



Caliban Yisrael: Constructing Caliban as the Jewish Other in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*

DeForest Ariyel Rolnick-Wihtol*, English and Spanish

ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to introduce new data into the discussion of William Shakespeare's portrayal of Jewish people through intertextual and close reading of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and *The Merchant of Venice*, sections from the Geneva Bible, and primary documents discussing Anglo-Jewish life in the Elizabethan era. Shakespeare's relationship to and purported views of Jewish people have been scrutinized for centuries. However, almost all conclusions put forth by scholars about Shakespeare's ties to Elizabethan Jewish communities and anti-Semitism have been drawn from one work, *The Merchant of Venice*. *Merchant* contains Shakespeare's only explicitly Jewish characters, Shylock and his daughter, Jessica, although she happily converts to Christianity. In this paper, I propose that Shakespeare has an implicitly Jewish character lurking in *The Tempest*: Caliban, the play's main antagonist, a native to the island on which the play is set, and Prospero and Miranda's slave. I will support the interpretation of Caliban as a Jewish-coded figure through cross-reading *The Tempest* with *The Merchant of Venice*, sections of the Geneva Bible, and non-fiction testimonials from English residents during and before the Elizabethan era. Using both these plays alongside other scholarly and historical texts, I will bring cultural and historical context to these portrayals in order to explore a deeper understanding of the complicated and nuanced depictions of Jewish people in Shakespeare's work.

CONTEXTUALIZING JEW-CODING: JEWISH PEOPLE IN SHAKESPEARE'S ENGLAND

For hundreds of years, scholars and historians denied that there existed a significant Jewish community in Shakespeare's England. Following King Edward I's expulsion of the English Jewish community in 1290 C.E., England was thought to be entirely devoid of Jewish people until a few years before their informal re-admittance and resettlement in 1655 (Shapiro 48). Most modern historical accounts place the number of Jewish deportees at roughly 16,000. However, recent

*DeForest Rolnick-Wihtol graduated in Spring of 2019 from the University of Oregon with degrees in English and Spanish. During their senior year, they received the Humanities Undergraduate Research Fellowship in order to study portrayals of Judaism in Shakespeare's work, which birthed this project. In their time at the University of Oregon, they were also involved in the Writing Associates Program, acted as the Executive Committee Director of the UO Poetry Slam Team, and worked as the Social Media Manager for the English Department and Folklore Program. They are currently residing in México and working towards publishing another book. Please direct correspondence to wihtol98@gmail.com.

scholars have investigated long-ignored evidence of a Jewish population remaining from the 1300s onwards, including detailed records of poll taxes paid by Jewish individuals. With this new evidence in mind, modern scholars have generally asserted that 2,500 to 3,000 Jewish people were still residing in England after the expulsion (Lipman 65). Additionally, archival research shows that Jewish immigrants began trickling back into England almost immediately after the expulsion and arrived in large numbers during the Tudor period, between 1485 and 1603 (Shapiro 62). During Shakespeare's lifetime, 1564-1616, a community of at least a few hundred Jewish people lived in the bustling city of London, as evidenced by a number of Spanish and Portuguese Inquisition records and from the repeated complaint of Catholic ambassadors residing in England that members of this small Jewish community would meet to observe holidays such as Passover and Yom Kippur. Additionally, the *Domus Conversorum*, a converts' house on Chancery Lane, housed Jewish converts to Christianity from its establishment in 1232 through the 16th century (Shapiro 2018). Even as these former-Jews were labeled converts, it was common for communities throughout England and other countries that had propagated forced conversion to suspect that converts often Judaized in secret. As historian George Fredrickson states: "Historians of Jews and Judaism disagree on the extent to which these conversions created believing Christians or secret Jews. There is no doubt, however, that the Inquisition proceeded from the assumption that Jewish ancestry per se justified the suspicion of covert Judaizing" (32). Thus, despite the expulsion of the Jewish community centuries before, while Shakespeare was living in England, Jewish people were never far away.

While there is evidence of a Jewish community in England, it was not the size of the Jewish population during Shakespeare's time that mattered, but rather the political and cultural status of the Jew. The population at large focused a disproportionate amount of attention on Jewish people, which implies that Shakespeare may have been more aware of Judaism and Jewish people than scholars previously assumed. Jewish people were a popular and complex topic that was significant to the English zeitgeist of Shakespeare's era. There are a variety of examples of Jewish characters in English literature from the 1300s onwards — perhaps most famously Shakespeare's own character Shylock, as well as Christopher Marlowe's tale of Barabas in *The Famous Tragedy of the Rich Jew of Malta*. Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, published in the late 1400s, features a story about Jewish people murdering a Christian child that was widely praised by scholars and critics of the 1500s (Pearsall 298). The traditional English folk song "Sir Hugh," also popular during this time, details a similar story of a boy who accidentally throws his ball into the garden of a Jewish man, whose daughter then lures the boy into the house and stabs him (Halliwell). In fact, the first recorded accusation of Jewish people murdering Christian children in Europe was made in England as early as 1144, and similar accusations plagued the country for centuries after (Trachtenberg 130). Jewish people are also mentioned in *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, which was popular and influential in England from its publication in the late 1400s through the mid-1500s (Nicholson 563). By Shakespeare's time, the Jew had become something of an English cultural preoccupation, regardless of whether or not many Jewish people actually lived in England.

This cultural preoccupation was likely the result of the new concept of nationalism that was emerging in England. As the English began to look to define English-ness, racial and cultural lines were drawn between inside and outside groups. Jewish people in particular posed a problem to this delineation, because they often were not ethnically distinguishable from non-Jewish (goyishe¹) Englishmen. As Jewish Shakespearian scholar James Shapiro states in his book *Shakespeare and the Jews*:

The erosion of recognizable difference paradoxically generated ever more strenuous efforts to distinguish Christian from Jew, and, with the increasing emergence of a sense of national identity, Englishman from Jew. One of the things that greatly complicated these efforts was that the answers depended on different ways of conceiving difference — religious, national, racial, physical, sexual — which often overlapped and just as often contradicted each other (35).

The construction of Caliban as Jewish or Jew-like illustrates the difficulties of this delineation, as Caliban also embodies the question of national belonging as the only mortal indigenous occupant of Prospero's island. Caliban's complexity has led him to be read in a variety of ways both racially and nationally, although he is traditionally conceptualized as indigenous to the Americas or African, rather than Jewish.²

While Caliban is not explicitly Jewish, Shakespeare imbues him with numerous characteristics that Shakespeare and his audience would have recognized as Jewish or Jew-like. My assertion of Caliban as a Jewish-coded character is not meant to disprove reading Caliban in other ways, especially as a colonial or racialized subject, but rather to demonstrate how he is constructed as "Other" in a way that aligns him with and can provide insight into the conceptualization of Jewish people by Elizabethan audiences.

THOU VILE RACE: JEWISH-CODING CALIBAN THROUGH STEREOTYPES

Caliban's construction can be perceived as Jewish in a variety of ways, although perhaps most notably through his adherence to stereotypes often applied to Jewish people in Elizabethan England. These stereotypes include the description of him as the inhuman offspring of a witch and the Devil, his association with sorcery, his portrayal as a rapist of goyishe women and a vicious murderer of goyishe men, his cannibalism, and even his fishy smell.

The characters of *The Tempest* clearly conceptualize Caliban as a different, devilish race; his alien inhumanity is a main tenet of his character, as Miranda says "Abhorred slave, / Which any print of goodness wilt not take, / Being capable of all ill! ... thy vile race, / Though thou didst learn, had that in't which good natures / Could not abide to be with" (I.ii.356-365).³ Miranda's description of Caliban as being unable to take "the print of goodness" and being "capable of all ill" reflects language often used to describe Jewish people as racially different in Shakespeare's England. As Shapiro states:

The argument for a degenerative Jewish nature coexisted ... with the belief that the Jews inherited distinctive personality traits ... Robert Burton's descriptions of the Jews'

“infirmities” and Samuel Purchas’s secondhand observation that Jews suffered from specific diseases ... offer additional evidence that the Jews were thought to be constitutionally different from Christians (Shapiro 36).

The dehumanization of Jewish people through assertions of racial difference and an inherently evil Jewish character quickly led to their association with Christianity’s Devil. By the medieval era, most Europeans thought of Jewish people as “demonic, diabolic beast[s] fighting the forces of truth and salvation with Satan’s weapons” (Trachtenberg 22). Scripture also figured into the construction: in John 8:44 (Geneva Bible), Jesus says to the Jewish leaders whom he is condemning “You are from your father the Devil.” While, in its original context, this quote was focused on corrupt politicians, rather than the Jewish people as a whole, by Shakespeare’s time it had become evidence for the devilish lineage of all Jews. Therefore, when Prospero describes Caliban as a son of Satan — “poisonous slave, got by the devil himself / Upon thy wicked dam” (I.ii.324-5) — he evokes a paternal connection that Caliban shares with Jewish people, the supposed offspring of Satan.

Alongside being associated with the Devil, Caliban is deeply tied to magic, another similarity with the English conception of Judaism. Jewish people had a long history of being aligned with magic and sorcery throughout the Middle Ages and into the 16th century, largely due to “blood libel,” or the popular belief that Jewish people abducted and murdered Christians to use their blood for everything from sacred ceremonies to rouge (Fredrickson 20). The thought that Jewish people possessed an inherent magic was so deeply ingrained and widely held in England that in 1189, the suspicion of Jewish sorcery caused a Jewish delegation bearing gifts and pledges of allegiance to the coronation of Richard I of England to be evicted from the court. English historian Matthew Paris (1200-1259) wrote of the event that the delegation was turned away “because of the magic arts, which used to be practiced at royal coronations for which the Jews ... are infamous” (“Historia Anglorum”). The delegation allegedly planned to use this magic against the king. This event sparked widespread violence against Jewish people which continued into the following year and touched all corners of England — the earliest mass attack on English Jewish communities for sorcery (Trachtenberg 71). Caliban is first introduced in *The Tempest* through the context of his mother Sycorax, a witch. As Prospero says in conversation with Ariel: “This damn’d witch Sycorax, / ... Thou know’st, was banish’d / ... This blue-eyed hag was hither brought with child / And here was left by the sailors / ... the son that she did litter here, / ... Dull thing, I say so; he, that Caliban” (I.ii.266-288). Through the sorcery of his mother, and indeed Caliban’s own attempt at sorcery when he tries to cast a curse on Prospero (I.ii.326-329), Caliban is connected to Judaism, or at least implied as belonging to a Devil- and magic-affiliated race similar to the Jewish people.

The legacy of blood libel carries over into Caliban’s murderous desires, which he repeats throughout the play. Caliban is shown to be particularly creative and bloodthirsty in his bids for Prospero’s demise; he asks for butler Stephano to “knock a nail into his head” (III.ii.60), to “brain him ... or with a log / Batter his skull; or paunch him with a stake; / Or cut his weasand with thy knife” (III.ii.84-88). He also wishes an unusual battery on jester Trinculo: “Bite him to death, I prithee,” (III.ii.32) he begs of Stephano. This murderous tendency is perhaps one of the most striking similarities between Caliban and Shakespeare’s Shylock, who is similarly creatively

murderous. The explicit dynamic in *The Merchant of Venice* — bloodthirsty Jewish villain and forgiving Christian protagonist — is echoed in *The Tempest* between Caliban and Prospero. The murderous Caliban plots a number of bloody ways to end Prospero's life while Prospero argues that he has shown Caliban undue mercy, — "Thou most lying slave, / Whom stripes may move, not kindness! I have used thee, / Filth as thou art, with human care, and lodged thee / In mine own cell till thou didst seek to violate / The honor of my child" (I.ii.349-353) — treating him as a son before his attempted assault on Miranda.

In Prospero's accusation of Caliban's attempt to rape Miranda, Caliban also falls into the notorious stereotype of a Jewish rapist of goyishe women. The image of Jewish men as "rapacious seducers" of Christian women ran rampant in England during Shakespeare's time (Shapiro 38, 109). When English courtier William Brereton visited an Amsterdam synagogue in 1635, he noted that the Jewish 'men are ... insatiably given unto women' (Shapiro 2018). Caliban's role as Miranda's attempted rapist and his unrepentant attitude — "Would 't had been done! / Thou didst prevent me. I had peopled else / This isle with Calibans" (I.ii.354-356) — therefore aligns him with this conception of Jewish men.

As well as a murderer and rapist, Caliban is strongly coded as a cannibal, primarily through his name, which evokes the word "cannibal." In the multiple spellings of cannibal in circulation in the 1500s and 1600s, one was "Canibal," an anagram of "Caliban" (Oxford English Dictionary Online). The incredibly slight difference associates Caliban with cannibalism and creates another tie between him and the cultural perception of Jews. Cannibalism was perhaps the most famous presumed crime of Jewish people. Jewish people in England were frequently charged with cannibalizing their victims and consuming their blood for ritual purposes (Shapiro 109). A variety of stories of Jewish cannibalism existed before and during Shakespeare's time — from a Jewess in Warwick, who was said to have eaten "the mouth and ears" of her victim (Trachtenberg 138) to the myth that Jewish witches ate human flesh at Shabbat meals and that "the meate they ordinarily eate is the flesh of young children, which they cooke and make ready in the Synagogue" (Trachtenberg 214). Although Caliban never explicitly states his desire or tendency towards cannibalism, his name creates the connection for him, and ties him again to the cannibalistic figure of the Jew.

On perhaps a less gruesome note, Caliban also seems to be plagued with an unholy stench reminiscent of the *foetor Judaicus*, or "Jewish odor" attributed to Jewish people throughout Europe (Shapiro 2018). When Trinculo first encounters Caliban, he immediately notes his odor: "What have we here? A man or a fish? Dead or alive? A fish. He smells like a fish, a very ancient and fish-like smell, a kind of not-of-the-newest poor-john. A strange fish! ... There would this monster make a man" (II.ii.24-6). Caliban's marked odor would have evoked the English belief that Jewish people smelled particularly foul. Anglo-Welsh Historian James Howell (1594 – 1666) reflected this popular thought by writing that Jewish bodies had "that rankish kind of scent no better indeed than a stink" (Shapiro 2018). While Caliban's stench is not necessarily a sign of Jewishness, it was certainly meant to reflect his "beastliness," a trait the *foetor Judaicus* shared. Smells were often given moral meaning in the Middle Ages, with "the common Christian belief ... that good spirits emit a marked fragrance, while evil spirits, and in particular, of course, Satan,

are distinguished by an offensive stench” and the related assertion that Jewish people “emit a foul odor as punishment for the crime against Jesus” (Trachtenberg 48). Through his stink, Caliban’s association with evil and the Devil manifests in all aspects of his being, a relationship that many of the English perceived Jewish people to share.

Through a multiplicity of stereotypes — racial difference, sorcery, violence and rapaciousness, cannibalism, and even body odor — Caliban is aligned with the construction of the Elizabethan Jew. This alignment is continued in scriptural terms as well, making the approach to understanding Caliban as a Jew both a cultural and religious one.

ADAM, ISRAELITE, SON OF CHAM: JEWISH-CODING CALIBAN THROUGH SCRIPTURE

Throughout *The Tempest*, Caliban also takes on characteristics typical of the Biblical role of a Jew. His position evokes Biblical stories⁴ in a way that casts him in Israelite roles — his role on the island is Adam-esque, an almost-man in an Edenic paradise that echoes the Israeli promised land, and his enslavement under Prospero connects both to the Hebrews’ slavery in Egypt and the endemic curse of Cham, son of Noah. Additionally, he puts himself in the position of Israelites by evoking the Old Testament story of Jael while proposing murder plans to Stephano.

Before Prospero and Miranda, Caliban is the first and only mortal on an island meant to rival Eden, both in its bounty and the innocence of its inhabitants. As lord Gonzalo describes it: “here is everything advantageous to life / ... Had I plantation of this isle, my lord — / All men [would be] idle, all. / And women too, but innocent and pure. / ... nature should bring forth / Of its own kind all foison, all abundance, / To feed my innocent people” (II.i.45-139). The island and its comparison to Eden gives it a scriptural connection to the land of Canaan, the land promised by G-d⁵ to Jakob, the father of the Israelites.⁶ In Genesis, when Abraham, his wife, and his nephew Lot settle on the land of Canaan, Lot compares it to “the garden of the Lord” (13:10). The ancestral claim of Israelites to the Edenic land of Canaan resonates with Caliban’s genealogical claim to the paradisiacal island: “This island’s mine, by Sycorax my mother, / Which thou takest from me” (I.ii.337-8). He is connected to the island as a promised land, much like the Israelites were to the land of Canaan and, tangentially, Eden. This connection is strengthened by Caliban’s Adam-like position on the island. Just as “[Adam] named the living creature, fo was the name thereof. / The man therefore gaue names vnto all cateel, and to the foule of the heauen, and to euerie beaft of the field” (Gen 2.19), Caliban speaks of his connection to naming in his first interaction with Prospero: “Thou strok’st me and made much of me, wouldst give me / Water with berries in ’t, and teach me how / To name the bigger light, and how the less” (I.ii.338-40). The language of the island is central to Caliban’s connection to it, just as it defines Adam’s role in Eden. In Act III, amongst its wild jungles, Caliban waxes poetic: “Be not afeard. The isle is full of noises, / Sounds, and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not. / ... Sometimes voices [Will hum about mine ears] / That, if I then had waked after long sleep, / ... I cried to dream again” (III.ii.129-37). His punishment at Prospero’s hands even echoes that of Adam’s — first that he is “All wound with adders who with cloven tongues / Do hiss me into madness” (II.ii.12-3), then his exile from the garden: “here you sty me / In this hard rock, whiles you do keep from me / The rest o’th’island”

(I.ii.339-44). In every aspect of his existence on the island, he is Adam-like, and his genetic claim to the island even further connects him to the Israelites of the Bible and their Edenic promised land.

As Caliban's exile from and connection to an Eden echoes Adam's and so aligns him with Jakob and the Israelites, his slavery too puts him in a Jewish role reminiscent of Hebrew slavery in Egypt — a slavery that reinforces his entitlement to the land. In Exodus, when G-d demands Moses fight to free the Hebrews, He connects the liberation directly with the promised land: "Furthermore as I made my couenat with them to giue them the land of Canaan ... I haue heard the groning of the children of Ifrael, whome the Egyptians kepe in bondage, & haue remembred my couenant" (6.4). Perhaps it is not ironic or accidental then, but a biblical fate that Caliban is granted his most profound wish and left to his Edenic island at the end of the play.

His slavery also connects Caliban to another figure in Genesis, Noah's son Cham⁷ and his son Canaan, father of the Canaanites, a Semitic group that lived in the Levant and were eventually conquered by the Israelites. Canaan's descendants were popularly believed to bear the curse of slavery in England in the late 1500s and through the 1600s, and this belief often connected Canaanites to the conceptualization of Jewish people. The first known invocation of the curse of Cham in English writing was in George Best's 1578 account of Martin Frobisher's voyage in search for the Northwest Passage, and merchants in the growing slave trade frequently referred to it in the sixteenth century (Fredrickson 45). As the story goes, Noah summons his sons in preparation for the flood, and then gets quite drunk and passes out nude in his tent. Cham happens upon his father's naked body and tells his brothers, who then respectfully cover their father, never looking at him. When he wakes, Noah realizes what Cham has done and curses Cham's son, Canaan, to slavery.⁸ This descent into slavery echoes Caliban's own story: one who was "first mine own king" (I.ii.347) but then passed into slavery through a sexual transgression — his attempted rape of Miranda.⁹ Although Canaan is not necessarily genealogically linked to Jewish people, his curse linked them theologically and morally. Notable Anglo-Christian theologians, such as St. Augustine of Canterbury, likened Cham's view of his father's nakedness to the Jewish observers who saw Jesus Christ naked on the cross,¹⁰ and Cham's mocking of his father was believed to be archetypal for all mockers, heretics, and unbelievers, including Jewish people (Braude 133). Additionally, English law and religious statutes had long dictated that Jewish populations should unilaterally serve Christians, often citing scripture. The 1222 council of Oxford issued the statute "because it is absurd that the sons of the free woman [Abraham's wife, Sarah] should serve the sons of the slave [Hagar] ... we decree that from now on Jews may not have Christian servants," and Henry III's 1253 *Statute of Jewry* states "no Jew may remain in England unless he does the king service; Just as soon as he is born, every Jew, male or female, serves us in some way¹¹" (Grayzel 315). Thus, through Caliban's condemnation to slavery based on his "vile race," and Cham-like plot, he and Anglo-Jewry are connected by a common enslaved ancestor. Additionally, even in Caliban's attempts to escape his enslaved position, he keeps his association with the Israelites.

Caliban's plot to overthrow Prospero and escape his life of slavery mirrors a biblical story that links Caliban to the Israelites and Prospero to an invading army. While all of Caliban's murderous plans are peculiar, his insistence that Stephano "knock a nail into [Prospero's] head" (III.ii.60) is

particularly curious because the plan echoes the story of Jael from the Book of Judges. The leader of King Jabin of Canaan's army, Sisera, fled from a defeat at the hands of the Israelites, and Jael, a Kenite woman sympathetic to the Israelites' cause and disapproving of Jabin's harsh 20-year-long reign in Hazor, invited Sisera into her tent to sleep. Once he slept, "Jael ... toke a nayle of the tent, and toke a hammer in her hand, and went fofly vnto him, and smote the naile into his temples and faftened it into the grounde ... and fo he dyed ... So God broght downe Jabin the King of Canaan that day before the children of Ifael" (4.17). In echoing this story, Caliban casts himself in the role of the Israelites — as he explains to Stephano, his territory has been seized by an oppressive ruler, Prospero, and he languishes under his rule.¹² He pleads with Stephano to play Jael's role: an outsider who liberates his kingdom by knocking in his enemy's head.

Caliban's construction as Jewish goes beyond stereotyping and into biblical belief. Throughout the play, he echoes biblical positions that Shakespeare and his audience would have known well and connected back to the history of Jewish people. These associations are further strengthened by the similarities between Caliban and Shylock, another Jewish Shakespearian character from *The Merchant of Venice*, which was published a little over two decades before *The Tempest*.

TWO JEWS WALK ONTO A STAGE: COMPARING CALIBAN AND SHYLOCK

Reading Caliban and Shylock against each other highlights their many similarities and strengthens the reading of Caliban as Jewish, even as it complicates both of their readings by revealing a pattern that casts neither of them as clear-cut villains.

Many of the traits that define Shylock as Jewish are similarly present in Caliban, such as their shared murderous tendencies, associations with the Devil, and cannibalism. For instance, both Caliban and Shylock are held up as pinnacles of cruelty. In *The Tempest*, Caliban is castigated thoroughly for trying to curse his master. Meanwhile, in *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock's demand for "a pound of flesh" from Antonio is used as an example of Jewish cruelty and bloodthirstiness. His disposition is contrasted by Christian generosity and forgiveness in the court scene, where the Duke apologizes that Antonio must come up against such a ruthless and bloodthirsty foe: "I am sorry for thee. Thou art come to answer / A stony adversary, an inhuman wretch / Uncapable of pity, void and empty / From any dram of mercy" (IV.i.3-6¹³), and Antonio resigns to his fate saying "You may as well do anything most hard, / As seek to soften that—than which what's harder?— / His Jewish heart" (IV.i.79-81). Additionally, Shakespeare evokes the Jewish connection to the Devil in *The Merchant of Venice* when Solano, upon seeing Shylock, says "Let me say 'Amen' betimes lest the devil cross my prayer, for here he comes in the likeness of a Jew" (III.i.22). Later in *Merchant*, the fool Launcelot also comments on the connection, saying "Certainly the Jew is the very devil incarnate" (II.ii.27). Caliban shares this explicit connection to the Devil with Shylock, along with their individual associations with cannibalism. Whereas Caliban's connection comes from his name, Shylock describes using Antonio's flesh to "feed my revenge" (3.1.50-1) and speaks with Jessica explicitly, if figuratively, about his desire or intent to consume Christians when he is invited to dine with Christian merchants and says, "But wherefore should I go? / I am not bid for love; they flatter me. / But yet I'll go in hate, to feed upon / The prodigal Christian" (II.v.11-15). However, while these similarities strengthen the association

between Caliban and Shylock and other Jewish people, they complicate the narratives these stories are telling about Jewish people.

Even as both Caliban and Shylock are viewed as bloodthirsty villains beyond contempt or redemption, they are given unusually poetic voices which they both use to criticize systems of power. Shylock even goes so far as to criticize Christianity and Christian morals in his historically famous plea for religious tolerance:

Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, ... affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, ... warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? ... If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villainy you teach me I will execute—and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction (III.i.55-66).

This monologue accompanies Shylock's role as the most religiously faithful character in *Merchant*. Even as the play's supposed protagonists condemn Shylock as a "misbeliever, cut-throat, dog / And spit upon [his] Jewish gaberdine" (I.iii.107–108), they delight in recounting the tales of the ancient Greek and Roman gods and goddesses — Solanio refers to Janus, a Roman god (1.150); Portia names Greek Sibylla, lover of Apollo, and Diana, goddess of the moon (1.2.103-104), as well as Cupid (2.9.99), Alcides (3.2.55) and Hercules (3.2.6); Salarino calls on Venus (2.6.5); Bassanio also names Hercules, Mars (3.2.85), and Midas (3.2.102), and Lorenzo and Jessica compare their love to that of endless Greek and Roman tales in the final act (5.1.1-13). Meanwhile, Shylock strictly adheres only to biblical references, highlighting the irony of his fellow Venetians' religious contempt.

Caliban has a similarly poetic speech appealing to the injustice of his position when he is first introduced:

This island's mine ... Which thou takest from me. When thou camest first, / Thou strok'st me and made much of me, wouldst ... teach me how / To name the bigger light, and how the less, / ... And then I loved thee / And showed thee all the qualities o' th' isle, / The fresh springs, brine pits, barren place and fertile. / Cursed be I that did so! ... / For I am all the subjects that you have, / Which first was mine own king. And here you sty me / In this hard rock, whiles you do keep from me / The rest o' th' island (I.ii.337-49).

Although Caliban does not fight against Prospero's accusation of rape or his claim that Caliban was well-treated before it, he is given the chance to speak about his experience before Prospero, granting his view validity and giving him a voice not usually given either to Jewish communities or to the indigenous communities of the countries Europeans were beginning to expand to and colonize. Additionally, Caliban takes the "gift" of language that Prospero gave him and uses it to curse them: "You taught me language, and my profit on 't / Is I know how to curse" (I.ii.168). In this curse, Caliban echoes Shylock's sentiment from *Merchant*; it is with the master's own tools that he rebels against them.

Finally, the question of Jewish access to paradise is complicated in both *Tempest* and *Merchant*. Both characters are permitted to enter paradise at the ends of their plays, although Shylock gains access in a decidedly more ambiguous manner. Where Caliban is left with his beautiful island, Shylock is forcefully converted at Antonio's request — "for this favor / He presently become a Christian" (IV.i.378-9). While audiences could have presumed Shylock would follow in the footsteps of other forced converts and continue Judaizing in secret, his conversion does imply that, in Christian eyes, his immortal soul should go to Heaven upon his death. Caliban and Shylock are both antagonists and villains — so why do they both have an ultimately desirable fate?

THIS THING OF DARKNESS I ACKNOWLEDGE MINE: THE JEWISH OTHER AND THE JEWISH SELF

How does revisiting Jewish characters like Shylock and Caliban influence how we see Shakespeare and Judaism? They may be showing us that something more complicated than just "Othering" is happening. After all, despite the small Jewish population in England, Judaism and representations of Jewish characters were integral to defining what being English meant during and before Shakespeare's time. Truly, the anxiety around Jewish people that *Merchant* and *Tempest* reveal reflects more on the English anxieties around defining the self than they do around the real lives and actions of English Jewish people.

The proximity and shared Abrahamic root of Christianity and Judaism has always complicated how the two communities interacted with each other. The Apostle Paul was the first to pose the question of how proto-Christians should treat Jewish people who rejected Jesus Christ.¹⁴ In his *Epistle to the Romans*, Paul portrays the Jewish faith as a preparation for the True Law that followed the resurrection of Christ, and the promise of "their moral correction in the future — emblemized by the allegorical tree of salvation in *Romans* 11:17-24 — ensured that [Jewish people] retained a special, albeit problematic, status" (Potter 34). This complicated status was present in England before and during Shakespeare's time as well. In the 1160s, before their eviction, Jewish moneylenders had gained prominent positions and increasing power in England's economy, and many were particularly intimate with the royal government, which caused further suspicion of both royals and Jewish merchants (Potter 3). The political shifts of Shakespeare's era were slowly evoking a nostalgic reconstruction of the "civility of dying feudal institutions" (Lipton 10), and the construction of the Jew as usurious and bloodthirsty, common by the end of the 12th century, along with the Jew as murderer, poisoner, and political interloper (Shapiro 92), reflects the anxieties of the English at that time not only about Jewish people and other populations perceived as "different," but also about their own governments and institutions. Whatever the crime, there was always an emphasis on Jewish people's ability to counterfeit: "In England, Jewish crime — like Jewishness itself — was invariably hidden and insidious, a secret waiting to be unearthed" (Shapiro 9), and this suspicion lent itself to the general air of suspicion that permeated Elizabethan England.

These same suspicions and doubts existed about the Catholic Christian Church as well. The Church's institutional rise and its expanding influence over Western European society before and

during Shakespeare's time meant that it was better equipped to spread and compel popular consent to Christian dogma, even throwing its weight behind controversial "miracles," prompting doubt among increasingly skeptical Christians (Potter 20). The Church used the Medieval and Early Modern claims of Jewish murder, poisoning, and cannibalism to combat this religious skepticism among Christians. While the claims lacked evidentiary support, they effectively assured Christians that even the "crafty Jew" recognized and believed in the power of Christianity, and that their religious rituals circulated around the inherent holiness of Christian blood, bodies, and artifacts (Rubin 99). These stories imbued the Church with power even as they betrayed the widespread psychological disturbance the new Christian doctrine was causing.

In their respective plays, Caliban and Shylock both highlight the internal nature of these anxieties and make it explicit in their monologues on their own mistreatment. Prospero furthers this dynamic; even as Prospero takes on a protagonist role, he, too, can be seen as Jew-like, a politician who manipulates those around him with violence and magic. His association with Judaism is furthered by that fact that, in 1542, a few decades before *The Tempest* was written, a report from Charles V's naval excursion against Algiers mentioned a Jewish magician who damaged the imperial fleet to the point of retreat by raising a terrific storm (Trachtenberg 80). The mention of "Argier" (I.ii.263) in the beginning of *Tempest*, as well as the very name of the play and its opening on a violent storm, connects it back to this folkloric Jewish sorcerer, who would be playing the role of Prospero. Additionally, Prospero evokes the witch Medea when he paraphrases her boasts of magic in *Metamorphoses* VII: "I have bedimmed / The noontide sun, called forth the mutinous winds, / And 'twixt the green sea and the azured vault / Set roaring war / ... graves at my command / Have waked their sleepers, oped, and let 'em forth / By my so potent art." (V.i.41-50). By creating a parallel between him and a known witch, he also connects himself back to the "damn'd witch" Sycorax. Medea and her magic also appear in *Merchant* (V.i.12-14) and tie these plays together in how they evoke and discuss this witch figure. The magic that connects him and these witches also ties him to Caliban, even after he spends the whole play condemning Caliban's inhumanity and "Otherness." Perhaps this is why, in the last Act, he says of Caliban "This thing of darkness I / Acknowledge mine" (V.i.289-90). The anxiety Jewish people raised for English Christians sprouted from the acknowledgement of a shared root and belonging that their cultural construction of the Jew betrayed, even as it attempted to dehumanize Jewish people and use them as crutches towards defining Englishness and bolstering Christian belief. With this conclusion, we must then consider: perhaps there is not only one implicitly Jewish character in *Tempest*, but two.

CONCLUSION

Although Jewish communities never fully disappeared from England, the cultural construction of Jews, in which Shakespeare, *the Tempest*, and *the Merchant of Venice* all play a part, reveals a web of anxieties much more concerned with the English and Christian conception of the self than with Jewish people themselves. By calling on a wide variety of societal, ethnic, and religious tropes, Shakespeare's Caliban is effectively "Othered" through Jewish or Jew-like means, even as both he and Shylock's stories lend an otherwise unheard voice to important debates on nationality

and belonging in Elizabethan England. Their identification with and criticism of their enemies, as well as their fates in paradise despite their religious status further call into question the role of Jewish people and other “outsiders” in England and identify a core insecurity in the construction of English identity. More than revealing the historically accurate experience of Jewish people and those around them, these plays demonstrate a deeper and more insidious look into the lives, experiences, and anxieties of goyishe Englanders. With this in mind, modern scholarship on Shakespeare, especially from scholars working with themes of race, belonging, and ethnicity, should take seriously the possibility that Shakespeare knew more about Jewish people than previously presumed and often cited cultural constructions of “Otherness” in a variety of ways that reflected broader English thought and experience.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Much thanks to my faculty advisor Kate Myers, professors Corbett Upton, Brent Dawson, and Elizabeth Wheeler, the Humanities Undergraduate Research Fellowship and its supervisor Karl Reasoner, both my parents, and all my wonderful friends.

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NOTES

¹ “Goyishe” is a word with Hebrew and Yiddish roots used to refer to non-Jewish people. “Goy” is a singular noun meaning “non-Jewish person,” “goyim” is the plural version, and “goyishe” acts as a descriptive adjective.

² The more traditional readings of Caliban as indigenous do not necessarily conflict with reading him as Jewish. See Richard H. Popkin, “The Rise and Fall of the Jewish Indian Theory,” in *Menasseh Ben Israel and His World*, 63-82.

³ All quotes from *The Tempest* are from Oxford University Press, 1993.

⁴ In discussing scripture, I cite exclusively from the Geneva Bible, the primary Biblical text Shakespeare worked from; see John W. Harris, ‘*Written in the Margent*’: Shakespeare’s Metaphor of the Geneva Bible Marginal Notes.

⁵ Many Jewish people choose to use this spelling to avoid erasing or defacing the Name, which is forbidden in Jewish law.

⁶ “Moreouer G-d faid vnto him, Thy name is Iaakob: thy name fhall be no more called Iaakob, but Ifael fjalbe thy name: and he called his name Ifrael. / Againe G-d faid vnto him, I am G-d all fufficiet. growe & multiplie: a nation & a multitude of natioes fhall fring of thee, and Kings fhall come out of they loynes. / Alfo I wil giue y land, which I gaue to Abraham and Izhak, vnto thee: & vnto they fede after thee wil I giue that land” (Gen 35.10).

⁷ Cham was also a famously powerful sorcerer in his own right (Braude 124), another thread that connects Caliban as a magical being to Cham and them both to Elizabethan English conceptions of Jews.

⁸ “he droke of y wine & was dronke & was vncouered in y middles of his tent / and when Ham the father of Canaan fawe the nakedness of his father, he tolde his two brethren without. Then toke Shem and Iapeth a garmet and put it vpon bothe their fhoulders and wet backward, and couered the nakednes of their father with their faces backward: fo thei fawe not their fathers nakednes. / Then Noah awoke from his wine, and knewe what his yonger fonne had done vnto him, / and faid, Curfed be canaan: a feruant of feruantes fhall he be vnto his brethren” (Gen. 9.21).

⁹ See Lupton 16.

¹⁰ See Rowan A. Greer and Jack P. Lewis. “A Study of the Interpretation of Noah and the Flood in Jewish and Christian Literature,” 179.

¹¹ See J.A. Watt, “The Jews, The Law, And the Church: The Concept of Jewish Serfdom in Thirteenth-Century England,” 172.

¹² “As I told thee before, I am subject to a tyrant, a sorcerer that by his cunning hath cheated me of the island” (III.ii.45)

¹³ All quotes from *The Merchant of Venice* are from Oxford University Press, 1987.

¹⁴ See Jeremy Cohen, *Living Letters of the Law: Ideas of the Jew in Medieval Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 4-8.