

# Victim and Villain: Shylock in the African American Imagination

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## Abstract

In examining the allusions that a variety of African American writers have made to the figure of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, this essay demonstrates that these writers have followed a general pattern that has long existed of viewing the character as either a victim or a villain. While some African American writers see a kindred spirit in Shylock, one whose vilification by Venetian society parallels the negative ways in which African Americans have been treated in America, others view him as an embodiment of Jewish economic exploitation. By appropriating Shylock in these opposing ways, these writers attempt to place Shakespeare on their side in promoting either positive or negative views of the history of Black-Jewish relations.

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In his autobiographical volume *Lovesong* (1988), the African American writer Julius Lester recounts having been given a volume of Shakespeare's plays for Christmas when he was twelve years old. His mother recommended that he begin reading with *The Merchant of Venice*. Reflecting on these events, the older Lester muses that, if he were giving a volume of Shakespeare to his own child, he would probably not suggest that particular play as a starting point. Nevertheless, the fact that his mother did so and that he followed her advice proved to be a crucial step in his own personal growth and development. Lester recalls of his youthful first reading of the text that "I do not even know what a money-lender or interest is, but I know that Shylock is being mistreated because he is a Jew" (Lester 1988, 21). "Angry" at this mistreatment, the young Lester plows through the difficult work and finds that, in Shylock, "I encounter myself in literature for the first time" (21-22). He concludes the remembrance by wondering why the character and the play affected him so deeply: "[I]s it simply that through Shylock I learn that blacks are not the only people in the world who must ponder in their flesh the meaning of meaningless suffering?" (22).

If we know anything about Lester, we might be tempted to dismiss this scene as being an exception among African Americans.<sup>1</sup> Since the main focus in *Lovesong* is adumbrated in its subtitle, *Becoming a Jew*, we should not be entirely unprepared for Lester to respond to this particular play precisely because of its Jewish content. Through the course of his life, Lester gradually discovers himself to be a Jew at least as much as he is an African American, eventually converting to (or, more precisely, recommitting to) the faith.<sup>2</sup> Yet Lester is far from the only African American writer to have referred to *The Merchant of Venice*. Several others have done so in a similar light, seeing in Shylock a man who was reviled for his religious beliefs just as African Americans have been reviled for their skin color. In contrast, several African American writers have referenced Shakespeare's character in a very different light, seeing in him an embodiment of negative, but largely accurate, stereotypes of Jewish merchants. In showing this bifurcation of response, African American writers are repeating the pattern that has existed in the general public and critical reaction to the play over the last 150 years or more, a dichotomy that sees in Shylock either a victim or a villain.

Indeed, theatergoers have long been divided about the nature of Shakespeare's play itself: is *The Merchant of Venice* an anti-Semitic play? Some critics argue quite the contrary, that the text is actually speaking out against anti-Semitism. Hermann Sinsheimer, for example, writes of Shylock's "Hath not a Jew" speech that "it is an outburst against inhumanity and injustice which one cannot but suppose to be the poet's own opinion. And the conclusion is that Shakespeare must have realized that something was wrong with the treatment of the Jews" (Sinsheimer 1963, 110). Similarly, Martin D. Yaffe asserts that Shakespeare intended "to correct what he [saw] as the theologically unwarranted and politically deleterious abuse of Jews as Jews in the name of Christian teaching" (Yaffe 1997, 47). Frederick Turner calls Shakespeare "one of the greatest pioneers in humankind's long struggle to throw off the evils of racism and anti-Semitism" (Turner 1999, 85). On the other hand, some critics have argued that, no matter what its artistic merits might be, the play is irredeemably anti-Semitic. Derek Cohen, for example, asserts that it is "a profoundly and crudely anti-Semitic play" (Cohen 1991, 305), a position seconded by Harold Bloom (Bloom 1991, xvi). Cohen believes that the text is anti-Semitic "not by virtue of its portrayal of an individual Jew in uncomplimentary terms but solely by its association of negative racial characteristics with the term Jewish or with Jewish characters generally," specifically when it results in "a moral relationship between the insistent equation of the *idea* of Jewishness with acquisitive and material values while the *idea* of Christianity is linked to the values of mercy and love" (Cohen 1991, 306). Whether anti-Semitic or not, the play has certainly been used in the past, and can be used again

in the future, by people who wish to promote anti-Semitism.<sup>3</sup> When African American writers invoke the name of Shylock or play upon the Shylock stereotype in their works, therefore, they are doing more than merely alluding to Shakespeare's text: they are deploying specific strategies of appropriation in taking Shakespeare's character and re-creating him so as to represent a wide range of attitudes towards Jews and towards Black-Jewish relations, both positive and negative, sometimes re-fashioning him as a victim of racial prejudice and sometimes re-fashioning him as an exploitative merchant, depending on the particular use they hope to make of his image.

### Shylock as Victim

Lester's youthful reaction to *The Merchant of Venice* certainly places Shylock in the former light, as a victim of Venetian prejudice whose status resembles that of African Americans, a position that had been taken by Black speakers and writers dating to as far back as 1789. In that year, an unknown "Free Negro" gave a speech entitled "Blood and Slavery" in which, attempting to prove that Africans are men, he simply appropriated Shylock's famous "Hath not a Jew" speech wholesale, replacing the word "Jew" with the word "Negro" and the word "Christian" with the words "white man" (Gottheimer 2003, 4). He also added the following: "Are we not exposed to all the same wants? Do we not feel all the same sentiments — are we not capable of all the same exertions — and are we not entitled to all the same rights as other men?" (4). The "Free Negro" clearly sees himself as a Shylock figure, set apart from the rest of society through no fault of his own and, as a result, wrongly treated as something less than human.

Along these same lines, Frank J. Webb, in his novel *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857) — the second novel by an African American to be published — presents an African American character who compares himself to Shylock. Mr. Walters has accumulated a huge fortune, but he resents the role that race has played in his life. "Time after time," he says,

"when scraping, toiling, saving, I have asked myself. To what purpose is it all? — perhaps that in the future white men may point at and call me, sneeringly, 'a nigger millionaire,' or condescend to borrow money of me. Ah! often, when some negro-hating white man has been forced to ask a loan at my hands, I've thought of Shylock and his pound of flesh, and ceased to wonder at him." (Webb 1969, 275-76)

Waters, a Black man, finds himself in a position so similar to that of Shakespeare's Jew that the comparison is almost inevitable. His expression of empathy is similar to those of the "Free Negro" and of the young Lester.

In Jessie Redmon Fauset's novel *Comedy: American Style* (1933), to cite another example, the character Phebe makes the following statement:

"I think we all spend too much time on color . . . It doesn't seem to make sense to me. . . . We're all people, aren't we? It's like that thing we had to learn in *The Merchant of Venice* . . . 'Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions' . . . and all the rest of it. Perhaps some day the world will see how silly it all is." (Fauset 1995, 237)

Like Lester, Phebe links the struggle of the Jew in anti-Semitic Venice (or early modern England) with that of the African American in contemporary racist America. Similarly, as Murray Friedman reports, "*The New York Times* once asked [Booker T.] Washington to name his favorite passage from Shakespeare; he selected Shylock's 'Hath not a Jew eyes?' speech in *The Merchant of Venice*. To Washington, Shylock's plea on behalf of Jews and brotherhood had an echo in the appeal of blacks to be treated as men and brothers" (Friedman 1995, 35). This may also explain why Chester Himes used Portia's "The quality of mercy" speech as the epigraph to his first autobiography, but then titled the volume *The Quality of Hurt* (1972). In Ann Petry's novel *Country Place* (1947), to cite a final example, the character Mrs. Gramby, although white herself, responds to a white racist's anti-Semitic remarks about a Jewish lawyer by echoing Shakespeare in stating that "'The Jew, as you call him, is a man like yourself. With the same desires, the same weaknesses . . . [s]ubject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer'" (Petry 1971, 88). This remark causes her to remember the first time she had seen a production of *The Merchant of Venice*, which was on her honeymoon. Petry, like Lester and the other African American writers noted above, clearly wants to compare the tragedy of anti-Semitism that affected Shylock to the tragedy of racism that is affecting their own lives and those of their Black characters.<sup>4</sup>

In each of these cases, the comparative allusion is predicated on an interpretation of Shylock as a model victim of unwarranted prejudice and, consequently, unwarranted suffering, a man whose "Hath not a Jew" speech is a plea for universal tolerance and equality of treatment. When we turn to an examination of the stage history of the play, however, we find that such an interpretation has not always prevailed, and in fact may have arisen closer to our own time than to the bard's. Ironically — or perhaps not, as I am arguing here — one of the people who did much to popularize such a view of Shakespeare's Jew was an African American, the actor Ira Aldridge. Having found the New York theatrical world barred to him because of his color, Aldridge went to England in 1825 and began to earn a name for himself playing black roles. Some of the plays he appeared in were significant pieces, most notably Shakespeare's *Othello*, but many of them were melodramas

or farces in which he was cast as a slave or a buffoon. Even so, with abolitionist sentiment running high in England at the time, Aldridge managed to slip in some social commentary. In his role as Hassan, "the vengeful Moor" (Lindfors 2007, 181) in the play *The Castle Spectre*, for example, he spoke out against slavery: "Am I not branded with scorn? Am I not marked out for dishonor? Was I not free, and am I not a slave? Was I not once beloved, and am I not now despised? . . . Can I remember this and not hate these white men? Can I think how cruelly they have wronged me, and not rejoice when I see them suffer?" (quoted in Marshall and Stock 1958, 86). In its echoing of Shylock's "Hath not a Jew" speech, Hassan's plea was perhaps fresh in Aldridge's mind when, in 1830, he began to perform in white roles, including the one that he would perform most often during the rest of his career (Lindfors 2007, 183), that of Shakespeare's despised moneylender.

Not long before Aldridge's time, Shylock had typically been portrayed as "soul-less . . . ridiculous in his demands and his insatiable anger and impudence"; actors "present[ed] him as a caricature" (quoted in Marshall and Stock 1958, 234). The modern, "tragic hero" view of Shylock had begun to emerge on stage, despite the early date of the Free Negro's speech, only in the early nineteenth century. In 1814 the actor "Edmund Kean risked his professional career on a sympathetic interpretation of Shylock . . . and as a result established his reputation" (Prior 1981, 481).<sup>5</sup> Viewing his performance, the English essayist William Hazlitt commented that "our sympathies are much oftener with [Shylock] than with his enemies" (481). The character was still less than admirable, but Kean did "raise [him] above sordidness, to endow him with a large measure of dignity and humanity" (Gross 1992, 128). Beginning in 1831, Aldridge took this one step further. As a Dutch reviewer said of one of his performances, "Shylock doesn't appear so hateful anymore; the natural acting style of the artist elucidates his character and provides motives for the sharp traits" (quoted in Lindfors 2007, 227). Indeed, many critics have argued that Aldridge's portrayal of Shylock was so effective precisely because of his personal identification with the role of a social outcast. "[P]erhaps Aldridge identified with Shylock's bitterness over the neglect of his people and the injustices done to him personally," Joost Groenboer asserts (Lindfors 2007, 227), while another unnamed critic stated more bluntly that "[b]eing himself a representative of a despised race, he could strongly and truly portray the feelings of wronged Jews" (quoted in Lindfors 2007, 250). Aldridge's acting was particularly appreciated in Russia: "One Press report told of a procession of Jews headed by the Rabbi coming to the theatre to thank him for his interpretation of Shylock. For the first time in Russian theatre history, Shakespeare's Jew became a human being" (Marshall and Stock 1958, 288; see also Hill 1984, 20). Along similar lines, another Russian critic noted that "Ira Aldridge is a mulatto born in America and feels deeply the insults levelled [*sic*] at people of another

colour by people of a white colour in the New World. In Shylock he does not see particularly a Jew, but a human being in general, oppressed by the age-old hatred shown towards people like him, and expressing this feeling with wonderful power and truth" (quoted in Marshall and Stock 1958, 234). The Russian historian M. P. Pogodin said of Aldridge's performance that "deep in the heart of every ecstatic spectator, sacred conscience is heard; no, under the dark skin the same flaming blood is excited, the poor heart beats with the same common human feelings, from the stained breast burst the same heavy sighs as ours, a black body quivers from pain the same as the white" (quoted in Marshall and Stock 1958, 233). Whether the echo of Shylock's "Hath not a Jew" speech is intentional in this passage or not, it is certainly present.

Although Aldridge received excellent reviews throughout England and, especially, on the Continent,<sup>6</sup> he was never a success on the main stages in London. Some ascribe this to racism. Bernth Lindfors even argues that this professional frustration probably figured into and advanced his portrayals of social outsiders like Shylock, stating that the exiled African American "could empathize totally with a Venetian Jew who suffered bitter injustices at the hands of bigoted whites" (Lindfors 2007, 189). British critics "accused him of being in league with the Jews, whose petitions for civil rights were then being considered by parliament" (Lindfors 2007, 74). Whatever the reason, Aldridge's portrayal of Shylock was overlooked in the theatrical center of London at the time and so the acting breakthrough is generally attributed to Henry Irving's portrayal of Shylock in 1879. Here for the first time a major actor dared to show the character "as a victim, even in his villainy" (Gross 1992, 146-47). Shortly before the production premiered, an article appeared in the journal *Theatre* (owned, not coincidentally, by Irving himself) that "argued fervently that in essence the play was a plea for toleration: 'the sympathy enjoyed by Shylock is designedly aroused in the interest of the great but downtrodden race he represents'" (Gross 1992, 155). Since that time, this interpretation has prevailed in the theater and among critics, including the Black writers we looked at earlier and the Black actors who followed in Aldridge's wake, *The Merchant of Venice* being a play that remained particularly popular among Black actors and dramatic ensembles for many years to come.<sup>7</sup>

The most significant passage in the text to support this sympathetic, Shylock-as-victim, interpretation is, of course, Shylock's own "Hath not a Jew" speech, to which the "Free Negro," Fauset's Phebe, Booker T. Washington, and Petry's Mrs. Gramby all refer. Putting forth his explanation as to why Antonio has continually insulted him, Shylock contends that it is primarily because

I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions, fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, heal'd by the same means, warm'd and cool'd by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?" (*The Merchant of Venice*, 3.1.58-67)<sup>8</sup>

Shylock's questions — at least until the last one — are like the best of rhetorical questions: they cannot be answered except in the affirmative. If the Venetians must therefore grant that Shylock is human, then how can they justify their inhuman treatment of him? This is the pivot upon which Shylock's position as a tragic figure turns. As Charles Knight asserts, "It is impossible, after this exposition of his feelings, that we should not feel that he has properly cast the greater portion of the odium which belongs to his actions upon the social circumstances by which he has been hunted into madness. He has been made the thing he is by society" (Knight 1991, 16). Sinsheimer goes even further, asserting that Shylock "proclaim[s] something like the equality and the equal rights of man — not bombastically or sententiously or piously, but realistically so that it can be understood by every 'groundling' in the pit" (Sinsheimer 1963, 109).<sup>9</sup>

The "Free Negro"'s use of Shylock's speech reinforces both of these points. First, he uses Shylock's tactics exactly in forcing his white listeners to accept him as a man and then questioning their inhuman treatment of him. Second, later in the speech he notes that "You make us slaves; you implant in our minds all the vices which are in some degree inseparable from that condition; and you then impiously impute to nature, and to God, the origin of those vices, to which you alone have given birth; and punish in us the crimes of which you are yourselves the authors" (Gottheimer 2003, 5). Given this historical precedent, it is not so surprising that African American students living more than one hundred years later, more than 300 years after *The Merchant of Venice's* premiere, would have memorized the "Hath not a Jew" speech in school, as Fauset asserts that they did in *Comedy: American Style*, nor that the speech affected Julius Lester so strongly.

Within the play itself, furthermore, there is a connection between Shylock's "Hath not a Jew" speech and people of African descent, namely the Prince of Morocco. In the Prince's initial speech, when he is urging Portia not to dislike him for being Black, he asks her to select the most handsome white man so that the two can "make incision for your love, / To prove whose blood is reddest, his or mine" (1.3.6-7). Morocco's point, of course, is that his blood is the same color as any other person's, that "under the skin, all men are brothers" (Goddard 1969, 150). This is

exactly the same point Shylock makes when he asks, "If you prick us, do we not bleed?" (3.1.64).<sup>10</sup> Thus, it seems clear that "Morocco's exclusion early in the play" is setting the stage for "Shylock's later" (Overton 1987, 23).<sup>11</sup>

Nor should we discount the extra-textual connection between *The Merchant of Venice* and the similarly named *Tragedy of Othello, The Moor of Venice*. Shakespeare clearly positions Shylock, the Prince, and Othello as outside the Venetian mainstream; in this manner, Mary Janell Metzger argues, his drawing of a "connection between blacks and Jews as alien others helped construct the racialized notion of Englishness" itself (Metzger 1998, 55). Several African American writers have noted this connection, such as Leon Forrest in *Divine Days* (1993) and Ishmael Reed in *Japanese by Spring* (1993),<sup>12</sup> and it has been commented on quite extensively by the Afro-Caribbean (and part Jewish) writer Caryl Phillips.<sup>13</sup> In his travelogue *The European Tribe* (1987), Phillips comments on his feelings while visiting Venice. "How did Othello live in this astonishing city?" he asks. "Sixteenth century society both enslaved the black and ridiculed the Jew" (Phillips 1987, 45). Later he notes that, because he has "identified with" Jews since he was quite young, he has "never been able to admire *The Merchant of Venice*" since he feels that "there is no denying that the play is anti-Semitic in its assumptions" (54). Still, he states that "Shylock is my hero" (55) and further asserts that "most black Americans, despite anti-Semitic statements, would have some understanding of [Shylock's] position" (55). In his subsequent novel, *The Nature of Blood* (1997), which is set during several different historical periods in Venice, Phillips depicts Othello wandering through the Jewish ghetto. Although neither Shylock nor *The Merchant of Venice* are explicitly named, they are certainly in the background of these scenes and serve to bring out the connections between Othello and Shylock as social outcasts, largely through no fault of their own.<sup>14</sup>

To modern audiences, Shylock, the Prince, and Othello are seen as victims of prejudice, good or at least potentially good people who are driven to madness by a hypocritical society. They may start out as stock characters, the Jew and the Moor, and they may have been seen in that way for a long time, but today's readers see in them, particularly in Shylock, a real person who is suffering undeservedly. "As the play proceeds," John Lyon writes, "Morocco and Shylock both appear on the stage as particular human beings who jostle disconcertingly against the initial prejudices and stereotyping labels. It is more particularly in their later appearances that the fool in Morocco and the villain in Shylock give way to a fuller revelation of human suffering" (Lyon 1988, 42). Modern readers and audiences of whatever ethnic affiliation tend to identify themselves with the persecuted minority figure — Shylock — rather than the persecuting majority figure — Antonio. Shylock is thus seen by Jewish and Black readers, among others, as a man who is unjustly persecuted. He has



completed the trajectory that Leslie Fiedler subsequently mapped out: "from grotesque to pathetic, from utter alien to one of us" (Fiedler 1986, 63). This is certainly the way Julius Lester viewed the character when he first read the play on Christmas Day in 1951.

### Shylock as Villain

In 1969, however, Lester made an allusion to *The Merchant of Venice* that showed a very different, and much less positive, view of the character, one that can also be found in the works of other African American writers. By this time Lester, having graduated from Fisk University, was beginning to make his way as a young artist in New York and was caught up in the extreme racial politics of the day. A radio personality on the independent station WBAI, Lester found himself embroiled in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Schoolteachers' Strike, one of the most distressing events in the history of Black-Jewish relations in America. He had had as a guest on his talk show a Black teacher, Leslie Campbell, who had read a poem that had been written by one of his students, a fifteen-year-old girl named Thea Behran; entitled "Anti-Semitism" and dedicated to Albert Shanker, the Jewish president of the United Federation of Teachers, the poem began, "Hey, Jewboy, with that yarmulke on your head / You pale-faced Jewboy — I wish you were dead" (Lester 1988, 51). Campbell was suspended, but then reinstated. When Shanker asked that he be suspended again, Lester countered, "'What does he want, two pounds of flesh?'" (54). His invocation of Shylock in this instance does not conjure up the image of a victim of Venetian anti-Semitism but instead that of a heartless villain. Indeed, this remark could not help but call to mind the historical prejudices against Jews that went into Shakespeare's creation of Shylock in the first place.

One of the primary ways in which Shylock differs from the Prince of Morocco or Othello in the eyes of Shakespeare's Venetians, which is to say one of the primary ways in which Jews differ from Moors in the Elizabethan imagination, is in his relationship to money. Indeed, without Shylock's supposed usuriousness and greed, *The Merchant of Venice* simply could not have been written, and his supposed usuriousness and greed has everything to do with his being a Jew. Although everyone in the play — with the notable exception of Portia — is consumed with money in way or another, a simple summary of the play's action shows that Shylock is the only one who is abused for his way of trying to advance his interests, as he is a usurer. Usury does not mean much to modern audiences, but in the play's setting, Venice being one of the foremost financial cities of the day, as well as in Shakespeare's England, it was a very big deal. Christians were not permitted to lend money to one another at interest, based on a Biblical passage about how one is to treat one's brother (Deuteronomy 23.19), but those who needed capital and were willing to pay managed to get around

this injunction by noting that it did not apply to the Jews, who were not "brothers." In much of Christian Europe, Jews thus became associated with occupations involving moneylending, while at the same time being condemned for their sinful ways by the good people who could not do business without their services.<sup>15</sup> Even in modern times, this association with money continues to be present in some references to Shylock, including references by African Americans, that make of him a villainous figure — an "economic villain" (Spencer 1988, 141). Venice's anti-Semitism may have made Shylock a villain, but he is a villain nonetheless. This is the context in which Lester referenced the usurer's desire for a pound of flesh in light of Albert Shanker's activities during the school controversy in New York; knowing the play as well as he does, Lester must have understood how cutting this allusion would be to Shanker as a Jew.

The stereotypical image of the exploitative Jewish businessman, which has played a significant role in Black-Jewish mercantile relationships in America, is the version of Shylock that Lester was alluding to in 1969, not the view of him as a tragic outsider figure, as he had first thought him to be. Nor is he the only African American to have seen Shakespeare's character in this light, one that fits right in with the pre-Kean history of stage presentation of Shylock, as we discussed earlier. In 1926, for example, a newspaper editor opined of Jewish philanthropy in Norfolk's black *Virginia Journal and Guide* that, "while the Jew 'sympathizes with and helps us[,] he also 'gets his pound of flesh for doing it'" (quoted in Friedman 1995, 81). When citizens in Harlem complained about the unfair economic practices to which they were subjected, their anger was directed (at least ostensibly) at Jews, and again, Shylock imagery was evoked. Murray Friedman notes that, in the 1930s "[s]tereotypes of the 'fiendish Jewish landlord' and the 'Shylock' were taken up by blacks in the slums of Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh as well as New York, even though many tenement owners were not Jewish" (Friedman 1995, 92). Irving Louis Horowitz, who grew up in Harlem in the 1930s and 1940s, notes that the Jewish "[s]hopkeepers were the visible enemies. For black militants they were the devil whites, for other blacks, Jews ascendant or ghetto profiteers. The 'merchant of Venice' had come to Harlem" (Horowitz 1990, 86). Far from identifying with Shylock as the receiver of prejudice, these African Americans saw him as an embodiment of everything that was keeping them poor and near despair.

A similar image of Shylock appears in other texts by African American writers, such as the novel *Flight* (1926), by Walter White. In this novel Jean, a light skinned Black who has moved from New Orleans to Atlanta, complains about the African Americans in the rising metropolis that "they are aping the white man — becoming a race of money-grubbers with ledgers and money tills for brains and Shylock hearts" (White 1969, 54). In referencing perhaps the most overtly anti-

Semitic line in *The Merchant of Venice*, Antonio's plea to the court to stop arguing with Shylock because "You may as well do anything most hard / As seek to soften that — than which what's harder? — / His Jewish heart!" (4.1.79-81), the allusion conjures up a host of negative associations regarding Jews and their relationships to money. In Joseph A. Walker's play *The River Niger* (1973), similarly, the protagonist John Williams kids his best friend Dudley Stanton, a Jamaican doctor, about his stinginess in the buying of alcohol; "One for the road!" he says. "Why didn't you buy one for the road before we hit the road. Shylock stingy bastard" (Walker 1973, 55). At another point John tells the story of a dog he once owned who "was the squarest, most unhip dog in the world! . . . Named him Shylock!" (41). For both White and Walker, to call someone a Shylock is to offer him an insult, displaying a negative view of the character's personality traits.<sup>16</sup>

The Black writer who has done the most to translate this image of the economically villainous Shylock figure into contemporary America is James Baldwin. Although I am aware of only three explicit references to this particular Shakespearean play in Baldwin's oeuvre, the Shylock figure, expanded beyond usury as it has become in modern America to include all manner of Jewish mercantile enterprise, exists in the background of several of his works. Take, for example, his depiction of the Jewish landlord Rabinowitz in his novel *Tell Me How Long The Train's Been Gone* (1968). The narrator, a famous Black actor named Leo Proudhammer, recalls times in his youth when his family could not pay the rent that they owed to Rabinowitz. The landlord

complained that our shiftlessness, which he did not hesitate to consider an attribute of the race, had forced him, himself, an old man with a weak heart, to climb all these stairs to plead with us to give him the money that we owed him. And this was the last time — he wanted to make sure that we understand that this was the last time. The next time our ass would be on the sidewalk. Our father was younger than Mr. Rabinowitz, leaner, stronger, and bigger. With one blow into that monstrous gut, he could have hurled him down the stairs. And we know how much he hated Rabinowitz. For days on end, in the wintertime, we huddled around the gas stove in the kitchen because Rabinowitz gave us no heat; and when the gas was turned off, we sat around the kerosene stove. When windows were broken, Rabinowitz took his time about fixing them; the wind made the cardboard we stuck in the window rattle all night long, and when snow came the weight of the snow forced the cardboard inward and onto the floor. Neither Rabinowitz nor the city was alert about collecting garbage or shoveling away snow; whenever the apartment received a fresh coat of paint, we bought the paint and painted the apartment ourselves; we caught and killed the rats; a great chunk of the kitchen ceiling fell one winter, narrowly missing our mother. We all hated Rabinowitz

with a perfectly exquisite hatred; great, gross, abject liar of a Jew — and this word in our father's mouth was terrible, as dripping with venom as a mango is with juice — and we would have been happy to see our proud father kill him. We would have been glad to help. (Baldwin 1969, 12-13)

While there is no explicit reference to the moneylender of Venice here, the lineage is not hard to see. A nineteenth-century actor steeped in playing the role of Shakespeare's villainous Shylock would have relished an opportunity to perform Baldwin's dastardly Rabinowitz.

The first of Baldwin's three explicit references to *The Merchant of Venice* appears in a little-known newspaper article from 1964 entitled "Why I Stopped Hating Shakespeare." He explains his initial condemnation of the playwright by noting that, "in the way that some Jews bitterly and mistakenly resent Shylock, I was dubious about Othello (what did he see in Desdemona?) and bitter about Caliban" (Baldwin 1964b). The connection Baldwin draws between Shakespeare's most famous Jew and his most famous Moor is interesting, as is his assertion that Jews are "mistaken" in their resentment of Shylock, whereas he is correct (presumably) in his "bitterness" over the portrayal of Caliban; Baldwin's use of the Shylock figure, as we will see below, indicates that he finds Shakespeare's character to be largely an accurate representation.

For our purposes here, however, Baldwin's second and third explicit allusions to *The Merchant of Venice* are more significant. Very similar to each other, these two references are quite telling in light of the mixed signals Baldwin sent out throughout his career regarding Jews, especially Jewish merchants. The first of them appears in *A Rap on Race*, a dialogue held between Baldwin and the anthropologist Margaret Mead and published in 1971. Baldwin has been speaking about his disdain for the state of Israel, the establishment of which he sees as a blatant ploy by the West to gain a strategic advantage in the region at the cost of displacing millions of Palestinians,<sup>17</sup> when the following conversation takes place:

Baldwin: We put a handful of people at the gate of the Middle East, in an entirely hostile, embattled area where they could be murdered at any moment and we knew it, not because we loved the Jews but because we could use them.

Mead: And because the promoters of Zionism could use the British. Remember, those were parallel points.

Baldwin: I remember the Merchant of Venice, too.

Mead: *Really?*

Baldwin: Yes! The Jew was still doing the Christian's dirty work. (Baldwin and Mead 1971, 208-209)

Baldwin's final overt allusion to Shakespeare's text appears in his "An Open Letter to the Born Again," published in 1979 in the wake of the Andrew Young affair, in which the African American Ambassador to the United Nations was forced to resign his post (under Jewish pressure, according to some observers) because he had met secretly with leaders of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, at that time considered an outlaw group. Focusing once again on the issue of Israel, Baldwin asks, "Does no one see the connection between *The Merchant of Venice* and [Edward Lewis Wallant's] *The Pawnbroker*? In both of these works, as though no time had passed, the Jew is portrayed as doing the Christian's usurious dirty work" (Baldwin 1985b, 655).

These two references to *The Merchant of Venice* might seem to reflect an empathetic understanding of the social circumstances that played such a large part in Shylock's creation. Baldwin certainly shows himself to be aware of the line of thinking used by the "Free Negro," that Venice created Shylock so that it could then excoriate him. He might appear to be viewing the moneylender as victimized more than victimizer. But is this actually the tone of the passages? Are they not rather condemnations of Jews for so readily accepting the role of middleman? The fact that Baldwin found it necessary to follow his statement "The Jew was still doing the Christian's dirty work" with the immediate disclaimer "I am not accusing Jews when I say that" (Baldwin and Mead 1971, 209) indicates that he is afraid someone might think he *is* blaming the Jew for playing that role, a defensiveness which perhaps shows that that is precisely what he is doing. Indeed, an examination of Baldwin's comments about Jewish merchants in such essays as "The Harlem Ghetto" (1948) and "Negroes are Anti-Semitic Because They're Anti-White" (1967) brings out Baldwin's view of "the Negro's ambivalent relation to the Jew" (Baldwin 1955, 55), showing a number of instances of statements that can only be seen as going along with and even perpetuating the negative Shylock/Rabinowitz stereotype.

The same can be said of Baldwin's final comments on the relationship between Jewish merchants and black patrons, which were made in 1984 when he gave an impromptu lecture at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, a transcript of which was later published in *The Black Scholar* as "Blacks and Jews." Speaking about the then-recent disclosure of Jesse Jackson's 'Hymietown' remark made while on the Presidential campaign trail, Baldwin showed in many ways that his ideas hadn't changed much since the time of "The Harlem Ghetto" more than thirty-five years earlier. The tape recording begins with Baldwin once again invoking the Shylock figure, although not naming him as such explicitly: "He comes to collect the rent, so you know him in that role. He runs the grocery store and gives you credit, so you know him in that role" (Baldwin 1988, 3). He then goes on to examine many of the issues he had written about in the earlier pieces. He

discusses the shared heritage of Blacks and Jews in the Old Testament, for example,<sup>18</sup> but only to make the point that "unconsciously a black person tends to expect more from a Jewish person than he expects from anybody else. And because the American Jew in this country is essentially a white man, this expectation is always defeated with a resulting accumulation of bitterness" (Baldwin 1988, 3). Of the Jewish merchant, he says that

part of the hazard of being a Jew, historically and actually, and part of precisely the danger I was talking about when I began about the way a Jew intrudes himself on a black person's attention is because he is the only white man you see. But then part of the hazard, actually, morally, historically of . . . being a Jew is finding yourself doing the Christian's dirty work . . . The people who own Harlem, for example, never arrive to collect the rent. The people who are really responsible for the misery all up and down those streets do not run the pawn shop. (Baldwin 1988, 9, second ellipsis mine)

Although Baldwin adds that "it's not a condemnation" (9), as he had in his similar conversation with Margaret Mead about *The Merchant of Venice*, his actual point of view regarding the Jew as economic middleman is somewhat hard to pin down, as he gives conflicting evidence. He clearly says "I am not anti-Jewish" (5), yet some who heard the speech were not convinced. Baldwin's reliance on the negative Shylock stereotype made him suspect from the beginning and the tone of his subsequent remarks left many members of the audience wondering. His "penetrating eye" may have seen "the oppressor as *also* the oppressed," as Wole Soyinka wrote (Soyinka 1989, 17),<sup>19</sup> but that did not prevent him from falling prey to the syndrome he himself identified whereby victims "do not distinguish one oppressor from another, nor see through to the root principle of their oppressions" (Baldwin 1985a, 430) and therefore strike out indiscriminately, hitting potential friends as well as real and imaginary foes. It should not have surprised him when these people took umbrage at being hit.

The person who took the most umbrage, in fact, was none other than Julius Lester, at that point in time a professor in the Afro-American Studies Department at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and present for Baldwin's talk. Between the time of Lester's allusion to Shylock during the Brownsville Schoolteachers' strike of 1968 and Baldwin's appearance at the University of Massachusetts in 1984, much had changed in Lester's life. Most significantly, he had become a practicing, even a devout Jew. He describes in *Lovesong* how Baldwin had joined him at Shabbat meals on several occasions and how close a bond they had forged. Thus he felt even more betrayed by what he saw as the anti-Semitism of Baldwin's spontaneous classroom lecture. "I was shocked," he writes, "when Jimmy referred to Jews as being nothing more than 'white Christians who go to

something called synagogue on a Saturday night rather than church on Sunday" (Lester 1988, 210). He went on to assert that "I know he is not an anti-Semite, but his remarks in class were anti-Semitic, and he does not realize it" (210). Lester also felt that, during the question-and-answer period that followed Baldwin's remarks, he had stood idly by while Black students were essentially given "permission to stand up and mouth every anti-Semitic cliché they knew and they did so, castigating Jewish landlords and Jews in general" (210). When Lester confronted him about it, according to Lester's account, Baldwin admitted that he had not spoken "as someone who understands Jewish suffering and Jewish fears" (211) and promised to apologize to the Jewish students whom he had offended. He never did. As a result of this encounter, Lester found himself shunned and ostracized by the members of the Afro-American Studies Department, leading to his being relocated to the Judaic and Near Eastern Studies Department, where he remained for many years.<sup>20</sup>

The irony, of course, is that Baldwin "pointed out the possibility that people were using [Jesse Jackson's 'Hymietown'] slip as a golden opportunity to set blacks and Jews against each other" (Leeming 1984, 366), yet this is exactly what happened as a result of his own statements. Baldwin may speak out against stereotypes — he told Margaret Mead that "it is very difficult to ask people to give up the assumptions by which they have always lived, and yet that is the demand the world has got to make now of everybody, [b]ecause the assumptions by which we have all lived so far are as inhuman as the Spanish Inquisition — or the Third Reich" (Baldwin and Mead 1971, 161) — yet he also perpetuates them. There can be little doubt that Baldwin's "experience of the adversarial relations between blacks and Jews in Harlem left the remnants of a grievance" (Campbell 1991, 277) and that the lingering effect of this stereotype prevents him from achieving what he despaired of ever finding back when he wrote "The Harlem Ghetto" in 1948: "any real and systematic cooperation . . . between Negroes and Jews" (Baldwin 1955, 57). As long as he continues to be affected by the negative Shylock stereotype, there can be little chance of rapprochement.

### Shylock as Both

It seems that there is also little likelihood of rapprochement between the two divergent views of Shylock in the African American imagination that we have sketched out here. That the same character can result in such opposed appropriations is no doubt a tribute to Shakespeare's genius as well as to the imaginations of the African American writers who have traced out these paths of development as a specific response conditioned by a strongly felt personal and cultural experience of being a social outcast. The situation is summed up well by Brian Murdoch, the translator of Mirjam Pressler's young adult novel *Shylock's Daughter* (2001), who stresses how "difficult" a

character Shylock himself is: "He can be seen in the play either as a victim, properly protesting that Jews are exactly the same as everyone else ("If you prick us, do we not bleed?" he asks), and utterly destroyed at the end, or he can be seen as a potentially murderous old miser, who cares more about his money than his daughter" (Murdoch 2001, 253-54). The play lends itself to these various interpretations, depending on one's subject position. If one is in the position of having been the victim of prejudice, one's reaction to prejudice is rarely average, according to the psychologist Gordon Allport, but is instead likely to be either very low or very high in prejudice. "Being a victim oneself disposes one either to develop [sympathy with] or [aggression toward] other out-groups," he notes (Allport 1979, 155). As our survey of African American literary responses to *The Merchant of Venice* has shown, Black writers have displayed both of these reactions. While many African American writers look to Shylock as a fellow victim of racism and invoke Shakespeare's character in calling for tolerance and equal treatment, others perpetuate the villainous anti-Semitic stereotypes of Jewish economic greed embodied in Shylock and transport them to modern America.

### Notes

1. Lester cites similar enthusiasm when he reads Leon Uris's *Exodus* in 1958 and when he hears a lecture by Rosey Poole, the translator of Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl*, in 1961.
2. For more on Lester's relationship to Judaism, see my essay "'Gee, You Don't Look Jewish': Julius Lester's *Lovesong*, an African-American Jewish-American Autobiography" (Meyer 1999).
3. For an interesting discussion of this issue see Laurence Lerner's "Wilhelm S. and Shylock" (2006), as well as Wesker 1990, 182-83, Overton 1987, 24, and Gross 1992, 273 and 319-23.
4. For a fascinating African reaction to *The Merchant of Venice*, see Isak Dinesen's *Out of Africa* (Dinesen 1983, 258-60). I must credit John Gross (1992, 255-56) for alerting me to this passage.
5. See also Toby Lelyveld: "Kean was the first to break with the tradition that made of Shylock a preposterous fool" (Lelyveld 2006, 219).
6. For reviews particularly of Aldridge's Shylock, see Marshall and Stock 1958, 139, 187, 197, 227, 229, 232, 236, 286-87 and Lindfors 2007, 183, 186, 189, 240, and 250.
7. Another Black actor, Morgan Smith, appeared in London in Shakespearean roles including Shylock, but he was less successful than Aldridge had been (Marshall and Stock 1958, 135; Hill 1984, 29-30). Errol Hill reports that in America in the 1870s, *The Merchant of Venice* was the fifth most frequently produced Shakespearean work among African Americans (Hill 1984, 45); in 1905, it was the first text selected by Atlanta University when it began "the custom of presenting a Shakespeare play by the graduating class" (83), while it was the second



Shakespearean play produced by both the Howard University and the Washington Dramatic Clubs (85, 86).

8. All references to *The Merchant of Venice* come from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, edited by G. Blakemore Evans (Shakespeare 1974).
9. For contrasting interpretations of this speech, see Palmer 1969, 125 and Prior 1981, 494-95.
10. For more on this connection see Golden 1958, 176.
11. See also Barbara K. Lewalski's statement that "This defeat and lessening of Morocco . . . foreshadows the defeat and conversion of Shylock" (Lewalski 2006, 181).
12. References to these allusions can be found in Erickson 2007, 9 and 106.
13. See Phillips's interview with Maya Jaggi, quoted in Erickson 2007, 198.
14. See Erickson 2007, 109: Phillips "intimates a Shakespearean link between the Venice that constructs the Jewish ghetto and the Venice in which Othello must negotiate his way. . . . Although *The Merchant of Venice* is never named in the novel, its thematic relevance is evident. The novel presupposes our awareness of Othello and Shylock as two ethnic outsiders, and it calls on this awareness not only in relation to early modern Europe but also in connection with contemporary attention to blacks and Jews. Phillips's parallel stories stress their major common bond in the prejudice that both characters have experienced at the hands of white Europeans."
15. One *OED* definition of "Jew" states: "As a name of opprobrium or reprobation; spec. applied to a grasping or extortionate money lender or usurer, or a trader who drives hard bargains and deals craftily" (quoted in Spencer 1988, 89).
16. Although I am not aware of Amiri Baraka ever making a direct allusion to Shylock or *The Merchant of Venice*, his call for "dagger poems in the slimy bellies / of the owner-jews" (Baraka 1991, 219) caused at least one critic to make such a connection, when Ethan Goffman observed that Baraka dismisses Jewish achievement and sees only "the 'hooked grin' of a Shylock obsessed with money" (Goffman 2000, 104). In *The System of Dante's Hell* (1963), Baraka again provides an image of a modern Shylock, without directly naming him as such: "10 feet up on the wall, in a kind of balcony, a jew sat, with thick glasses and a cap, in front of a table. He had checks and money at the table & where the winding steps went up to him a line of shouting woogies waved their pay & waited for that bogus Christ to give them the currency of that place. Two tremendous muthafuckers with stale white teeth grinned in back of the jew and sat with baseball bats to protect the western world" (Baraka 2000, 107). It is a bit surprising that more of the Black Arts Movement writers did not allude to Shylock, as their "portray[al] of Jews as metonymic for dominant exploitation" (Goffman 2000, 99) fits right in with the ethos of Shakespeare's text, as these writers would have interpreted it.

17. Baldwin was consistent throughout his career in his denunciations of Israel; see "An Open Letter to the Born Again" (Baldwin 1985b, 655), "Blacks and Jews" (Baldwin 1988, 4), and interviews in Standley and Pratt 1989, 85-86, 135, and 149.
18. In "The Harlem Ghetto," Baldwin points out that, within the context of the Black church, "the negro identifies himself almost wholly with the Jew. The more devout Negro considers that he is a Jew, in bondage to a hard taskmaster and waiting for a Moses to lead him out of Egypt. The hymns, the texts, and the most favored legends of the devout Negro are all Old Testament and therefore Jewish in origin" (Baldwin 1955, 55). See also Schulberg 1989, 143-44. Baldwin's novel *Go Tell It On the Mountain* (1953), which grows directly out of his own early experience in the church, both as the (step-)son of a minister and as a popular boy preacher, contains several such references linking the African American struggle with the Jews of the Old Testament. See Baldwin 1977, 68, 70, 97, 114, 129, and 197 (the last a reference to the Curse of Ham). See also "Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region in My Mind" (Baldwin 1964a, 54).
19. See also Sylvander 1980, 17, 18.
20. For more on this controversy see *The Black Scholar* 19.6 (1988): 16-43.

### Permissions

Ira Aldridge, "the African Roscius," in the role of Shylock. Courtesy Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University Library.

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