the relationship between commerce and race. The radical economic transformations of the early modern period had two apparently contradictory effects—on the one hand they encouraged the assumption that money was colour-blind and that wealth would override other social differences. On the other hand, racial differences became more, not less, pronounced during this period. Through the figures of various 'strangers' to Venice, but most especially through Shylock and Jessica, Shakespeare's play captures these contradictions. Jews were both insiders and outsiders, with deep roots in Europe, but also with long histories of persecution and migration. They were often indistinguishable, both physically and in terms of their activities, from the local populations, and yet they were marked as different, ideologically and often literally through clothing and confinement in ghettos. That difference was elusive, hard to define, and yet culturally central, and this is the dynamic encoded in *The Merchant of Venice*.

Shylock's Difference

Antonio suggests that Venetian law is blind to cultural, ethnic, and religious distinctions:

For the commodity that strangers have
With us in Venice, if it be denied,
Will much impeach the justice of the state . . .

(3.3.27–9)

Contemporary travelogues were awed by the sheer number of 'strangers' in Italy: 'I think verily that in one region of the world again are not half so many strangers as in Italy,' wrote one visitor in 1549.⁹ Jews made up large numbers of these 'strangers', although they were not visitors but residents. Venice was among the most tolerant of Italian states because most dependant upon Jewish participation in its economy, but even in Venice, Jews were required to wear a cap distinguishing them from others, to pay higher taxes, and be confined to the ghetto.¹⁰ Shylock does not live in a ghetto, and he wears no special badge of identification, although he does mention his Jewish 'gaberline', or long coat (for which critics have not been able to identify a historical source). Rather than remaining faithful to reports about Venetian Jews, Shakespeare plays upon three important elements which were repeatedly mentioned by contemporary writings—the economic importance of Jews, the tension between them and the Christians, and the supposed impartiality of the Venetian state towards the different communities in the city. David C. McPherson has suggested that the last feature was an important aspect of the 'Myth of Venice', or an idealized picture of Venice that was often used by English writers to reflect upon their own government and society. But in this play, as in *Othello*, the fabled cosmopolitanism and justice of Venice are exposed as flawed. By the end of the play, the Venetian legal system has revealed the double standard at its core:

It is enacted in the laws of Venice,
If it be proved against an alien
That by direct or indirect attempts
He seek the life of any citizen,
The party 'gainst the which he doth contrive
Shall seize one half his goods; the other half
Comes to the privy coffer of the state...

(4.1.345–51)

Although Venice is dependent upon Jews, it has special legal provisions to deal with 'aliens' who have instigated violence against 'citizens'. By the end of the play, Jews are cast as aliens to Venice, although earlier they have been acknowledged as part of its wealth-generating citizenry.

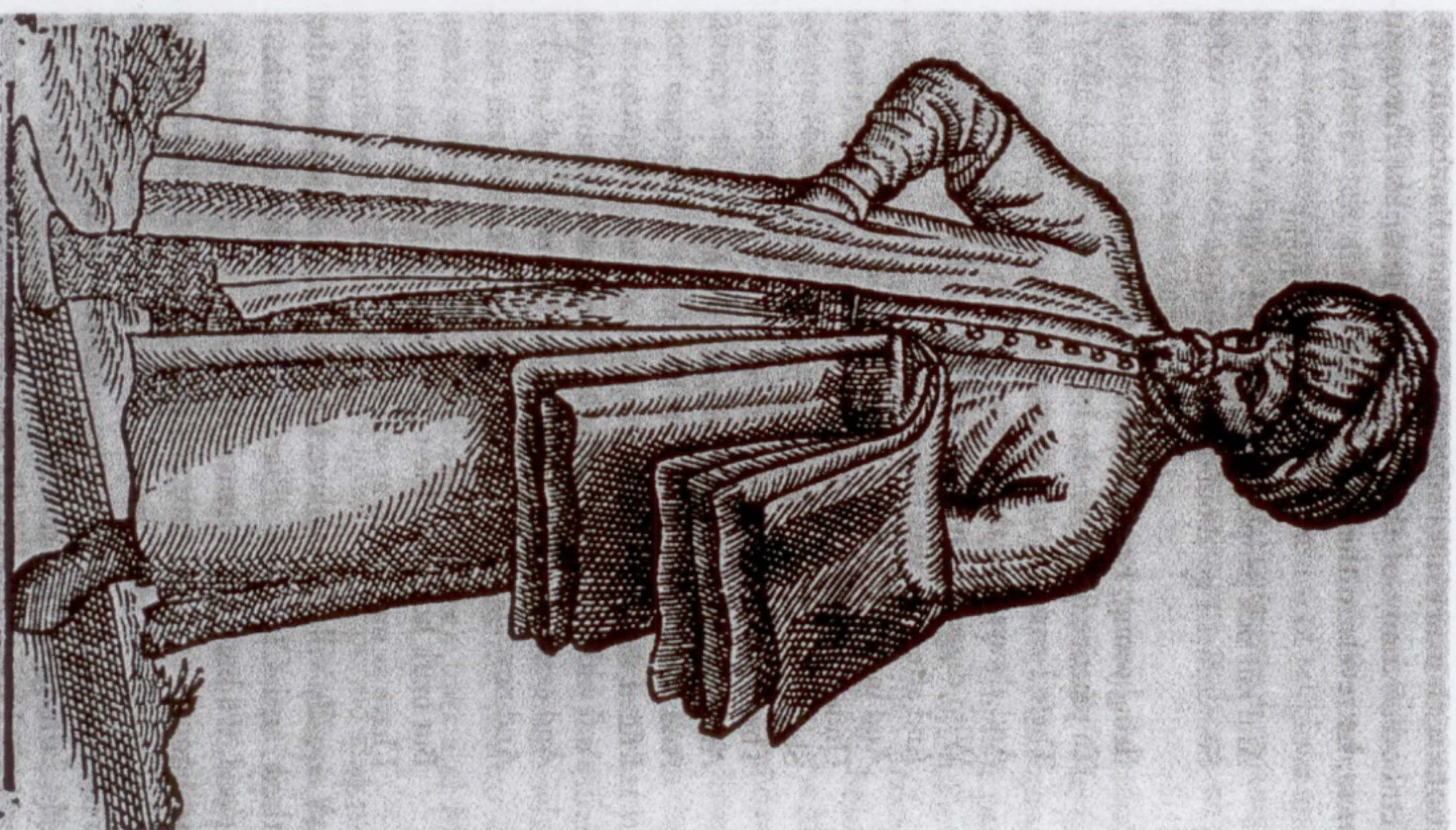
In 1595, about a year before *The Merchant* was staged, over a thousand artisans and apprentices in London had rioted violently against foreigners. James Shapiro points out that the play rewrites the dynamics of this hatred by casting a Jew as the instigator of the violence: 'The hostility is reimagined as originating with the aliens and directed against the citizenry and is enacted in a way that does not contradict the more tolerant laws governing the freedom of the city that guarantees equality before the law to strangers' (189). Thus the play is shaped not just by reports of Jewish life in Venice, but also by a specific English situation. In 1594, London had also been rocked by the controversy surrounding the trial of Roderigo Lopez, a Portuguese Jewish convert who was Queen Elizabeth's physician and was accused of poisoning her. Although the part played by his Jewishness in the trial remains open to debate, Lopez's execution ensured the success of a rerun of Christopher Marlowe's play, *The Jew of Malta*, which had played to packed houses in the 1590s. As discussed earlier, England had been one of the first countries to expel Jews in 1290, and they were not officially allowed back until 1656. For this reason scholars have often assumed that there were not enough Jews in Shakespeare's England for there to have been a 'Jewish Question' for him and his contemporaries.¹¹ It is true that Jewish characters such as Shylock and Barabas embody negative traits shared by the society at large, such as the greed for money, and therefore they can be seen as shorthand for a critique of such evil. But we still need to ask why Jews are used as shorthand, and why it is that the plays simultaneously question the difference between them and the Christians around them and focus relentlessly on their Jewishness.

Recent historians and critics have persuasively argued that, as with the black presence in England, numbers cannot be the only index to the cultural centrality of Jews and to the anxieties aroused by them. They have shown that in Shakespeare's time, there existed a small but significant Jewish community in England, comprised of physicians, teachers, and merchants, most of whom had begun to arrive there after the expulsions of Jews in Portugal and Spain. Although these Jews could not practice their faith openly (indeed some would argue that it was *because* they could not), their presence complicated the anti-Semitic ideologies that had percolated down from earlier

times. Apart from England, Spain, and Portugal, Jews had, at different points of time, been expelled and readmitted, and sometimes expelled again, from various other places in Europe including Naples, Genoa, and Florence. Partly as a result, European Jews travelled to far-flung places; Samuel Purchas commented that 'dispersions of the Jewish nations' extended far beyond Europe to Africa, and especially Asia.¹²

At one time over 250,000 Jews lived in the Ottoman Empire, where many of them not only became successful traders but were appointed to high political positions.¹³ In Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, Barabas the Jew is appointed governor of Malta by the Turks. The French traveller Nicholas de Nicholay, whose account of Turkey was translated into English in 1585, wrote that in Constantinople Jews indulged in trade as well as usury, and concluded that 'at this present day, they have in their hands the most and greatest of traffic of merchandize and ready money that is in all Levant'.¹⁴ Nicholay reproduced the figure of a 'merchant Jew' of the region (Fig. 10); such traders offered stiff competition to English merchants seeking to establish a foothold in the lucrative trade in this region, and some English merchants believed that they could achieve their aims only by converting Jewish merchants to Christianity. Many of the Jews of Venice were in fact Sephardic merchants from Ottoman Turkey.

The racial, economic, and sexual tensions of *The Merchant* are woven from aspects of the Jewish presence in all these places, both as it was directly experienced by English people, and as it circulated through travel, religious, and other writings. Scholars have identified a wide range of physical and moral traits that were attributed to Jews during the medieval and early modern periods in Europe. Jews were supposed to stink (and become perfumed if they converted to Christianity), have large hooked noses, drink Christian blood, and Jewish men were said to menstruate and be capable of breast-feeding. They were accused of ritually murdering children, of poisoning Christians (perhaps because they were often renowned as physicians), of forcibly circumcizing Christian men, of indulging in cannibalism, of desecrating the eucharistic host, and, of course, exploiting Christians economically through usury. These prejudices fluctuated in different



10. A Merchant Jew from Nicholas de Nicholay, *The Navigations, Peregrinations and Voyages Made into Turkey*.

places and times, the hooked noses disappearing at one time, and the associations with usury intensifying at another. Barabas in *The Jew of Malta* embodies many of these attributes, and, like Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*, he revels in them:

I walk abroad o' night
And kill sick people groaning under walls:
Sometimes I go about and poison wells

Being young, I studied physic, and began
To practice first upon the Italian;
There I enriched the priests with burials,
And always kept the sextons' arms in use
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 to the brokery,
I filled the jails 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

But mark how I am blest for plaguing them;
I have as much coin as will buy the town.¹⁵

Barabas's equally villainous slave Ithamore is a Moor, and they proclaim their anti-Christian alliance: 'we are villains both: | Both circumcised, we hate Christians both' (2.3.216-17).

This alliance was widely suggested in contemporary writings. The medieval *The Play of the Sacrament* narrates the story of the conversion to Christianity of a Jonathan, 'chief merchant of the Jews'.¹⁶ Curiously, 'almighty Mahomet' is Jonathan's 'glorious God' whose 'laws tenderly I have to fulfil' (ll. 149-50, 154). John Foxe wrote that 'it is supposed of some, this filthy Alchoran, not to be set out in the days of Mahumet, but that certain Jews had some handling also in this matter, and put it out after his death'.¹⁷ Various writers repeated the idea that the prophet was born of a mixed marriage, and that his

mother was 'a Jew blinded with superstition'.¹⁸ The association between Jews and Muslims was underlined by their interlocking histories in Spain. The position of the two communities was far from identical there, but their expulsions and forced conversions had provoked analogous anxieties about the nature of religious and racial identity. Some of those associations spilled over into England, which had its own worries about English conversions to Islam as well as Jewish conversions to Christianity.

John Florio's Italian-English dictionary defined 'Marano' as 'a Jew, an Infidel, a renegado, a nickname for a Spaniard'.¹⁹ Here, Florio describes converted Jews by evoking both Turks, and Europeans who had converted to Islam. A seventeenth-century English pamphlet literally conflated Moors and Jews, suggesting that 'when Ferdinand drove the Jews out of Spain, a world of them came into Africa, being born Moors, though of religion Jews'.²⁰ Nicholas de Nicolay indicated a more recent and pragmatic alliance by noting that 'the Maranes of late banished out of Spain and Portugal' had 'to the great detriment and damage of Christianity' taught the Turks 'diverse inventions, crafts and engines of war' but also made available to them 'books in diverse languages' (130-1). And a Spanish visitor wrote that the Jews had 'taught our enemies most of what they know of the villainies of war'.²¹ Thus, both in the context of the trade networks which the Europeans desperately wanted to enter, and in the context of their own enmity with the Turks, an alliance between Jews and Muslims would have been worrying.

It is significant, then, that travelogues of the period also routinely suggest a tension between Muslims and Jews. William Biddulph writes that the Jews of Constantinople have to wear blue hats as marks of identification and 'are of more vile account in the sight of the Turks than Christians; insomuch that if a Jew would turn Turk, he must first turn Christian before they will admit him to be a Turk'.²² The idea that Jews must first convert to Christianity before they can be admitted to Islam is repeated by other writers. Nicholas de Nicolay adds that Turks hold Jews in 'disdain and hatred' and will not eat with them, or 'marry any of their wives and daughters, notwithstanding that oftentimes they do marry with Christians' (131). Leo Africanus had found that Jews are had in great contempt by all men in Fez, where they are made to pay a high tax, are forbidden to wear

any shoes, and made to wear a black turban as a mark of identification.²³ The preacher Edward Terry claimed that Jews were hated in India. The most revealing comments are made by William Davies, who laments the fact that 'a Jew is respected more in Christendom, than with the Turks' for Turks make Jews wear a 'black cap... to show the world that he is a Jew and a slave to the world' and say that 'if a Jew had put Mahomet to death, nay, but touched the hem of his garment violently, they would not have left one of the race alive... but in Christendom they are suffered to build synagogues, and to use their religion publicly'. But he concludes by beseeching God 'that this our land of England may never be defiled, whether by a Pope, Turk or Jew'.²⁴

Thus Turkish hatred for Jews becomes an argument for increased Christian intolerance against them. An emphasis on an antipathy between Muslims and Jews, I suggest, was partly a response to the acute anxieties generated by their widely feared alliance. According to some analysts, comparison of Jews and Muslims was a major factor in fuelling anti-Semitism. Europe perceived itself to be besieged by militant Islam, and the Jew was regarded as an 'Islamic fifth columnist in Christian territory'.²⁵ This hypothesis certainly reverberates with *The Merchant of Venice* where the threat posed by 'Moors' (both tawny and black, male and female, living in Venice and outside it) is both contrasted to and mirrored by the threat posed by the Jews who live within Venice.

In literary, theological, and other writings, Jews were also associated with blackness, an association that was analogous to, and later interconnected with, the conflation of Islam and blackness. In *Titus Andronicus*, the black villain Aaron is given a Jewish name. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Jessica reinforces this association by naming 'Cush' or Chus, widely believed to have been the progenitor of all blacks, as one of Shylock's countrymen' (3.2.283). The idea of the moral and often literal blackness of Jews and of Judaism had as long a tradition as that of the blackness of Islam; it was reinforced as racism intensified, so that in nineteenth-century Germany, the Jew could be labelled the 'white Negro'.²⁶ Not surprisingly, analogies between Jews and blacks surfaced as the blood laws were codified in Spain; in a passage we have already considered, a Spanish writer compared the 'blackness' of 'Negroes' to 'the ingratitude of Jews' by suggesting that both these

qualities are inherent and persist, even if Jews convert and black people 'unite' with white women.²⁷ While the specificity of racism against Jews, Moors, and blacks should not be blurred by these overlaps, they remind us that analogies between different marginalized groups, as the ones we noted earlier between women and blacks, play a crucial role in the construction and circulation of racist ideologies.

In *The Merchant of Venice*, the Christians refer to Shylock as 'devil' (1.3.96; 2.2.19), or 'the very devil incarnation' (2.2.25), 'old carrion' (3.1.33), and most often merely 'Jew', rarely calling him by his name. Shylock himself says that they 'call me misbeliever, cut-throat, dog, | And spit upon my Jewish gaberdine' (1.3.110-11); Antonio merely confirms that 'I am as like to call you so again' (1.3.128). The play vividly evokes the difference perceived by both Jews and Christians between their two communities: Shylock says he bears 'an ancient grudge' against Antonio because the latter is a Christian who 'hates our sacred nation' and 'my tribe' (1.3.45, 46, 49). He draws a line between economic and other kinds of interactions: 'I will buy with you, sell with you, walk with you, and so following, but I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you' (1.3.33-5). Although no critic can ignore this antipathy in the play, scholars have been divided over what it means. One strand of scholarship has insisted that anti-Jewish sentiment in the medieval and early modern periods should be defined as theologically driven rather than racial in nature.²⁸ But as recent work on Jews in Europe suggests, this is an unhelpful formulation, since religion and race are so tightly woven together. What is more, as Jerome Friedman demonstrates, racist views about Jews hardened as a result of the anxieties regarding religious conversion in Iberia.²⁹ In medieval Europe, he says, hatred of the Jews focused on their supposed unwillingness to convert and assimilate into Christian society; in early modern Europe on the other hand, the tensions arose precisely from the fact that thousands of Jews *did* convert, forcibly or otherwise. Although many converts quietly assimilated, others were regarded as retaining their Jewishness, either by covert practices or by their very nature. The process of trying to pinpoint the difference between these converts and the Old Christians led to 'a growing identification of Jewishness as biological fate and infection, both physiologically and spiritually, to be cut out of society rather than incorporated into it' (27).

In England, similar tensions were central to the racialization of Jews; one critic argues that as early as the thirteenth century in England, 'there was an irreducible element to Jewish identity in the eyes of Christians, which no amount of baptismal water could entirely eradicate'.³⁰ By Shakespeare's time, Jewish conversion posed a major dilemma; on the one hand, widespread conversion of Jews to Christianity was widely regarded as a prerequisite to the Second Coming of Christ, and therefore to be welcomed. On the other, conversions eroded the idea of a distinct Christian identity, and generated anxiety as well as hatred towards the convert. Again, what heightened these concerns was the assumption that many Jews would never genuinely convert and would retain, indeed, nurture their Jewishness in secret. As Peter Berek puts it, since at this time no one could live openly as a Jew in England, Jewishness was by definition 'a covert state, a state that entailed multiple creeds, nationalities, even names'.³¹ Jews became synonymous with dissimulation, in fact, they were seen to be most themselves when pretending to be someone else. Such a view was not generated by fears about conversion in the early modern period, but had older roots: according to a medieval Latin translation of an Arab Christian document, 'a Jew is not a Jew until he converts to Islam'. This rather confusing statement does not merely associate Jews and Muslims but also suggests that Jews most carefully preserve their identity when they have converted to another religion.³² These are the multiple contexts which shape the image of Shylock as a devil that can put on a 'goodly show'.

Matters were further complicated by the fact that Jews, as one contemporary writer put it, 'have not for their mansion, any peculiar country, but are dispersed abroad among foreign nations'.³³ Jews could be Spanish, or Portuguese, or Russian, Turkish, and also, English, and early modern writings abound with categories such as 'an English Jew', or 'a Turkish Jew', which heightened confusion about whether Jewishness was a nationality, a religion, or a race. Jewishness was widely associated with the ability to assume a disguise. Shapiro recounts the story of a Jew converted to Christianity by Sir James Lancaster and taken to India. A Frenchman, Pyrard de Laval, who met Lancaster and this servant later noted that the latter 'was a Jew in faith and race, and knew a large number of languages'; with 'the English he was of their religion; with the Mahometans, of

theirs, whereas all the while a Jew'.³⁴ The attempts to attribute hooked noses or a particular smell or a darker skin to Jews tell us that, as with the Irish, the lack of clear-cut distinctions between Jews and Christians were worrying to many English people. Portia's question, 'Which is the Merchant here and which the Jew' thus touches an exposed cultural nerve. It also touches a raw economic nerve, as we shall now examine.

Old Gods and New

Karl Marx dated the birth of capitalism in Europe to the sixteenth century; he explained that in pre-capitalist Europe, two groups of people could generate money that could function 'as capital' (or money that could be used to generate more money). These were usurers and merchants; their money was

prevented from turning into industrial capital by the feudal organization of the countryside and the guild organization of the towns. These fetters vanished with the dissolution of the feudal bands of retainers, and the expropriation and partial eviction of the rural population. The new manufactures were established at sea-ports, or at points in the countryside which were beyond the old municipalities and their guilds. Hence in England, the bitter struggle of the corporate towns against these new seed beds of industry.³⁵

Historically, merchants were the most prominent moneylenders, and could be Christians as well as Jews. England had modified its usury statutes in 1571 and 1624, so moneylending per se was no longer proscribed, although the charging of excessively high interest rates was. Shakespeare's own father was among those prosecuted for charging unfair interest.³⁶ Thomas Wilson's *A Discourse Upon Usury* suggested that there were 'fewer usurers elsewhere than are here in England', and that usury was more 'outrageous... here in England than in any place else that I know in Christendom'.³⁷ Jews and Christians were competitors with overlapping activities and aspirations, both in England and elsewhere. In Italy, Jewish moneylenders offered stiff competition to Christian banks, which were set up in order to undercut the former. And in the Mediterranean, as we have already noted, much of the trade English merchants aspired to was in Jewish hands.

Shakespeare's play rewrites these rivalries by crafting a tension between usury and mercantile activity, and by racializing this tension. Shylock and the other Jews do not trade in anything but money, and no Christian in the play lends money for interest; Shylock says he hates Antonio both for being a Christian, and because he 'lends out money gratis', thus bringing down the rate of interest (1.3.40-2). The difference between usury and trade hinges upon how each generates its profits; whereas trade claims to be an exchange of goods between two parties for mutual benefit, usury uses money to generate more money and is premised upon the asymmetrical needs of the parties involved. In the play, moreover, Antonio's ships range the world and generate profit from worlds that lie far away from Venice. In contrast, Shylock is seen as a 'carrion crow' preying upon the very city that feeds him. Trade is thus portrayed as outward-looking, glamorous, and adventurous, and usury as inward-looking and cannibalistic. Not just that, but Shylock's moneylending paradoxically involves a movement away from the exchange of money; Walter Cohen reminds us that Shylock is demonized not because he indulges in usury but because he refuses to be paid in cash, and insists on Antonio's flesh. Therefore he becomes someone who is not just inward-looking, but backward, primitive, and irrational in his desires.³⁸

Karl Marx famously read Jews as the very embodiment of capitalism; often, critics have interpreted Shylock along similar lines. But whereas Marx did not go on to suggest that Christians were anti-capitalist because they were anti-Semitic, some critics have been tempted to interpret the Christians of Shakespeare's play as representatives of a feudal order hostile to a newer order.³⁹ At one level, Antonio's ability to spend money he does not even possess, his distaste for taking interest, and his association with the gentlemanly Bassanio and the wealthy Portia (both of whom are lavish in their spending), smack of a feudal, princely ethos. But Walter Cohen rightly points out that it is Shylock who represents an older Jewish financial network, and Antonio who is the Christian merchant on the rise who needs to break into it: 'Both the characterization and the outcome of *The Merchant Of Venice* mark Antonio as the harbinger of modern capitalism' (771). And yet, as Theodore B. Leinwand cautions, Antonio is extremely uneasy about this role. He has borrowed money from others besides Shylock, and lent money to many people,

including Bassanio; therefore he is 'thoroughly locked into early modern credit relations'. Leinwand suggests that Antonio's mysterious sadness, with which the play opens, is a symptom of his alienation from his role in Venetian finance and foreign trade; repeatedly, though vainly, Antonio tries to 'distance himself from financial operations' in the play.⁴⁰

Antonio is a gentled mercantilism, which combines the values of a bygone world with the daring and risk-taking required in the new. His ships are spoken of as 'argosies' which tower over 'the petty traffickers' who acknowledge their superiority and 'do them reverence' (1.1.9-13). His 'venturing', like the exploits of Drake and Raleigh, can be presented as an individual, honourable enterprise, far removed from the collective profit-seeking of the joint-stock companies, in whose hands foreign trade was beginning to concentrate. Thus, in many ways, Antonio is also 'faced backward in history'.⁴¹ Shylock, we have already noted, is in some aspects a figure from the past, a resurrection of the medieval stereotype of the Jew, who is unable to divorce his economic transactions from his racial antipathy. In this way the antipathy between Christian and Jew is infused with an older, folkloric aspect, epitomized by the bond of a pound of flesh. Shakespeare is reminding us that contemporary economic rivalries were built upon a long and complicated history of antagonisms fought on a shared terrain.

In reality, private venturing such as Antonio's was not counterposed to, but contributed to the formation of large overseas trading companies, such as the English East India Company, which was established in 1600.⁴² Antonio's ships are bound to Tripoli, to 'the Indies', Mexico, Lisbon, Barbary, and England. At this time Venetian ships did not trade across the Atlantic or the Indian Ocean, but all over Europe, including in England, there was an excitement about the endless possibilities of such far-flung markets. With the so-called discovery of the New World and rediscovery of the Old, Europe imagined itself uniquely positioned at the heart of the known world; as one resident of Seville remarked, 'previously our regions... used to be at the very end of the world, but now, with the discovery of the Indies, they have become its centre'.⁴³ In England, which, compared to many other European powers, was a latecomer to both trade and colonization, the benefits of foreign trade were ardently advocated by

men such as Richard Eden and Richard Hakluyt. Samuel Purchas's massive travel collection *Hakluytus Posthumus* opens with a statement of international variety:

It is true that as every member of the bodie hath somewhat eminent, whereby it is serviceable to the whole; so every Region excelleth all others in some Peculiar Raritie, which may be termed extraordinary respectively, though otherwise most common and ordinary in its owne place... and so each part is to the other part in some or other part, and particular respect admirable.⁴⁴

On this variety and mutual need rests the justification for trade. However, even Purchas must acknowledge the hierarchies that actually structure intercontinental relations: 'Asia, Africa and America have been discovered to our Reader, not as enjoying the first and best place, but offering their ready service and best attendance unto Europe.'⁴⁵ In the long term, European trade could not have attained its powerful global position without the systematic colonial plunder that was absolutely crucial for the birth of capitalism; as Marx noted:

The colonial system ripened trade and navigation as in a hothouse.... The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the indigenous population of that continent, the beginnings of the conquest and plunder of India, and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of blackskins, are all things which characterize the dawn of the era of capitalist production....⁴⁶

Written at a time when these processes had only just been set in motion, Shakespeare's play captures both the excitement and the unease they generated.

Although Marx points to the 'Christian character' of the European 'primitive accumulation' (or the way in which Europe accumulated the wealth that made capitalism possible), for him, the colonial system was a "strange God" who perched himself side by side with the old divinities of Europe on the altar, and one fine day threw them all overboard with a shove and a kick. It proclaimed the making of profit as the ultimate and sole purpose of mankind.' Thus, in Marx's view, while colonial exploitation was essential for Europe's transition to capitalism, both colonialism and capitalism could only proceed by getting rid of older prejudices. Elsewhere, Marx appropriated Shakespeare to make his point that money was the new god who would

eliminate the older deities of Europe. He cited the following passage from Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* in which Timon, abandoned by his friends after he has lost his wealth, bitterly concludes that money can transform everything into its opposite:

make
Black white, foul fair, wrong right,
Base noble, old young, coward valiant

This yellow slave
Will knit and break religions, bless th'accurs'd,
Make the hoar leprosy adored, place thieves,
And give them title, knee, and approbation
With senators on the bench.

(4.3.28-38)

For Timon, 'yellow glittering gold' is simultaneously a 'visible god' and a 'slave', powerful precisely because it is so obedient. He suggests that money has the power to displace religion; Marx quotes the passage while observing that because every commodity can be exchanged for money, money is a 'radical leveller, it extinguishes all distinctions'.⁴⁷

However, *The Merchant of Venice* makes clear that the making of money *exacerbates* religious differences, rather than undermining them. In this play, we can trace a different dynamic from the one outlined by Marx, one of the appropriation and transformation, rather than the elimination, of the 'old divinities' by the new. The play presents Jewish-Christian strife by evoking older tropes and motifs, yet in doing so, it conveys not the past but the evolving present of economic and race relations. And indeed, as analysts of race now emphasize, it was in the better interests of capitalism and colonialism *not* to discard older social structures entirely. Slavery, for example, with which Shylock charges Venetian Christians, was a pre-capitalist practice, but one which was not merely retained, but systematized and expanded by colonialism. In the play, it is precisely Venice's economic dependence upon those who are considered outsiders that generates unease and a hardening of attitudes, an antipathy that is articulated as racial. In economic terms as well as somatic, it is hard to tell the Merchant from the Jew—because their terrain is shared, the combat is racially charged.

The Merchant of Venice 'resolves' the problem of Venetian dependence upon Shylock's wealth by ensuring that the latter is transferred into Christian hands. This resolution hinges upon Jessica's conversion to Christianity, for she takes some of his money with her, while the rest comes to her and Lorenzo as a result of Portia's courtroom victory over Shylock. But the transfer of wealth is not enough, for Antonio also demands that Shylock convert to Christianity. This demand seems to be simultaneously excessive and regressive, a throw-back to an antipathy that should have no place in a 'modern' mercantile system. Along with the fact that Venice brands Shylock an 'alien', the demand for his conversion most powerfully conveys the fact that new gods do not displace the old. We have already discussed how in various dramatic texts of the period, conversion is presented as a fair exchange of Christian faith for non-Christian wealth. The converts themselves say so, and imagine that conversion erases their difference. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock's unwillingness to become a Christian offers us a very different perspective. It reminds us that even though conversion appears to be an invitation to assimilate, it is actually a way of asserting social power. Thus, if the new gods of capitalism and colonialism seek to erode the old differences, they do so coercively, and in ways that intensify existing hierarchies. In this play we see that a language of sharing and community can actually be used to articulate hostility, as when Shylock makes a passionate claim to a shared humanity, which is actually part of his argument for retribution:

Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions... 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? (3.1.54-62)

Similarly, Shylock's conversion indicates not universal brotherhood but his marginalization from Christian society.

Jessica's Difference

We began this chapter by discussing the spectre of Christian miscegenation with both Jews and blacks that haunts *The Merchant of Venice*. As we have seen, the play does not treat them as equivalent.

Jessica's conversion highlights the fact that the pregnant Moor is not converted, but it also needs to be contrasted with the forced conversion of Shylock in order to understand how gender complicates issues of race and religion.⁴⁸

The very first time we see Jessica, she expresses her alienation from her father and his house which she describes as 'hell'; she follows this with an assertion that although she is daughter to Shylock's 'blood', she is not to his 'manners' (2.3.19). Here she suggests that in her own case, 'blood' can be divorced from 'manners', whereas in Shylock's case, they cannot. As Mary Janell Metzger shows, 'Jessica's incorporation into Christian society is essential to defining her father's alien status'; this incorporation depends not only on Jessica's fairness but also her eagerness to cross the very boundaries which her father has reinforced with his hatred of Christians.⁴⁹ Throughout the play, Jessica's Christian admirers emphasize both her fairness and her tractability: she is 'sweet Jew' (2.3.11), 'gentle Jessica' (2.4.19), 'fair Jessica' (2.4.28); she is 'wise, fair, and true' (2.6.56). Finally, when Shylock claims her as his 'flesh and blood', Salerio retorts: 'There is more difference between thy flesh and hers than between jet and ivory; more between your bloods than there is between red wine and Rhenish' (3.1.35-7). The difference between Jessica and Shylock is thus translated into one of colour—they are cast as literally black and white in relation to one another.

A similar difference between men and women was suggested in relation to other parts of the world. Peter Heylyn's *Microcosmus* observed that in Macedonia, 'the men are of the African complexion and language... the women fair but hating company and going covered'.⁵⁰ Bartolomé Argensola's history of the Moluccan islands, on which Fletcher's play *The Island Princess* was based, claimed that the 'Natives Differ from one another, as it were through a Miraculous Bounty of Nature, for it has made the Women Fair and Beautiful, and the Men, of a darker Colour than Quince'.⁵¹ Fletcher's play attributes fairness exclusively to the Moluccan Princess Quisara who is to be converted to Christianity and married to the play's Portuguese hero. In fact all of the converted women on the Renaissance stage are remarkably fair, and their skin colour is essential to their convertibility. As mentioned earlier, these conversions hark back to a long literary tradition featuring a converted Saracen princess. The figure

of the converted Jewess reinforces the striking parallels between Muslims and Jews. While in *The Merchant of Venice*, as in these other plays, the converted lady's whiteness is crucial, the most obvious difference between Shylock's flesh and Jessica's is that he is circumcized. Thus we can say that circumcision morphs into skin colour, and the uncircumcized female body is imagined as literally fairer than the circumcized male one.

It is also striking that, unlike the Muslim women who convert in other Renaissance plays, and unlike the figures in the civic pageants, Jessica does not express any religious zeal towards her new faith, although like them, she does ensure a transfer of money to Christian hands. *The Merchant* is also different from these other plays in one other respect—it does not end with conversion and marriage but allows us to see their after-effects. As the play proceeds, Jessica's conversion does not appear to have resulted in a fairy-tale ending; Launcelot's teasing suggests that marriage and conversion have been unable to save Jessica from the damnation her lineage confers upon her. Jessica's banter with Lorenzo invokes images of the tragic loves of Troilus and Cressida, Pyramus and Thisbe, Aeneas and Dido, Jason and Medea, at least three of which involved crossing the boundaries of community; she also suggests, even if jokingly, that Lorenzo's vows of faith included 'ne'er a true one' (5.1.20). Conversely Lorenzo calls Jessica's love 'unthrift', reminding the audience that she has squandered away much of Shylock's wealth, including exchanging her mother's ring for a monkey. Metzger concludes that while Jessica's desire to convert is essential to establishing Shylock's stubborn resistance to Christianity, its own uncertain outcome reinforces the idea of a Jewish difference which cannot be easily erased. There is thus both a crucial difference between father and daughter, and a shared inheritance that is immutable. We can extend this reading by suggesting that the unsuccessful attempts of other outsiders in the play to cross racial, national, and religious boundaries throw into relief Jessica's exceptional status, but simultaneously they also reinforce the uneasy note on which her story ends.

Finally, the difficulty of Jessica's conversion is also underlined by Portia's use of this term; she tells Bassanio, 'Myself and what is mine to you and yours | Is now converted' (3.2.166–7). By drawing attention to the fact that all marriages call upon women to be converted into new

households and communities, Shakespeare highlights the range of differences within women. Morocco compares Portia to a contemporary coin, an 'angel'; and critics have pointed out that she is crucial to developing the economic as well as emotional relationships between men in this play. If Shylock's money, borrowed by Antonio, makes it possible for Bassanio to woo her, she first offers to repay Shylock many times over, and then saves Antonio's life by outwitting him. The friendship and love between Antonio and Bassanio is thus protected by Portia, even though she ensures that her own position as Bassanio's wife is not threatened by this love—by the end of the play Antonio, 'stand(s) indebted over and above | In love and service' to her 'evermore' (4.1.410–11).⁵² Portia establishes this emotional and financial community by refusing to circulate beyond a closed cultural conduit. That is why her repudiation of Morocco and Aragon are not just aberrations on the part of an otherwise genteel maiden, but an essential part of her gentility and value within the economy of the play.

Historically, marriages between Christians, Jews, and Muslims had been taboo for centuries. Between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries, any sexual contact between Christian and non-Christians was deemed impermissible by canon law.⁵³ In each community the punishment for sexual transgression was always worse for women. The requirement that Jews and Muslims should dress differently from Christians partly arose from the fear that the physical similarities between these groups would lead to sexual intercourse between them. Here, Muslim women risked enslavement by consorting with Christian men, but a Jewish woman in the same position would be fined, even mutilated rather than enslaved. In England where the population had not been so heterogeneous, fears of miscegenation heightened as overseas contact spread, and thirteenth-century laws forbidding intermarriage between Jews and Christians were reiterated in the seventeenth century.⁵⁴ The supposition that non-Christian women desire white and Christian men also increased: Jewish women, writes Thomas Browne, 'desire copulation' with Christians 'rather than [with] their own nation and affect Christian carnality above circumcised ventry', an idea which is repeated by Bulwer's *Anthropometamorphoses* a few years later.⁵⁵ As in Shakespeare's play, in these writings, the active desire of non-Christian women for Christian men is evoked in order to define the boundaries of culture.

