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Jewish Questions in Robert Wilson's *The Three Ladies of London*

In the history of portraying Jews on the early modern stage, critics frequently cite Robert Wilson's The Three Ladies of London as an anomaly. The play's first modern editor, H.S.D. Mithal, went so far as to describe Gerontus as 'a character sui generis', quite unlike Marlowe's porridge-poisoning Machiavel, Shakespeare's knife-whetting usurer, and the devilish doctor in Selimus. This essay explores the questions raised by Wilson's portrayal of Gerontus, paying particular attention to their critical and theatrical implications. What was understood by the term 'Jew' and how might Elizabethan audiences have recognized Gerontus as a Jew? Is the play really an anomaly of early modern theatre history?

Not yet discredited as a forger, John Payne Collier included in his important 1851 collection *Five Old Plays* an edition of Robert Wilson's *The Three Ladies of London*, the first to appear in over 250 years.¹ A year earlier, Collier sent a letter to *The Athenaeum*, dated 28 April 1850 and subsequently published in their 4 May issue, in which he describes how, having 'met with [the play] only recently', he discovered an earlier instance of the phrase 'to turn Turk' than hitherto had been noted. After touching briefly on the play's authorship, Collier outlines the Gerontus–Mercadorus subplot and describes the trial scene in detail, before offering the following remarks:

Here, we see the earliest known Jew on our stage — some years before the arrival of Shakespeare in London and of course long before he drew the character of Shylock — displaying the most disinterested generosity, and setting a most admirable example of Christian forbearance. It is not true, therefore, that the professors of the

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Hebrew faith were always exhibited on our early stage as monsters of unfeelingness and brutality as they were drawn by Shakespeare in his 'Merchant of Venice' and by Marlowe in his 'Rich Jew of Malta'.²

Since then, critics have followed Collier in treating *The Three Ladies of London* as an anomaly in the history of portraying Jews on the early modern stage.³ Gerontus is variously characterized as 'the virtuous Jew',⁴ 'an interesting lapse from the stage-Jew who had excited contempt for so long',⁵ 'a surprisingly accommodating and generous Jew',⁶ 'a man of honor'⁷ that 'stuns typical Elizabethan expectations by being virtuous as a Jewish man and moneylender',⁸ 'the most honest and admirable, one might even say "Christian", character in his play',⁹ and 'the single instance in the Elizabethan drama of an honourable Jew'.¹⁰ The play's first modern editor, H.S.D. Mithal, went so far as to describe Gerontus as 'a character *sui generis*',¹¹ quite unlike other Elizabethan stage Jews — Christopher Marlowe's porridge-poisoning Machiavel, William Shakespeare's knife-whetting usurer, the devilish doctor in the anonymous *Selimus*. Emma Smith has recently drawn attention to the paucity of historical evidence supporting a number of long-held critical assumptions about Elizabethan attitudes toward Jews in general, and the portrayal of Shakespeare's Shylock in particular.¹² In the same spirit, the present essay seeks to reassess Wilson's portrayal of Gerontus and to explore the various Jewish questions *The Three Ladies* raises.

Captious Words

Like Anthony Bale, I prefer the term 'antisemitism' to 'anti-Judaism' when discussing 'deprecatory non-Jewish ideas about Jews' as opposed to narratives designed to attack *real* Jews or Judaism on a practical level, and I purposefully avoid the hyphenated form 'anti-Semitism' because 'outside linguistics, there is no such thing as a Semite; it is only a negative category forced onto Jews, and others'.¹³ The same rationale governs my preference for 'philosemitism' over 'philo-Semitism'.

Whether *The Three Ladies* is antisemitic or philosemitic is a question that hinges on another important, but no less loaded, term: 'Jew'. Variouslly employed as an adjective, noun, and verb, a web of complex, contradictory, and shifting cultural, social, theological, and political associations informed the word 'Jew' in Elizabethan England.¹⁴ The Jews were held up as God's chosen people (and therefore a model for England's own providential identity), custodians of the languages and exegetical traditions essential to an understanding of scripture free from Catholic impurity and mistranslation, and a nation whose predestined and

immanent conversion would herald Christ's second coming.¹⁵ However, scripture also provided the foundation for centuries of stigmatization in England and across Europe: according to the gospel of John, the Jews were 'of [their] father the deuill',¹⁶ and the depiction of Jews as morally abject, physically monstrous, and socially aberrant in Christian sermons, literature, art, and popular culture perpetuated this diabolical association.¹⁷ Many of the medieval narratives about the Jews — such as their abduction and crucifixion of Christian children, their ritual use of Christian blood, their desecration of the eucharistic host, their poisoning of Christian wells and spreading of infectious disease, as well as acts of cannibalism and sorcery — survived in England long after their official expulsion in 1290 and into the seventeenth century, as did assumptions about their distinctive physical features. For example, belief in the existence of a characteristic Jewish stench or *foetor judaicus* was supposedly widespread enough for Thomas Browne to justify an entire chapter on the question whether 'Jews stinck naturally' in his *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (London, 1646).¹⁸

To capitalize on this symbolic potential, other national, social, and religious groups in early modern England variously aligned themselves — and maligned others — as Jews or 'judaizers'.¹⁹ Belief in their own divine election and a shared experience of persecution and survival in diaspora allowed Calvinists and other Protestant minorities to identify readily with the Jews, while Christians on all sides of the confessional divide pilloried one another in terms of perceived Judaic recidivism. English xenophobia also frequently expressed the economic and political threats posed by aliens in Jewish terms. The so-called Dutch Church Libel of 1593, for example, likened London's immigrant population to 'the Jewes' that 'eat us vp as bread' through 'vsery' and mercantilism.²⁰ Many perceived usury as a peculiarly Jewish crime,²¹ rendering the terms 'Jew' and 'usurer' synonymous in England long after the Jews were officially expelled, despite the fact that Christians had taken up the practice of moneylending in their absence — as Conscience laments in *The Three Ladies*, 'usury is made tolerable amongst Christians as a necessary thing' (10.25).²² The irony was not lost on early modern commentators: Thomas Wilson, for example, reminded readers in 1572 that usury was the reason Jews 'were hated in England, and so banyshed worthelye' before calling for their contemporary Christian counterparts — those 'Englishmen ... worse then Jewes' — to suffer a similar fate.²³

Staging a/the Jew in 1581

Where does *The Three Ladies* fit within this constellation of competing and contradictory Elizabethan attitudes toward Jews? With the exception of Stephen Gosson's description of a now lost alternative ending to *The Three Ladies*,²⁴ no accounts of the play in performance survive, leaving only the extant playbooks, printed in 1584 (Q1) and 1592 (Q2), as the basis for speculation. Unlike the early printed editions of both *The Jew of Malta* (Q 1633) and *The Merchant of Venice* (Q 1600; F1 1623), in which a number of speech headings for Barabas and Shylock respectively are replaced with the identity 'Jew' instead,²⁵ both Q1 and Q2 of *The Three Ladies* consistently mark Gerontus's speeches with the abbreviated form 'Geron.' The name 'Gerontus' itself is not demonstrably Jewish,²⁶ though its similarity to 'Gernutus', a Jewish usurer bearing little further resemblance and the subject of a broadside ballad — printed in the 1620s but of uncertain date of composition and relationship to *The Merchant of Venice* — has been noted.²⁷ In fact, the word 'Jew' and its derivatives 'Jews', 'Jewry', and 'Jewishness' occur a total of ten times throughout the play: eight times in dialogue (1.14, 9.7, 12.19, 12.22, 12.24, 14.49, 14.49, 14.59) and twice in stage directions (9 sd, 12 sd). The first of these instances appears in the stage direction opening scene 9, '*Enter Mercadorus, the Merchant, and Gerontus, a Jew*' (9 sd), a scene in which Gerontus identifies himself as a Jew when he admonishes Mercadorus to be more ethical in his business dealings: 'Surely, if we that be Jews should deal so one with another, / We should not be trusted again of our own brother' (7–8).

Whereas Mercadorus's appearance is prescribed as '*like an Italian Merchant*' (3.0 s.d.), '*the Merchant*' (9.0 s.d.) and later described as 'in Turkish weeds' (14.13), the text provides no descriptions of Gerontus — that is, unless the words '*a Jew*' (9.0 s.d.) and '*the Jew*' (12.0 s.d.) following his name in the stage directions are intended to convey the appearance of a stock character type.²⁸ The existence of such a traditional character type in the Elizabethan drama — in which Jews were costumed with prosthetic hooked noses, red hair, beards, and gabardines — has become axiomatic in modern scholarship, and Smith, like Charles Edelman before her, prudently advises that this is perhaps an 'invented tradition' with 'very little archival or historical basis.'²⁹ The lack of evidence cuts both ways, however, and absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. The dialogue has already established Gerontus is a Jew, so why is this detail necessary to repeat in the stage directions? There are later instances in the early modern drama where the word 'Jew' is used to indicate costuming in this way. Two Christian characters in John Webster's *The Devil's Law-Case* are disguised '*in the habit of a Jew*' (3.2.0 s.d.) and

'like a Jew' (5.3.32 s.d.) respectively, prompting the play's most recent editors to suggest that the directions call for 'an immediately recognizable stage costume', one that likely drew upon 'other stage Jews' to provide 'a model (and theatrical stock) of clothing and other features'.³⁰

Neither Edelman nor Smith considers *The Devil's Law-Case* in their analysis. Webster's play postdates the appearance of Gerontus, Barabas, and Shylock — as well as other Elizabethan and early Jacobean stage Jews — and therefore cannot be cited as evidence for any tradition that may have informed *The Three Ladies*. Nevertheless, it is not implausible to concede that insistence on Gerontus's Jewishness in the stage directions may suggest reliance upon an existing convention of costuming and perhaps also served as an actors' prompt.³¹ As Jean MacIntyre observes, *The Three Ladies* 'calls for multiple changes not only for doubling but also to show the characters' changing moral states as their social status changes', employing 'exotic attire' in the form of 'loose overgarments, headgear, and hand properties' to indicate the 'foreignness' of the Italian merchant, the Jew, and the Turkish judge — so-called "occupational" roles — and to allow 'the rapidly doubling actors to change'.³²

Unless new evidence is forthcoming, we may never know for sure how Jews were costumed on the early modern stage, whether a recognizable convention existed, or what 'loose overgarments, headgear, and hand properties' were necessary to distinguish Gerontus from non-Jewish characters in *The Three Ladies*. Biblical Jews aside,³³ Gerontus is the earliest extant Jewish role in the Elizabethan drama. Gosson describes an earlier play, *The Jew*, 'representing the greediness of worldly chusers, and bloody minds of Usurers' that was staged at the Bull in or before 1579,³⁴ but nothing is known about the identity of the titular character or how (presuming a male character) he was costumed. A blank theatrical history such as this allows for much speculation: how might Robert Wilson, Leicester's Men, or indeed, their Elizabethan audiences expect a Jewish merchant in Turkey to look?

By the time *The Three Ladies* was first staged in 1581, Nicolas de Nicolay's richly illustrated travel narrative was already a bestseller: first printed in French (Lyon, 1567–68; second edition Antwerp, 1576), two Italian editions followed (Antwerp, 1577; Venice, 1580), before an English translation was published as *The Navigations, peregrinations and voyages, made into Turkie* (London, 1585).³⁵ Nicolay dedicates a chapter to 'the Merchant Iewes dwelling in Constantinople and other places of Turkie and Grecia', in which he describes their number and wealth as 'a thing marueilous and incredible', multiplying at rates to rival the monetary interest gained through usury, with the result that 'at this present day

they haue in their handes the most and greatest trafique of merchandize and readie money' in the Levant.³⁶ He remarks upon the presence of *marranoes* or crypto-Jews 'of late banished and driuen out of Spaine & Portugale' in terms of the 'detriment and damage' this poses to Christendom, since these Jews, in addition to bringing 'workemen of all artes, and handicraftes moste excellent', have also passed information on to the Turks: 'diuers inuentions, craftes and engines of warre, as to make artillerie, harquebuses, gunne powder, shot, and other munitions'.³⁷ After rehearsing the standard litany of charges against 'this detestable nation of the Iewes', as 'men ful of all malice, fraude, deceit, and subtill dealing, exercising execrable vsuries amongst the Christians and other nations without any consciences or reprehention', Nicolay then describes their appearance:

The Iewes which dwell in Constanstinople [*sic*], Andrinpole, Bursia, Salonica, Gallipoli, & other places of the dominion of the great Turke, are all apparrelled with long garments, like vnto the Gretians, and other nations of Leuant, but for their mark and token to be knowen fro[m] others, they weare a yealow Turbant.³⁸

This description is accompanied by an illustration, captioned 'Marchant Juif', 'Mercante Giudeo', or 'A Merchant Iewe' in the French, Italian, and English editions respectively (see Figure 1), and referred to in the text as 'one of those [Jews] that carie cloath to sell through the citie of Constantinople'.³⁹

If Wilson and/or Leicester's Men were concerned with verisimilitude, a yellow turban as described by Nicolay may have served as suitably distinctive headgear for the actor playing Gerontus to don. After Nicolay — and possibly, as argued here, *The Three Ladies* — the description of Barabas' hat as a gift from the 'Great Cham' in *The Jew of Malta*, which strongly suggests it is a turban,⁴⁰ and the frontispiece to Thomas Coryate's travel narrative, *Coryate's Crudities* (London, 1611), which 'includes a picture of a Jew in a turban' chasing a Christian with a knife, provide further pictorial evidence to 'support the notion that Jews were known in England to wear turbans'.⁴¹ If not a turban, yellow garb of some kind was just as likely to signal Jewishness to an Elizabethan audience — even those unfamiliar with the restrictions in the Ottoman Empire — because the colour had become associated with the Jews ever since the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 compelled them to wear yellow badges throughout Christendom. After the Council of Vienna in 1267, Jews in Christian lands were also required to wear distinctive horned hats or 'pileum cornutum'. Representations of Jews, marked by yellow apparel and characteristic headgear, were readily available in early modern England: for example, a fragment of a fifteenth-century stained-glass



Fig. 1. A merchant Jew, from Nicolas de Nicolay, *Les quatre premiers livres des navigations et pérégrinations orientales* (Lyon, 1567–68). Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Cartes et plans, GE DD-2002 (RES).

shield at Great Malvern Priory Church in Malvern, Worcestershire, depicts a Jew wearing contemporary (that is, medieval) yellow garb spitting at Christ (Figure 2).⁴²

However, if the actor playing Gerontus wore a turban, we may assume that he was not alone: the trial scene calls for a ‘Judge of Turkey’ (14.0 s.d.), and the dialogue establishes that Mercadorus is dressed ‘in Turkish weeds’ (13) — presumably the same ‘Turk’s apparel’ mentioned earlier (12.23). How, then, might Gerontus’s costume have been distinguished from that of the Turkish Judge and/or Mercadorus? In a chapter devoted to ‘the Cadilesquers great Doctors of the lawe



Fig. 2. A Jew spitting at Christ. Stained glass at Great Malvern Priory, Malvern.
Photo by Rev. Gordon Plumb, Barton upon Humber.

Mahometicke and chiefe Iustices of the Turkes', Nicolay provides a description and illustration of Turkish judges. After likening their religious function to 'the Metropolitans' and 'Patriarches' in the Greek and Roman Churches, and their judicial function to 'Chauncellours or chiefe Presidentes', Nicolay relates how the *kadiaskers* (from the Arabic *qāḍī al-'askar*, literally 'judge of the army') are 'stately and honourable' men 'chosen of ripe age' to deter 'the heat of youth' and 'the fire of carnall loue' from swaying their decisions:

As for their apparrel, they loue to be cloathed in a chamblet, satten, or damaske, of sad colours, and more honest, as russet browne, tawny, or darke purple. The sleeues of their gownes be long and streit: vppon their heads they do weare a Tulbant of a marueilous wideness and bignesse, hauing the middest ... more lower and streight then the other ordinarie are: ... [and] wearing their beard long & fierce.⁴³

Lest readers misinterpret his description as praise or admiration, Nicolay concludes that the *kadiaskers* show ‘in the[m] a great grauitie, ioyned with a fained holiness, casting foorth but few words’, reflecting the ‘euident and meare hypocrisie’ of their ‘lawe and religion altogeather’.⁴⁴ The accompanying illustration depicts a bearded *kadiasker* on horseback with a fine robe and distinctively layered turban (see Figure 3).

As the play’s clown figure, Mercadorus likely wore an Italian costume that an Elizabethan audience presumably found risible to begin with; whether his adoption of ‘Turkish weeds’ in the trial scene was an opportunity for further amusement or not, we can probably assume that his new clothes were sufficiently different from those worn by Gerontus and the Judge.⁴⁵

Argument, Counter-argument, and Conclusions

The case for the play’s antisemitism requires establishing its deployment of derogatory Jewish stereotypes and beliefs. Though the terms were synonymous in Elizabethan England, casting Gerontus as both a usurer and a Jew is perhaps evidence enough — his Jewish identity is rendered unnecessary by the historical practice of moneylending at interest by Christians and Ottoman Muslims,⁴⁶ as referenced in the play itself: ‘interest is allowed amongst you Christians, as well as in Turkey’ (14.32). As detailed in the previous section, Gerontus’s costume (about which we may never be certain) may also have relied upon established conventions used to distinguish Jews from non-Jews, of which many derive from legal restrictions, such as the prescription of particular clothing. We may also infer that his name — from the Greek *gerōn*, or ‘old man’ — suggests Gerontus was bearded; however, as Elliott Horowitz has shown, changing fashions in Christendom and the emergence of a new cultural ‘other’ in the beardless peoples of the New World began to displace the medieval association between beards and non-Christians.⁴⁷

The Three Ladies contains echoes of other antisemitic narratives: when Mercadorus curses Gerontus as a ‘sitten, scald, drunken Jew!’ (12.19), this recalls an association between Jews and excrement — ‘sitten’ is an aphetic form of ‘beshit-ten’ — still current in early modern England, evidenced in the belief that Jews emitted a noxious scent and in the tale of the Jew of Tewkesbury, an event reported to have occurred in 1257 but frequently retold. John Foxe relates this story in his *Actes and Monuments* as follows:

A certain Jew ... fell into a priuy at Tewkesbury vpon a sabboth day, which for the great reuerence he had to his holy sabboth, would not suffer him selfe to be plucked



Fig. 3. A *kadiasker* or Turkish chief justice, from Nicolas de Nicolay, *Les quatre premiers livres des navigations et pérégrinations orientales* (Lyon, 1567–68). Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Cartes et plans, GE DD-2002 (RES).

out. And so Lord Richard Earle of Gloucester, hearing therof, would not suffer him to be drawne out on Sundaye for reuerence of the holy day. And thus the wretched superstitious Jewe remainyng there tyll mondaye, was found dead in the dounge.⁴⁸

This notion of the ‘excremental’ Jew, as Jonathan Gil Harris has argued, informs a number of literary, dramatic, and anecdotal materials linking the fear of Jewish infiltration with enemas and sodomy, such as Barabas’ betrayal of Malta by ‘gain[ing] entry to the body politic through apertures that are subtly coded as its anus’ and leading the Ottoman troops through the sewers.⁴⁹

Another antisemitic aspect of the play may be found in Gerontus’s invocation of Muhammed when he threatens Mercadorus with legal action: ‘Truly pay me my money, and that even now presently, / Or by mighty Mahomet I swear I will

forthwith arrest ye' (12.3–4). Late medieval and early modern Christian polemics routinely conflated Jews with other 'infidels' and 'enemies of Christ' in general, and with Muslims in particular.⁵⁰ One of the symptoms of this, as Michael Mark Chemers has shown, is that Jewish characters in early English drama 'seem to take a particular delight in the invocation of Muhammed specifically as a curse or to throw weight behind a threat'.⁵¹

Antisemitic belief in the inability of Jews to properly or sincerely shed their Hebrew faith after conversion — whether to Christianity or Islam — may also explain Gerontus's inappropriate oath: Peter the Venerable had proclaimed 'a Jew is not a Jew until he converts to Islam', after all.⁵² Although performed some thirty years after *The Three Ladies*, Robert Daborne's *A Christian Turned Turk* provides a striking example in the character of Benwash, a Jewish merchant living in Tunis who has converted to Islam to safeguard his wife against the predations of the Turks: 'I bought my liberty, renounced my law / (The law of Moses), turned Turk — all to keep / My bed free from these Mahometan dogs' (6.74–6).⁵³ Despite his conversion, Benwash is never once referred to as a Muslim or Turk. Instead, other characters refer to him directly as 'Jew' throughout the play (5.37, 6.45, 6.63, 6.155, 6.192, 6.227, 6.259, 6.267, 6.293, 6.350, 6.345, 6.453, 10.44, 10.79, 11.3, 11.17, 13.45, 16.37, 16.48, 16.222, 16.238). He is mocked for 'speak[ing] in Hebrew' (6.411), and is made a cuckold whilst 'in the Synagogue' (373). Beyond the dialogue, Benwash's Jewish identity is emphatically confirmed in print: the 1612 Quarto consistently uses 'Jew' as his speech prefix. In fact, the only references to Benwash as a Turk are those made by Benwash himself, but these are either equivocal or contradictory: he warns an officer to 'know a Turk's wife from a Christian's' (428), threatens his adulterous wife with 'I swore as I was a Turk, and I will cut your throat as I am a Jew' (16.74–75) and, in his last words, 'Bear witness, though I lived a Turk, I die a Jew' (213).

The argument that *The Three Ladies of London* is not antisemitic and is perhaps even philosemitic in its treatment of Jews rests upon interpreting Gerontus as a virtuous character. To do so, critics typically draw attention to his apparent generosity in forgiving Mercadorus his debt, an act variously characterized as 'wildly unrealistic',⁵⁴ 'an example of moneylending conducted in an ethical manner',⁵⁵ and one driven by a desire not to witness him 'forsak[ing] his faith'.⁵⁶ Gerontus has even been described as taking Mercadorus to court 'reluctantly'.⁵⁷ But how selfless, generous, and reluctant is this act? When Gerontus first threatens Mercadorus with legal action, he dismisses the merchant's initial plea for an extension of 'tree or four days' to conduct 'much business in hand' (12.6) with 'Tush, this is not my matter; I have nothing therewith to do. / Pay me my money, or I'll make

you' (7–8), promising to post officers outside his lodgings 'so that you cannot pass by' and to take him to 'prison' should the debt remain unpaid (9–10). It is only after this exchange that Mercadorus announces his plan to turn Turk to avoid repayment of the loan — since 'if any man forsake his faith, king, country, and become a Mahomet, / All debts are paid' (14.15–16)⁵⁸ — to which Gerontus reacts with disbelief: 'This is but your words, because you would defeat me; / I cannot think you will forsake your faith so lightly' (12.15–16). This disbelief spurs Gerontus to take his leave to 'try [Mercadorus's] honesty' (17), arguably forcing Mercadorus's hand. It is only after this point that the audience is made aware of Lady Lucre's letter, requesting that Mercadorus 'cozen de Jew for love a her' (22), but this is irrelevant — can Gerontus's actions in this scene be said to be those of a patient, generous, reluctant, or ethical character?

Gerontus's motivation in forgiving the debt is equally questionable. He is not necessarily 'horrified at the thought that he has caused a man to repudiate the faith to which he was born',⁵⁹ or 'revealed to be more ethical and merciful than the Christian merchant',⁶⁰ but releases Mercadorus from the bond because he 'would be loath to hear the people say, it was 'long of me / Thou forsakes thy faith' (14.38–39). Conversion to one faith means apostasy from another, and, as Nabil Matar reports, 'the punishment for apostasy in Islam, as it was in Christianity, was death'.⁶¹ Death — even the threat of death — is not good for business, and, given that his clientele include Christian merchants, Gerontus's fears of being blamed for Mercadorus's apostasy may easily be read in an economic light.

Whereas Shylock relies upon the threat posed to legal precedent should his suit be denied — 'If you deny me, fie upon your law: / There is no force in the decrees of Venice' (4.1.100–01)⁶² — a further commercial incentive for Gerontus to forgive the debt may be to avoid the threat of establishing such a legal precedent for other potential customers to follow. To forgive Mercadorus his debt is thus rendered a shrewd fiscal maneuver: although he forfeits the principal and interest — but not, as in *The Merchant of Venice*, his livelihood — Gerontus secures his future business by ensuring that should 'the people say' anything, they, like the judge, might focus on his apparent act of kindness — his perceived ability to 'excel in Christianity' (14.49) — and not on the threat feigned or actual conversion poses to his contractual relationships. Tobias P. Graf has recently argued that conversion to Islam indeed voided such contractual relationships in the early modern period, evidenced 'by numerous cases of debtors who, after having embraced [Islam], often saw their debts reduced or written off entirely'.⁶³ To minimize the financial loss and contractual uncertainty posed by converts to Islam, a number of Christian states negotiated with the Ottoman Empire to establish formal procedures

for redress. For example, 'the regularity of such conversions' to Islam by Venetian merchants 'to avoid paying debts and returning goods', Eric R. Dursteler reports, 'led the baili' (the Venetian ambassador) to 'obtain a firman' (an Islamic royal mandate) 'stating that if Venetian agents turned to Islam, their goods were to be returned to their principals'.⁶⁴ The capitulations renewed in 1662 between Charles II and Mehmed IV introduced similar provisions for the English:

An Englishman turning Mahometan, & hauing goods, or estate in his hands belonging to his English Principalls, those goods or estate shall bee deliuered into the hands of the Embassadour, or Consul that they may conuey, & make them good to the true owners.⁶⁵

Whether to avoid the stigma of apostasy or setting a legal precedent, Gerontus's final admonishment to Mercadorus bears such economic readings out: rather than denounce Mercadorus's feigned conversion, he advises only that the merchant 'Seek to pay, and keep day with men, so a good name on you will go' (14.53). In other words, Gerontus is less concerned for Mercadorus's soul than for his 'good name', that is, his credit.

Critics also typically interpret the Judge's closing remark, 'Jews seek to excel in Christianity, and Christians in Jewishness' (14.49), as praise for Gerontus' morality set against Mercadorus's chicanery. To do so not only ignores the fact that the Judge 'reassuringly keeps the categories of Jew and Christian intact while scrambling their occupants',⁶⁶ but by equating Jewishness with falseness and economic trickery, the Judge also reinscribes antisemitic beliefs in the impossibility of sincere Jewish conversion and the economic threat Jews posed to Christendom through deceit.

What conclusions, if any, might be drawn from all this? If the preceding arguments and counter-arguments suggest anything, it is that *The Three Ladies* poses more Jewish questions than it answers. This is partly due to an absence of evidence — a critical lacunae too tantalizing to leave unfilled — and partly, I think, because on some level we want the play to stand as an exception to the antisemitism overwhelmingly present elsewhere in the early modern drama. The paucity of historical and theatrical evidence that has enabled critical assumptions about Elizabethan antisemitism in *The Merchant of Venice* to become axiomatic (as Edelman and Smith have shown) is the same that has allowed philosemitism to dominate scholarly assessment of *The Three Ladies*, ignoring the ambiguities and exaggerating the available evidence — scant though it may be — in both plays.

Notes

- 1 John Payne Collier (ed.), *Five Old Plays, Illustrating the Early Progress of the English Drama* (London, 1851), 157–244.
- 2 John Payne Collier, “‘To Turn Turk.’ — Jews in Our Early Plays,” *The Athenaeum* 1175 (1850), 476.
- 3 One notable exception is Matthew Biberman, who holds ‘it is wrong to read Gerontus in a straight (nonironic) way as a good character’, and argues that, as ‘a satire of a morality play’, *The Three Ladies* ‘rests on a strategy of inversion that here extends to include the absurdity of the charitable Jew’ (*Masculinity, Anti-Semitism, and Early Modern England Literature: From the Satanic to the Effeminate Jew* [Burlington, 2004], 23, 201n39).
- 4 Alfred Harbage, ‘Innocent Barabas’, *The Tulane Drama Review* 8.4 (1964), 49.
- 5 M.J. Landa, *The Jew in Drama* (London, 1926), 55.
- 6 Lloyd Edward Kermode, *Aliens and Englishness in Elizabethan Drama* (Cambridge, 2009), 18, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511576140>.
- 7 Robert A. Logan, *Shakespeare’s Marlowe: The Influence of Christopher Marlowe on Shakespeare’s Plays* (Aldershot, 2007), 137.
- 8 Joan Ozark Holmer, ‘Jewish Daughters: The Question of Philo-Semitism in Elizabethan Drama’, John W. Mahon and Ellen Macleod Mahon (eds), *The Merchant of Venice: New Critical Essays* (New York, 2002), 108, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9780203060537>.
- 9 Charles Edelman, ‘Which is the Jew that Shakespeare Knew?: Shylock on the Elizabethan Stage’, *Shakespeare Survey* 52 (1999), 100, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/ccol0521660742.008>.
- 10 E.E. Stoll, ‘Shylock’, *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 10.2 (1911), 247.
- 11 H.S.D. Mithal (ed.), *An Edition of Robert Wilson’s ‘Three Ladies of London’ and ‘Three Lords and Three Ladies of London’* (New York, 1988), xix.
- 12 Emma Smith, ‘Was Shylock Jewish?’ *Shakespeare Quarterly* 64.2 (2013), 188–219, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/shq.2013.0034>.
- 13 Anthony Bale, *The Jew in the Medieval Book: English Antisemitisms, 1350–1500* (Cambridge, 2007), 3, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2277/0521863546>. I raise these distinctions at the outset because Smith’s otherwise admirable work of revisionism employs the terms ‘anti-Semitic’ and ‘Semitic’ and their cognates in ways that tacitly validate the Victorian racial constructs she seeks to expose as fantasies: the pithiness of Smith’s repeated expression contrasting ‘semantic’ with ‘Semitic’ (189, 219), as well

as her consistent use of 'anti-Semitic' (189, 192, 195, 201, 202, 205, 207, 209, 219), undercut her argument for deessentialization.

- 14 Brett D. Hirsch, 'Judaism and Jews', Bruce R. Smith (ed.), *The Cambridge Guide to the Worlds of Shakespeare* (Cambridge, 2016), forthcoming. See also James Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews* (New York, 1996).
- 15 Representative studies include Stephen G. Burnett, *Christian Hebraism in the Reformation Era (1500–1660): Authors, Books, and the Transmission of Jewish Learning* (Leiden, 2012), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/9789004222496>; Elaine Glaser, *Judaism without Jews: Philosemitism and Christian Polemic in Early Modern England* (New York, 2007), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1057/9780230599932>; David S. Katz, *The Jews in the History of England, 1485–1850* (Oxford, 1994) and *Philo-Semitism and the Re-admission of the Jews to England, 1603–1655* (Oxford, 1982); and Jeffrey S. Shoulson, *Fictions of Conversion: Jews, Christians, and Cultures of Change in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia, 2013), <http://dx.doi.org/10.9783/9780812208191>.
- 16 John 8. All references are to the Geneva Bible.
- 17 Representative studies include Joan Young Gregg, *Devils, Women, and Jews: Reflections of the Other in Medieval Sermon Stories* (Albany, 1997); Miri Rubin, *Gentile Tales: The Narrative Assault on Late Medieval Jews* (New Haven, 1999); Debra Higgs Strickland, *Saracens, Demons, and Jews: Making Monsters in Medieval Art* (Princeton, 2003); and Joshua Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews: The Medieval Conception of the Jew and Its Relation to Modern Anti-Semitism* (New Haven, 1943).
- 18 Thomas Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (London, 1646), 2C1r. The reference is also used for comic effect when Crasy vows revenge in Richard Brome's *The City Wit* (London, 1653): 'I'll rid 'em one after another, like Guts, till they shall stink worse then Jewes' (B5v). Of course, some of these medieval and early modern beliefs were distorted reflections of real Jewish practices — the conflation of male circumcision with castration, for example — and economic circumstances, such as the association between Jews and usury — one of the few activities available to Jews in Christian lands, where they were otherwise subject to restrictions on land ownership and excluded from membership of merchant and craft guilds.
- 19 The same is also true for the iconography that became associated with the Jews, such as wolves and owls; on the latter, see Brett D. Hirsch, 'From Jew to Puritan: The Emblematic Owl in Early English Culture', Brett D. Hirsch and Christopher Wortham (eds), *'This Earthly Stage': World and Stage in Late Medieval and Early Modern England* (Turnhout, 2010), 131–72, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1484/M.CURSOR-EB.3.4722>.
- 20 Quoted in Arthur Freeman, 'Marlowe, Kyd, and the Dutch Church Libel', *English Literary Renaissance* 3.1 (1973), 44–52; on the question of Elizabethan xenophobia

- broadly, see also Matthew Birchwood and Matthew Dimmock, 'Popular Xenophobia', Andrew Hadfield, Matthew Dimmock, and Abigail Shinn (eds), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Popular Culture in Early Modern England* (Farnham, 2014), 207–20.
- 21 While the play 'does not explicitly identify' the character of Usury 'as a Jew', Janet Adelman has argued that 'the play's audience would have no trouble making the connection' (*Blood Relations: Christian and Jew in 'The Merchant of Venice'* [Chicago, 2008], 13, <http://dx.doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226006833.001.0001>). I do not find this persuasive, not least because it requires reading back from the play's sequel, *The Three Lords and Three Ladies of London* (London, 1590), in which Wilson describes Usury's parents as 'both Iewes' (F4r).
 - 22 All quotations from *The Three Ladies of London* are taken from Lloyd Edward Kermode (ed.), *Three Renaissance Usury Plays* (Manchester, 2009), cited parenthetically by scene and line number.
 - 23 Thomas Wilson, *A Discourse vppon Vsurye* (London, 1572), F5v.
 - 24 Stephen Gosson, *Plays Confuted in Fiue Actions* (London, 1582), D1v–D2v. The alternate ending described by Gosson makes no mention of the Mercadorus–Gerontus subplot.
 - 25 On the implications of these interchangeable speech headings, see Brett D. Hirsch 'Counterfeit Professions: Jewish Daughters and the Drama of Failed Conversion in Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* and Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*', *Early Modern Literary Studies*, Special Issue 19 (2009), 4.33–34, <http://purl.oclc.org/emls/si-19/hirscoun.html>; and, John Drakakis, "'Jew. Shylock is My Name": Speech Prefixes in *The Merchant of Venice* as Symptoms of the Early Modern', Hugh Grady (ed.), *Shakespeare and Modernity: Early Modern to Millennium* (New York, 2000), 105–21, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9780203141045>, though Drakakis's bibliographical argument — and the earlier scholarship on which it rests — are certainly flawed: see Gabriel Egan, 'Shakespeare: Editions and Textual Matters', *Year's Work in English Studies* 91 (2012), 328–42.
 - 26 As Kermode suggests, the name 'probably indicates an old man, from the Greek *gerōn*' (80). The similarity of 'Gerontus' to 'Gerontius' or 'Gerontios' (a fourth-century British-born Roman general) or its Welsh derivations 'Geraint' or 'Gereint' (names for a character in the Welsh Arthurian tradition) do not warrant further investigation.
 - 27 The ballad 'A new Song, shewing the crueltie of Gernutus a Jew' (London, 1620?) is available from the *English Broadside Ballad Archive* (ebba 20063; Magdalene College — Pepys 1.144–145), <http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/ballad/20063/>. A transcription of the ballad is also available in Thomas Percy (ed.), *Reliques of Ancient English*

- Poetry* (London, 1765), 1.189–98. Although Geoffrey Bullough deemed the ballad to be ‘probably pre-Shakespearian’ (*Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* [London, 1957–75], 1.449), I am inclined to follow Kenneth Muir who sees it as ‘influenced by Shakespeare’s play, and also by Robert Wilson’s play’ (*The Sources of Shakespeare’s Plays* [London, 1977], 88). For a lively discussion of the ballad, see Bruce R. Smith, ‘Shakespeare’s Residuals: The Circulation of Ballads in Cultural Memory’, Stuart Gillespie and Neil Rhodes (eds), *Shakespeare and Elizabethan Popular Culture* (London, 2006), 208–13, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781472555120.ch-009>.
- 28 On the existence of such a tradition, see Alan C. Dessen, ‘The Elizabethan Stage Jew and Christian Example: Gerontus, Barabas, and Shylock’, *Modern Language Quarterly* 35.3 (1974), 231–43, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1215/00267929-35-3-231>; cf. Edelman, ‘Which is the Jew’.
- 29 Smith, ‘Was Shylock Jewish?’, 196, 189; see also Edelman, ‘Which is the Jew’.
- 30 John Webster, *The Devil’s Law-Case*, David Gunby, David Carnegie, and MacDonald P. Jackson (eds.), *The Works of John Webster* (Cambridge, 2003), 2.37, 2.214n, 2.232n. References to the play are to act, scene, and line numbers and cited parenthetically.
- 31 The status of the text allows for this possibility: according to Martin Wiggins, Q1 of *The Three Ladies* appears to have been printed ‘from an authorial MS or a transcript thereof’ (*British Drama, 1533–1642: A Catalogue* [Oxford, 2012–], 2.265–69 [no. 700]). Leslie Thomson also believes that the stage directions ‘are almost certainly authorial, and probably reflect Robert Wilson’s practical experience as a player’ (“As it hath been publicly played”: The Stage Directions and Original Staging of *The Three Ladies of London*, *The Three Ladies of London*, <http://threeladiesoflondon.mcmaster.ca/contexts/LeslieThomson.htm>). However, the enterprise of determining the nature of an underlying manuscript from a printed playbook has recently come into question; see Paul Werstine, *Early Modern Playhouse Manuscripts and the Editing of Shakespeare* (Cambridge, 2013), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781139103978>.
- 32 Jean MacIntyre, *Costumes and Scripts in the Elizabethan Theatres* (Edmonton, 1992), 35. Likewise, Thomson suggests ‘the costumes of the lawyer, judge, constable, beadle, and other court figures would have been recognizable, as probably would that of “Gerontus, a Iewe”’; see Thomson, ‘“As it hath been publicly played”’.
- 33 These include characters in *The Story of Samson* (1567), *The Repentance of the Ninevites* (1569), *Dives and Lazarus* (1570), the Sherborne Corpus Christi Play (1571), *Herodes* (1572), *Abraham’s Sacrifice* (1575), and *All for Money* (1577). All dates of first performance are taken from Wiggins’ *Catalogue*.
- 34 Stephen Gosson, *The Schoole of Abuse* (London, 1579), C6v.

- 35 On the contents and wider significance of Nicolay's treatise, see the entry for it in David Thomas and John A. Chesworth (eds), *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History, Western Europe (1500–1600)* (Leiden, 2014), 6.754–63.
- 36 Nicolas de Nicolay, *The Navigations, peregrinations, and voyages, made into Turkie* (London, 1585), R6v.
- 37 Ibid, R6v.
- 38 Ibid, R7r–v. Nicolay also describes how the Jews on the isle of Chios are likewise 'constrayned to weare for a token a great cappe or yealowe colour' so 'they should be the better knowen from others' (F1v).
- 39 Nicolay, *The Navigations*, R7v; the illustration appears at R8r. A photograph of the illustration from the English edition is available online through the Folger Shakespeare Library Digital Image Collection: <http://luna.folger.edu/luna/servlet/s/5o5o7q>.
- 40 Randall Nakayama, '“I know she is a courtesan by her attire”: Clothing and Identity in *The Jew of Malta*', Sara Munson Deats and Robert A Logan (eds), *Marlowe's Empery: Expanding His Critical Contexts* (Newark, 2002), 138.
- 41 Robert Lublin, *Costuming the Shakespearean Stage: Visual Codes of Representation in Early Modern Theatre and Culture* (Farnham, 2011), 158.
- 42 On the association between Jews and spitting, see Brett D. Hirsch, 'The Taming of the Jew: Spit and the Civilizing Process in *The Merchant of Venice*', Rory Lougnane and Edel Semple (eds), *Staged Transgression in Shakespeare's England* (New York, 2013), 136–52, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1057/9781137349354.0014>; on early modern English perceptions of Jewish garments and appearance more generally, see Lublin, *Costuming the Shakespearean Stage*, 142–61, and Eva Johanna Holmberg, *Jews in the Early Modern English Imagination: A Scattered Nation* (Farnham, 2011), chap. 4.
- 43 Nicolay, *The Navigations*, N5r–N6r.
- 44 Ibid, N6r.
- 45 The comic possibilities of Mercadorus's costuming are beyond the scope of this essay. On the relationship of the play to the *commedia dell'arte* tradition, and to Mercadorus's role in this system in particular, see Pamela Allen Brown, 'Courtesan, Merchant, Zany: Italian Knockoffs in *The Three Ladies of London*', *The Three Ladies of London*, <http://threeladiesoflondon.mcmaster.ca/contexts/PamelaBrown.htm>.
- 46 On the Ottoman practice of usurious piety or *waqf al-nuqūd* (from the Arabic, literally 'detention of money'), see Jon E. Mandaville, 'Usurious Piety: The Cash Waqf Controversy in the Ottoman Empire', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 10.3 (1979), 289–308, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/s0020743800000118>.
- 47 Elliott Horowitz, 'The New World and the Changing Face of Europe', *Sixteenth Century Journal* 28.4 (1997), 1181–201, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2543574>.

- 48 John Foxe, *Actes and Monuments* (London, 1570), N1v.
- 49 Jonathan Gil Harris, *Foreign Bodies and the Body Politic: Discourses of Social Pathology in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 1998), 80.
- 50 Jewish characters frequently swear by Muhammad in the surviving medieval liturgical drama and mystery cycles. In the English drama, Jewish characters profess their faith to 'Machomet' throughout the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*, while Herod swears by 'Mahound' — a pejorative corruption of the name of the Islamic prophet — in the York, Towneley, and Digby plays. By way of a continental example, a Jewish usurer and his family repeatedly invoke the names 'Mahé' and 'Mahom' — Gallicized short-forms of 'Muhammad' — in the *Mistere de la Sainte Hostie*, a fifteenth-century Parisian host desecration play.
- 51 Michael Mark Chemers, 'Anti-Semitism, Surrogacy, and the Invocation of Mohammed in the *Play of the Sacrament*', *Comparative Drama* 41.1 (2007), 29, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/cdr.2007.0002>; see also Paula Blank, *Shakespeare and the Mismeasure of Renaissance Man* (Ithaca, 2006), 80–117. For an important discussion of the links between Islamic and Jewish characters in early modern drama, see Jonathan Burton, *Traffic and Turning: Islam and English Drama, 1579–1624* (Cranbury, 2005), 196–232.
- 52 Quoted in Alan H. Cutler and Helen E. Cutler, *The Jew as Ally of the Muslim: Medieval Roots of Anti-Semitism* (Notre Dame, 1986), 2. On the perceived impossibility of Jewish conversion in early modern England, see Hirsch, 'Counterfeit Professions'; cf. M. Lindsay Kaplan, 'Jessica's Mother: Medieval Constructions of Jewish Race and Gender in *The Merchant of Venice*', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 58.1 (2007), 1–30, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/shq.2007.0012>.
- 53 All quotations from *A Christian Turned Turk* are from Daniel J. Vitkus (ed.), *Three Turk Plays from Early Modern England* (New York, 2000), cited parenthetically by scene and line number. I thank Saskia Zinsser-Krys for clarifying an earlier reading of this scene.
- 54 G.K. Hunter, 'Elizabethan and Foreigners', *Shakespeare Survey* 17 (1964), 50, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/ccol0521064309.005>.
- 55 Teresa Lanpher Nugent, 'Usury and Counterfeiting in Wilson's *The Three Ladies of London* and *The Three Lords and Three Ladies of London*, and in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*', Linda Woodbridge (ed.), *Money and the Age of Shakespeare: Essays in New Economic Criticism* (New York, 2003), 203, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1057/9781403982469>.
- 56 Chloe Preedy, *Marlowe's Literary Scepticism: Politic Religion and Post-Reformation Polemic* (London, 2012), 72, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781472555021>.
- 57 Burton, *Traffic and Turning*, 220.

- 58 The term ‘paid’ in this instance means ‘absolved’, ‘cancelled’, or otherwise no longer enforceable by law.
- 59 M.M. Mahood (ed.), *The Merchant of Venice* (Cambridge, 1987), 22.
- 60 Claire Jowitt, ‘Robert Wilson’s *The Three Ladies of London*’, Thomas Betteridge and Greg Walker (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Tudor Drama* (Oxford, 2012), 311, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199566471.013.0019>.
- 61 Nabil Matar, *Islam in Britain, 1558–1685* (Cambridge, 1998), 60, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511582738>.
- 62 All quotations from *The Merchant of Venice* are from Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (gen. eds), *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 2005), doi:10.1093/acrade/9780199267170.book.1, cited parenthetically by act, scene, and line number.
- 63 Tobias P. Graf, ‘Of Half-Lives and Double-Lives: “Renegades” in the Ottoman Empire and Their Pre-Conversion Ties, ca. 1580–1610’, Pascal W. Firges, Tobias P. Graf, Christian Roth, and Gülay Tulasoğlu (eds), *Well-Connected Domains: Towards an Entangled Ottoman History* (Leiden, 2014), 134–35, doi:10.1163/9789004274686_009.
- 64 Eric R. Dursteler, *Venetians in Constantinople: Nation, Identity, and Coexistence in the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Baltimore, 2006), 114.
- 65 *The Capitulations and Articles of Peace* (Constantinople, 1663), C2v.
- 66 Adelman, *Blood Relations*, 17.