SBReviews_12:

Janet Adelman. *Blood Relations: Christian and Jew in The Merchant of Venice*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008. ISBN-13: 978-0-226-00681-9; xi + 226pp. US$35.00.

Reviewed by Murray M. Schwartz, Department of Writing, Literature and Publishing, Emerson College

This bold and brilliant book was the last scholarly work of Janet Adelman's exemplary career as a teacher and interpreter of Shakespeare. Aptly entitled "Strangers within Christianity," the opening chapter of *Blood Relations* begins by confronting the perception of Jewish intrusion into "Christian" Renaissance studies when she and many other Jews, myself included, began academic careers in the 1960s. Her book is in part a response to that fear of inordinate Jewish presence among Shakespeareans, which she immediately links to her central theme, the troubling status of Jews within Renaissance Christian history, theology, and *The Merchant of Venice* itself.

Merchant is a play of interiors and exteriors, insiders and outsiders. In this intricately, sometimes obsessively argued book, Adelman shows how Shakespeare's overdetermined text encodes—both concealing and revealing—fantasies and theological arguments about the presence and place of Jews and Jewishness in allusion, metaphor and dramatic structure. *Merchant* is replete with instances of literal and metaphorical outsides and insides, purses and persons, disguises and revelations. In Adelman's reading, virtually every aspect of the play is shown to be embedded in theological and cultural discourses about purity of blood, discourses that have yet to outlive their currency. As "a figure for the disowned other within the self" (12), the sifting signifier of "the Jew" retains much of its problematic tenacity to this day in the contentious commonalities and rivalries of Abrahamic societies, making this

book both an indispensible contribution to Shakespeare studies and a commentary on some of the most persistent conundrums and conflicts in Western history.

In *Blood Relations* Adelman foregrounds the dream-like strategies of dramatic and linguistic structure that encode the "day residue" of the culture surrounding the play—the biblical texts and shared imaginings that thread through sermons, plays, and historical narratives. Her readings owe much to her psychoanalytic insights into the ways dramatic form—especially Shakespeare's displacements into poetry of telling fantasies—enacts in its "subterranean logic" (87) the tensions that are hidden in the play's overt features. For example, she reads Graziano's passage about the "prodigal" barque that returns "Lean, rent, and beggared by the strumpet wind" at 2.6.14-19 as an oblique representation of "the bodily danger inherent in lovemaking" (102). Similarly, the reported rupture in Antonio's ships points to the split in Antonio himself. "For the innards concealed in the prologue in effect spill out dreamlike into the action of the play, into a plot that threatens to open him up and a set of literalized metaphors that express what he does not want to know that he has within" (115). In every chapter, Adelman illuminates the ways apparently gratuitous elements (e.g. Jessica's disguise as a boy) become meaningful aspects of the play's design.

One of Adelman's achievements is to show how the play and its cultural moment paradoxically both reinforce and resist secure oppositions at every turn. For her, the text of *Merchant* is haunted by ambiguities, ambivalences, and anxieties in both proto-capitalist Venice and the Belmont of fairy-tale exchanges. Opposites interpenetrate more troublingly than in any other Shakespearean comedy, threatening the tone of the play at crucial junctures in the action, and casting the stability of individual and group identities into doubt. As Portia says, "Which is the merchant here? And which the Jew?" (4.1.176). Nowhere is Shakespeare's preoccupation with doubles and foils more problematically present.

It should be said, however, that Adelman's arguments are often so complex in their interweaving of biblical, historical, and textual elements that they must be read (and re-read) carefully to grasp both their logic and their import in the play's meanings. They defy easy summation but repay concentrated study. One of the book's strengths is its powerful expose of the logic of cultural exclusion and racism in general. A whole series of binaries are shown to be both fixed and fluid: Venice/Belmont, white/black, Christian/Jew, Moor/Jew, Christian/ Moor, spirit/blood. "Two distincts, division none," in the paradox of "The Phoenix and the Turtle."

Adelman's introductory chapter frames and summarizes the book's purposes. Each of the three chapters that follow is like an overlapping spotlight highlighting aspects of her central themes and intensifying aspects of the overall arguments about conversion, blood and the dilemmas of identity, and each centers on one character: Lancelot Gobbo, Jessica, and Antonio.

The introductory chapter explores way in which *Merchant* is haunted by anxieties that disrupt the "secure distinctions" between Christians and Jews in Elizabethan England. At the center of her argument is the Christian preoccupation with the Jew as "the original stranger" within Christianity, and the converso as the hidden Sephardic Jew within the imaginary of Shakespeare's world. As both origin and other, the Jew calls into question religious, national, and gender boundaries. Adelman's careful and lucid interpretations of "Sir Thomas More," the significance of London's converso community, Robert Wilson's "The Three Ladies of London," and John Foxe's "A Sermon Preached at the Christening of a Certain Jew" in 1577 converge on the problematics of "blood relations" and both the uncertainty and the necessity of conversion in relation to Christian triumphalism.

In her second chapter, Adelman considers the "throwaway scene" of Lancelot's departure from Shylock's house (2.2) as a comic displacement that encodes anxieties about conversion before we encounter them in close proximity to Jessica's flight from her Jewish father and her theft of his ducats and jewels. The story of Isaac and Jacob, a "pretext" for Christ's bodily ancestry and Christian Jewish origins, informs the language of Lancelot's dilemma about leaving the Jewish house. As it both mirrors and parodies its biblical precursor, 2.2 reinscribes anxieties about fathers and sons even as it displaces them.

Jessica's conversion is central to the third chapter. In leaving her Jewish father, Jessica's betrayal encodes anxieties about the Jewish body and the Jewish womb. Jessica may steal from her father's house and sell her mother's ring, but she cannot escape Christian uneasiness about her potential maternity. "The more Jessica appears to be 'a gentle, and no Jew,' the more vigorously her problematic lineage needs to be asserted" (75). The threat of merger provokes insistence on differentiation; cultural assimilation reinforces racial alterity. Adelman recognizes a convergence of religious and proto-racist elements in Jessica's role as she comes to occupy an ambiguous place in Belmont, at once insider and outsider, convert and stranger. Jessica's body also presents a potential threat to the integrity of Christian blood in the proto-national Christian state, a threat Portia counters in her injunction against violating the integrity of Antonio's body. "Conversion, danger to the commonwealth, race, and miscegenation come together in Jessica's body . . . " (97).

Adelman's final chapter moves from Jessica's "ambiguously gendered" (101) body to the fraught issue of circumcision, claiming convincingly that the biblical story of Dinah "haunt[s] the edges of *Merchant*" (105), as "a kind of conversion story gone terribly wrong, with both parties to blame" (103). It is Portia as Balthazar who must counter the threat of bondage to the old Law embodied in the trope of circumcision and literalized as Shylock's

pound of flesh. Antonio's unseen interior has a double valence: it hides the Jew within even as, in the idea of "circumcision of the heart," it identifies the true Christian. The trial scene finds its scapegoat as it illustrates Shakespeare's diagnostic imagination. "Though it creates a monstrous Jew as it reproduces the threat of circumcision and crucifixion in 4.1, it also allows us to see what needs that creation fulfills, for its characters as well as its audience" (112).

The meanings of Antonio's interior, however, are not limited to the symbolism of circumcision. As many have recognized, his opening confession, "In sooth I know not why I am so sad," (1.1.1), masks erotic desire. "Shylock both literalizes and gives an alibi for Antonio's initial desire to be unlocked purse and person for Bassanio, to be known inside out by him . . . As though only torture could extract the confession that Antonio wants both to conceal and to make . . . [in his] ambivalent desire for self-disclosure" (120). In one of Adelman's most eloquent insights, she states a deeper meaning as well:

> In its representation of Antonio's concealed inwardness and his ambivalent desire for exposure, *Merchant* seems to me to anticipate not only Hamlet's noisier insistence that he has something inaccessible within but also his developing sense of the self; and Antonio's ambivalent desire for self-exposure catches exactly this dilemma of this private self in its most painful form. (121)

Here Adelman draws on the psychoanalytic writing of D.W. Winnicott, who wrote of "the urgent need to communicate and the still more urgent need not to be found" (121).

Before the trial scene is over, Portia has reinforced the fantasy of the feminized Jew (for it was said that melancholy men bleed like women) and the masculinized Christian (in herself as Balthazar), transcending the gender division. The play can then move to the Belmont of Act 5, which at once distances the anxieties of Venice and echoes them in its

language of incision, inward searching, and prying into interiors. Portia's triumph "seals off" the potential wound in Antonio's body as the play retreats to Belmont, "But the retreat is uneasy, for *Merchant* seems to me everywhere haunted by what it cannot allow itself to know. In its play of glib surfaces, *Merchant* represents self-knowledge as a wound, and one that must be forestalled . . . And once that knowledge has been foreclosed, the debt to the Jew—the debt the play encodes as three thousand ducats for three months—need never be repaid" (133).

In its textual focus, *Blood Relations* is a fine complement to and extension of James Shapiro's *Shakespeare and the Jews*, and Kenneth Gross's *Shakespeare is Shylock*, to take only two examples of Adelman's recent precursors. As in her previous books, Adelman's notes are models of erudition, professional critique, and magnanimous acknowledgement of the debts on which she builds. Her mind absorbed and condensed an enormous range of commentary into eloquent prose that is at once summary and original.

Adelman's final, brilliant success in *Blood Relations* strengthens her legacy as a major figure in, psychoanalytic, feminist, and historical Shakespearean scholarship. Not only does she answer the prejudices she encountered at the beginning her professional experience as a Jewish scholar, she has bettered the instruction. *Blood Relations* will be essential to all future interpretations of *The Merchant of Venice*.