

SHAKESPEARE'S QUEER RELIGIONS

by

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## DEDICATION

Dedicated with all my love to my 3E's

and

For Jerry and Kari who did so much to make this possible

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## ABSTRACT

The goal of this dissertation is to explore the construction of the Catholic, the Moor, and the Jew in Shakespeare's early plays as instances of queering—as stagings of religious others as sexually deviant and a threat to normative, English, Protestant reproduction. As numerous critics have remarked, the alien is a conspicuous figure in Elizabethan drama. A number of explanations for this have been offered, the vast majority of which have sought to tie this phenomenon to emerging categories of race and empire (see, for example, Emily Bartels' work on the "alien" in Elizabethan drama, and the work done by both Kim F. Hall and Virginia Mason Vaughan on the role blackness plays on the early modern stage). I want to explore the religious dimension of otherness. In Protestant religious discourse, the error of other religions was characterized as a perversion of desire that had serious implications for physical and ideological reproduction. As Francis Dolan has noted, Catholics were seen as embracing a disordered vision of sexuality in which women are dominant. This fear of political and social inversion is typically associated with the "whore of Babylon" in late 16th and early 17th century rhetoric. As Nabil Matar observes, the Moor was seen to be lascivious, embracing a polymorphous, perverse desire that pollutes culture through sodomy while at the same time threatening miscegenation. Finally, as James Shapiro has noted, the Jew was seen as desiring money above all in a way that entailed a kind of "monstrous" and asexual reproduction through usury. In sum, the discourses of religious otherness were principally concerned with sexual deviance as a threat to reproduction. Shakespeare's construction of characters like Joan La Pucelle, Aaron the Moor, and Shylock is rooted in this protestant understanding of religious otherness as queer. That understanding was increasingly important in a late Elizabethan England that was, as Daniel Swift suggests, rooted in protestant ideology and simultaneously worried about the stability of that identity, given an aging monarch and growing military threats from Catholic and Islamic nations. Our understanding of Shakespeare's religious figures is enhanced by taking into account the queer character of their religious otherness at a time of acute reproductive anxiety.

## Introduction

### *Shakespeare's Queer Religions*

I am of this opinion, that those comical inhibitions by which our society is so fettered that people talk of nothing else are for the most part the effects of apprehension and fear.

Michel de Montaigne (93)

This dissertation explores the queering of the Catholic, the moor, and the Jew in three of Shakespeare's early plays. This project began with the recognition that religious and sexual politics in our everyday world are often structured on a fear of difference, especially of religious and sexual difference. Coupled with recent work in queer theory that has broken down the distance between past and present, suggesting that queer theory might have something to tell us about Shakespeare, this recognition has provided the ground for exploring a similar fear in Shakespeare's early plays. In his staging and censure of the Catholic, the moor, and the Jew in these plays, Shakespeare explores both contemporary fears about religious others by figuring them as what we now call "queers" and the difficulty of attempting to locate and censure the bodies onto which those fears have been mapped.

When this project began in 2009, I was living in north Phoenix with my wife and infant daughter and making a two-and-a-half-hour trek to Tucson to teach composition and literature

at the University of Arizona. This thrice-weekly voyage would begin each Monday, Wednesday, and Friday just before dawn and would end long after the Arizona sun had laid to rest behind the mountains. In the long hours in between, many of them spent traveling I-10 in a car with a (hopefully) sleeping infant, I needed to find something that would keep me, but not her, awake.

As it turned out, conservative talk radio filled this role perfectly, as it both pumped me full of adrenaline and left me speechless. The almost constant xenophobia spewing out of the dash from the moment I tuned in a talk radio station—rhetoric that almost always centered on religious (e.g., “Muslim”), sexual (e.g., “gay”), or sometimes a hybrid of the two (e.g., “secretly gay Muslims”) *others*—filled me with a mixture of rage and profound confusion that ensured I would be awake for the entirety of any given trip. Underwriting almost everything that was said on talk radio was the reductive belief that there was a “them” and an “us.” “Them” were protean bogeymen who onto which to map the ostensible perversions of foreign religions and sexualities, and “we” were what Benedict Anderson had called an “imagined community”—a heterogeneous group of people made seemingly homogeneous by a shared mythos of supposed honesty, patriotism, and work ethic that militated against “them” and “their” supposed desire to take over our country, church, or body. At first, this need to see the world as such a reductive binary left me dumbstruck. How, I wondered, could anyone believe the simplistic and hateful things (e.g., the president is a secret Muslim out to destroy the world, “gays” are pedophiles trying to “turn” your children, etc.) that flooded talk radio airwaves?

My answer to this question came from an unexpected place; my answer to this question came from Shakespeare. I had long been fascinated by the religious others that were antagonists who loomed large in some of Shakespeare’s early plays. From Joan in *I Henry VI* to Aaron the

Moor in *Titus Andronicus* to Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare's religious antagonists in his early plays struck me as profoundly interesting. Much criticism has ignored or even maligned these characters for being either the lesser creations of a playwright not yet come into his full power or as instances of troubling characters rooted in polemics that were common in Shakespeare's England. However, Joan, Aaron, and Shylock struck me as more complicated and interesting than most seemed to want to believe or acknowledge. Spurred on by my encounters with the rhetoric of fear in modern America, it became increasingly clear to me that Shakespeare crafted the singular religious others that are the antagonists of some of his early plays as the *kinds* of threats that are so often discussed today on talk radio. They were the ostensible barbarians at the gates who desired the destruction of the nation in keeping with their perverse desires. Moreover, as I began to unpack Shakespeare's treatment of religious others in *1 Henry VI*, *Titus Andronicus*, and *The Merchant of Venice*, it also became quite clear that Shakespeare was constructing the religious others in his early plays as not simply other, but as abject and queer.

My aim in this introduction is to set the stage for reading Joan, Aaron, and Shylock as instances of the Catholic, Moor, and Jew respectively as queer. To this end, I want to (1) briefly explore how and why queer theory can be a powerful tool for engaging the work of Shakespeare, (2) track a shift in how Shakespeare's engagement with religion has been understood by critics, (3) explore how using queer theory as a tool for understanding Shakespeare's religious others in his early plays can help to build on this recent shift, (4) suggest that doing so can help us to better understand what is going on in the plays as well as in our modern world, and (5) briefly sketch out what I will be arguing in each of the chapters that follow this introduction.

## Queer Theory

Before we can turn directly to how Shakespeare's construction of religious others in *1 Henry VI*, *Titus Andronicus*, and *The Merchant of Venice* can be productively understood through the lens of queer theory, a few words need to be said about the use of queer theory as a tool for analysis of early modern texts. On the surface, the use of queer theory as a tool for understanding Shakespeare may seem anachronistic. After all, Shakespeare lived in a time and place in which "queer theory" would have been a completely foreign idea. However, if we think critically about what precisely queer theory is and the kinds of questions queer theory invites us to consider, it will become clear that queer theory can be a valuable tool for understanding Shakespeare. Because of it, we will be able to see Shakespeare's construction of religious others in *1 Henry VI*, *Titus Andronicus*, and *The Merchant of Venice* is the construction of religious others as queer.

It is certainly not unreasonable to question whether and how queer theory can contribute to our understanding of Shakespeare. Queer theory is a recent invention and accordingly has something of a short history. While the word "queer" has been part of the English language for centuries, "queer theory," as I am using it here, was only coined in 1992. Further, the cultural and critical issues and the impulses that underlie the development of queer theory in the past 25 years are themselves native to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, since queer theory has been animated principally by questions of sexuality and, more specifically, very modern formations of sexuality. As Michel Foucault reminds us, the seemingly de facto links between sexuality and identity that are so much a part of modern discourse are a recent invention. While it is undoubtedly the case that some of the sexual practices stereotypically associated with

queerness are in no way unique to our modern world—human sexuality has always embrace diverse desires and practices—the idea that sexual practices can be linked to identities and labelled in the ways we label them in our contemporary world is still a relatively new one. Given all of this, it might seem odd on the surface that queer theory could have much to tell us about the work of an author such as Shakespeare. It is clear that queer theory may be a useful tool for investigating ourselves and even our use and abuse of Shakespeare in our contemporary world, but what can it tell us about an author who has been dead some 400 years and whose world was very different from our own?

While employing queer theory as a tool for understanding early modern authors, and Shakespeare specifically, may seem anachronistic on the surface in the ways that I have been describing, Madhavi Menon, Lee Edelman, and Carla Freccero have convincingly argued in recent years that queer theory can be a valuable tool for understanding Shakespeare in particular.<sup>1</sup> For Menon, Edelman, and Freccero, queer theory provides not just a window into Shakespeare's sexuality but a window into how he engages the world in a way that, as Menon describes it, "reformats the historical date we currently attach to the idea of queer" (3). Because it does so, says Menon, we need to delink the notion of queer from specific sexual practices and focus instead on queer as a creation of and one response to Western culture's default presumption of heteronormativity. As Menon argues, queerness is not limited to specific sexual

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<sup>1</sup> For a more extensive treatment of the value of queer theory for reading Shakespeare, including extensive responses to the charges of anachronism often leveled against queer critics, see the introduction to Madhavi Menon's introduction to her edited volume *Shakespeare* and Lee Edelman's "Against Survival: Queerness in a Time That's Out of Joint." For a broader engagement with queer theory in the early modern world, see Carla Freccero's *Queer/Early/Modern* and "Queer Spectrality: Haunting the Past," as well as Valerie Traub's "The Joys of Martha Joyless: Queer Pedagogy and the (Early Modern) Production of Sexual Knowledge."

practices but more broadly encompasses what disturbs the sense of normative telos that undergirds Western thought. The focus of queer approaches to Shakespeare is accordingly not on discerning Shakespeare's sexual politics or proclivities, but rather on recognizing that the ideas that play a major role in queer theory are at play in Shakespeare. For queer theorists, Shakespeare astutely chronicles the human condition in ways that anticipate many of the concerns that ground contemporary queer theory, making Shakespeare, in the words of Menon, "a queer theorist . . . [whose] work already inhabits the queer theory we occupy today" (11).

This idea of queerness as that which disrupts, or as Menon playfully puts it, "Shakes" (1), the normative shares a great deal in common with Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection. As Kristeva describes it, abjection is a way of dealing with that which disturbs attempts to develop a unified sense of identity. For her the abject is that which, while once part of (and often still part of) the self, "is radically excluded" (2) but never fully banished in our conscious awareness – such as our once being half-inside and half-outside the mother, of which we carry a dim sense-memory -- and it includes the immanence of death that must be excluded from everyday life, even as it is also used to establish the boundaries of a sense of "I" that is never, and can never be, fully stable. Like Kristeva's abject, Menon's queer is that which is cast off by the normative social order as anomalous to it so as to fashion a sense of identity that both excludes and requires the presence of that queer other and every otherness that it includes. Where the notion of queerness expounded by Menon departs from Kristeva's notion of abjection is with the explicit focus on the queer as that which, broadly speaking, disrupts heteronormative reproduction.

Underlying much of what Menon says, and of particular interest to me in this study, is the interest in reproduction and reproductive anxiety that is central to the work of queer

theorists such as Lee Edelman -- an interest that, I want to argue, is a key feature of Shakespeare's early plays as well. As Edelman argues in his *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, the queer is best understood as that which stands in opposition to what he terms "reproductive futurism" (3). Edelman notes that modern social and political discourse is deeply rooted in the image of the Child, since, Edelman shows, the figure of the child comes to stand for heteronormative reproduction. To be on the side of the child is to embrace a logic by which heteronormative reproduction is both good and necessary for the reproduction of the state. The queer is that which opposes, or even militates, against "normal" heterosexual reproduction within the dominant ideology of a culture at any given time. Embracing ostensibly narcissistic desires, the queer, as understood by Edelman, pursues desires that are seemingly self-centered and whose satiation necessarily disrupts or prevents reproduction. The most obvious examples of such queer desires, says Edelman, are non-reproductive sexual activities that satisfy the participant but that cannot end in any reproduction.

While Edelman does sometimes address desire and reproduction at the level of the individual, he is more interested in how queerness defined as such also operates at the level of the social. In other words, those who are identified as queers do not simply militate against reproduction in their own lives; they also collectively militate against reproduction of the social order writ large. As Edelman himself puts it, queerness comes to occupy the space of the death-drive on the level of the social, so much so that queer is that which is opposed to life itself. Given this link, despite the fact that Edelman's central goal in *No Future* is a political one in which queer persons should embrace this role of disruption—in which they should say "fuck . . . the Child in whose name we are collectively terrorized" (29)—his work also provides a powerful framework in which to read literature. Drawing on a Lacanian scheme that, while

Edelman does not specifically cite her, is deeply indebted to Julia Kristeva, Edelman's formulation of the queer fits neatly with Kristeva's notion of abjection and with the extent to which Kristeva argues that abjection plays a key role in literature. For Kristeva, literature provides a way to explore and work through abjection. In Kristeva's words,

Far from being a minor, marginal activity in our culture, as a general consensus seems to have it . . . literature as such, represents the ultimate coding of our crises, of our most intimate and most serious apocalypses. (208).

While literature can be something that diverts or entertains us, it is also something that lays bare that which terrifies us. Literature provides us a chance to encounter that which is abjected, or, as I am suggesting here, the queer, and to do in ways that provide an opportunity to both contain and censure that abject. As Noelle McAfee puts it, literature allows "*working through* conflicts so that the subject is not doomed to *act them out*" in quotidian life (Kindle Location 1041).

Taking all of this together, I find that queer theory, as Menon and Edelman have defined it and as I am using it in this study, can be a powerful tool for understanding Shakespeare. Read through the lens of queer theory, we can see Shakespeare as an artist invoking the queer even before it has been named as such to work through issues of identity-construction. Particularly in his engagement with and navigation of religion, something to which I will turn in the next section, Shakespeare gave himself and his audience a chance to work through fears about the ability of an English nation to reproduce itself at a time of pointed epistemological anxiety and a troubled eschatology.

## Shakespeare and Religion

Shakespeare's engagement with religion has long been a topic of critical interest. Indeed, given how often Shakespeare's plays and poems are chock-full of religious imagination and polemic, it's no wonder that, in the words of Arthur Marotti and Ken Jackson, "the vexed question of Shakespeare's [treatment of] religion never stopped stimulating discussion inside or outside the academic world" (167). While it is clear that religion plays an important role in Shakespeare's plays and poems, how we should understand the role of religion in Shakespeare has remained something of an open question. For some, Shakespeare's engagement with religion is evidence that he must have held one or another particular religious view. Others have suggested that Shakespeare's treatment of religion is not a statement of belief but instead reflects an astute playwright and businessman delivering to his audiences what he knew they wanted to see. Building upon this latter view, I want to suggest in this dissertation that we read Shakespeare's engagement with religion as the product of a savvy writer who aimed to please his audiences but did so in a way that can be productively understood as an attempt to think through the precarious construction of English identity right at a time when English identity was anything but fixed.

For a long time, critical work on Shakespeare and religion was focused on discerning what Shakespeare believed—on attempts, in Cyndia Susan Clegg's words, to "discover . . . authorial theological leanings" (599). Much early work on Shakespeare and religion seems to have been written under the assumption of what Herbert Butterfield labelled a "Whig interpretation of history" (111), a view of the past in which "some such line as that which leads through Martin Luther and a long succession of whigs to modern liberty" (12) has dominated our understanding. Because he is thought to be *the* great English poet, there has been a default assumption that Shakespeare's work is to be understood as being wrapped up in a narrative of emerging

enlightenment in which Shakespeare and his contemporaries could be understood as part of a slow march away from the medieval superstitions of Catholicism and towards an implicitly Protestant version of enlightenment. Seen this way, Shakespeare's work was that of a writer who embraced the Protestant ideas of his contemporaries.<sup>2</sup> While much work on Shakespeare has proceeded from this assumption that he embraced the Protestant leanings of the Reformation, others have argued that Shakespeare is best understood as something of a Catholic or at the very least a Catholic sympathizer who, while perhaps maintaining the outward conformity required by Elizabeth I, was nonetheless working from and towards a Catholic perspective. In support of this argument, critics have turned to everything from details about Shakespeare's family to textual evidence in the plays themselves, some of it quite scant, to say the least.

As Alison Shell reminds us, therefore, speculation about Shakespeare's religious views remains a common topic "both inside and outside the academy" (*Shakespeare and Religion* 80), and it has been very common in recent years to see arguments about Shakespeare's supposed religious leanings in the critical literature. However, while such arguments remain common, there are also a growing number of critics have turned away from attempting to tease out what Shakespeare himself believed and towards thinking through how Shakespeare staged religion and religious "others" for an audience for whom religion was, as David Scott Kastan observes, "an essential, if often perplexing dimension of . . . identity" (8). For Kastan, the question of what Shakespeare believed is both unanswerable and unimportant. It is unanswerable because we simply do not have any convincing evidence one way or another as to what Shakespeare himself believed. It is unimportant because Shakespeare is best understood as a playwright

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<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed treatment of critical debates about whether Shakespeare was a Protestant or a Catholic see David Scott Kastan's *A Will to Believe*, esp. 15-48.

who made his living, not by telling others what he believed, but by engaging their beliefs in drama.

This shift in focus in recent work on Shakespeare and religion has called for a pivot away from attempts to claim Shakespeare for one confessional tradition or another and towards seeing Shakespeare as a producer of popular entertainments for an audience for whom a complex, often paradoxical, web of religious beliefs was central—what Clegg has dubbed “the imaginative ways” (610) in which Shakespeare addressed the complexity and centrality of religion in the period. In the process, Shakespeare has come to be viewed more and more as a popular playwright rooted in his times and writing for an audience for whom, in Kevin Sharpe’s words, “Religion was not just about doctrine, liturgy or ecclesiastical government; it was a language, and aesthetic, a structuring of meaning, and identity, a politics” (12). In other words, thinking through the role religion plays in Shakespeare has revealed how much Shakespeare was a savvy writer who understood that religion was important to his audience and who accordingly employed common religious stereotypes and hotly-debated issues in his work. This shift in focus towards seeing Shakespeare as an artist in a cultural milieu instead of a partisan apologist allows us to focus on Shakespeare’s navigation of ongoing contexts among ideologies in his contemporary world.

This last point is particularly important to the present study. My aim in this study is to expand upon the “imaginative ways” critics have developed for reading Shakespeare and religion in recent years. When we free ourselves from attempting to detect in Shakespeare his own beliefs, we free ourselves to read Shakespeare as negotiating larger questions about the nature and role of religion in his world. Characters like Joan, Aaron, and Shylock accordingly become more than props conjured up in the service of advancing religious polemic, and they

are neither secret nor overt markers of Shakespeare's own beliefs. Rather, such characters can be better understood as critical engagements on the part of Shakespeare with the role the Catholic, the Moor, and the Jew played in the early modern English imagination. Moreover, as I argue in this dissertation, this realization prepares us to understand how Shakespeare crafts Joan, Aaron, and Shylock as instances of the threatening religious other as queer in the broad sense of that term as it is used in queer theory today.

### **What's So Queer About Religion in Shakespeare?**

Critics have in recent years, then, suggested that Shakespeare's use of religion in his plays has far less to do with his own beliefs than it does with meeting the needs of his audiences. Building on this stance, I want to suggest that we see Shakespeare's Joan, Aaron, and Shylock as queer characters through whom Shakespeare addresses reproductive anxiety and the fragility of English identity in Shakespeare's England. In doing so I want to suggest we read these characters not as some of Shakespeare's lesser creations—characters that lack the subtlety, complexity, or humanity of those that would follow them—but rather as complicated responses to the pressing questions of what it means to be English and a coherent, reproducible English self at a precarious moment in English history.

By the time Shakespeare started writing for the theater, England had enjoyed relative peace and prosperity under the reign of Elizabeth I. Where the decades prior to her taking the throne had been turbulent as the country lurched back and forth between Protestantism and Catholicism under the reigns of Elizabeth's father, Henry VIII, and her half-siblings Edward VI and Mary I, social order became relatively stabilized under Elizabeth. As A.G. Dickens notes, among Elizabeth's earliest acts as queen was the Elizabethan Religious Settlement that was

comprised of two separate acts passed in 1558 and 1559. While on the surface the two acts that comprised the settlement—the Act of Supremacy of 1558 and the Act of Uniformity of 1559—restored the nation to Protestantism following the Catholic reign of Mary I, what Elizabeth had in mind was a far cry from the hard-line Protestantism of Edward VI. Elizabeth famously adopted a policy of outward conformity that, while requiring attendance and participation in services in accordance with the Book of Common Prayer called for by the Act of Uniformity, also essentially allowed for the continued private religious practice of Catholics in the realm. Moreover, while this policy of outward conformity was tested from time to time as Elizabeth and England continued to have a turbulent relationship with the Pope and with Rome, it was enough to calm stormy waters at home most of the time.

While Elizabeth is still famous for her moderate views on religion, she also proved a successful monarch in other areas. While she perhaps never lived up to the fanfare of her coronation in 1559, Elizabeth was a capable steward of foreign-policy and economic policy, especially in the first thirty years her reign. As R.B. Outhwaite has noted, under Elizabeth, the spiraling debt that had been such a part of Henry VIII's England was brought under control, expanding by little more than £3,000 per year. Further, Elizabeth managed to maintain the security of England in the face of hostile powers foreign powers, something famously associated with her speech to the troops at Tilbury before turning away the Spanish Armada in 1588. To observe that Elizabeth was a successful and popular monarch is not to say life in England under Elizabeth was idyllic, but it was certainly better than it had been in the years preceding her, something that, as Roy Strong has argued, was captured in the various portraits done of Elizabeth during her lifetime.

By the time Shakespeare began to work in the theater, it was clear that the relative peace

and prosperity that marked the early parts of the reign of Elizabeth I would not last. Despite her early successes built on the foundation of moderate governance, by the time Shakespeare arrived in London somewhere around 1590, Elizabeth's popularity had begun to wane. While there were, as Christopher Haigh notes in his *Elizabeth I*, a number of reasons for the turn in Elizabeth's fortunes, key among them was the growing realization that Elizabeth was by 1590 long past the age where she might bear children and was, therefore, lacking an heir. As Susan Frey has argued, the fact that Elizabeth was an older, unmarried woman did not sit well with her contemporaries, and anxiety about this fact seems to have provided a catalyst for the diminishing of her reputation. Elizabeth was to be the last in a line of monarchs who had ruled England for more than a century. Moreover, while monarchical succession was a normal and natural part of English life and politics, and while the mounting problems faced at home and abroad may have made some hunger for a change, the question of who would succeed Elizabeth was a particularly charged one.

The charged nature of the questions surrounding Elizabeth's succession also had a religious connection: starting with Elizabeth's ascension to the throne in 1558, the rhetoric of Englishness was, as Daniel Swift has recently argued in his analysis of Shakespeare's use of the *Book of Common Prayer*, increasingly tied up with the articulation of a proto-Anglican protestant ideology. While Elizabeth had made affordances for those who still wished to practice the old faith, the emerging sense of national identity in the period was focused on Protestant ideology. The growing centrality of Protestantism to English identity was so pronounced that, according to Swift, it became the very stuff out of which Shakespeare and his contemporaries formed their poetry and plays. Under Elizabeth, England had begun to foster a seemingly stable Protestant identity, and the prospect of her death revealed just how tenuous this project was.

With, as William Allen notes, no less than 11 viable possible heirs to the throne, at least two of whom were Catholic and were seen to be hostile to England, the possibility that the England of Elizabeth would not be able to reproduce itself under the rule of the next monarch was a very real one.

The fears about who would succeed Elizabeth were exacerbated by a number of threats, and, more pointedly, threats tied to religious “others.” The most pointed of these were the threats posed by hostile Catholic nations on the continent and those posed by the specter of the Ottoman Empire. As historian Paul E.J. Hammer has noted, there was profound unrest in the 1590s that Elizabeth’s failure to produce an heir or even name a successor would leave England vulnerable to foreign aggressions (9-10). Following both the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre of 1572 and the attempted invasion of the Spanish Armada in 1588, there was a preoccupation in England with the fear that Catholic powers on the continent were militating against England. Further, the attempted invasion of Europe by the Ottoman Empire that was fended off by the Holy League at the battle of Lepanto in 1571 was a reminder that there were other faiths to fear beyond the Catholic, seeing as there was a different religious other at the edge of the known world always waiting to strike. A strong leader, Elizabeth I had provided some sense of bulwark against such threats, but that bulwark was close to breaking.

The external threats of the 1570s and 1580s were joined and exacerbated by internal tensions in England near the end of the 16th century. After a half-century of relative stability, there was a fear that England might once again descend into the kind of civil unrest that had marked the middle part of the century or, even worse, into the kind of infighting that had led to and persisted through the Wars of the Roses (ca. 1455-87). Following the death of Henry VIII and his “third-way” approach to religion and politics in England, Tudor monarchs had embraced

first a hard-line Protestantism during the reign of Edward VI, then an equally hard line Catholicism during the reign of Mary, and finally a return to Protestantism with Elizabeth. More than minor shifts in policy, the movements between Protestantism and Catholicism brought with them real-world consequences, not the least of which were, as Brad Gregory and Anne Dillon remind us, the more than 4,000 people who were burned at the stake for heresy in the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. Yet even this carnage was viewed as paling in comparison to the havoc that had been wreaked upon the nation during the Wars of the Roses, the death and destruction that had only been forestalled by the establishment of the very line of succession that was about to come to an end.

If these fears were not enough on their own, there was also a persistent fear that there were those in England who were actively working to bring about England's destruction. There are, of course, obvious examples like the attempted rebellion by the Earl of Essex. However, even more troubling, as I will argue in the chapters that follow this introduction, were the persistent fears about the shape-shifting ability of Catholic priests and even fears that *conversos*—the descendants of those who had converted from Judaism to Christianity either voluntarily or under threat of force following the expulsion of the Jews from England—remained secret Jews, a fear exacerbated by the infamous Roderigo Lopez incident of 1594 in which Lopez, a physician to the queen and a *converso*, was implicated in a murder plot. In short, Shakespeare and his contemporaries were living in a period when the reproduction of the English state was anything but assured. The threat of uncertain succession, given all that was wrapped up in it, was accordingly a threat to English identity itself. And, given the extent to which the English nation had been tied up in Protestant ideology under Elizabeth, it is perhaps no surprise that the threats to English identity so often came in the form of Catholics, Moors, and

Jews.

Adding to the anxiety created by Elizabeth's uncertain succession was the fact that England was going through a period of transition away from what Benedict Anderson has called a "dynastic realm" (19) and towards a more modern nation State. As Anderson notes, England had long been defined from the center out, and the identity of the nation was accordingly wrapped up in the figure of the monarch and the identification of additional centers of English life and culture. Things had begun to change by the time Shakespeare was writing, and increasingly England's sense of self was tied up, as Jonathan Baldo notes, in the definition of borders and the demarcation between self and other. At the same time that Elizabeth was declining in stature and slowly moving towards her eventual death, the nation was developing new ways to understand itself that would not be so heavily reliant on the queen. Together this fear of Elizabeth's death and what it could mean for the increasingly Protestant nation's ability to reproduce itself within clear borders led to the kinds of anxiety that I believe that Shakespeare was addressing in his creation of queer religious others.

It is into this milieu that Shakespeare emerges and in which he writes the characters of Joan, Aaron, and Shylock, and hence it is in this context in which we can understand Shakespeare's crafting of each of these characters as queer. An artist acutely aware of the anxieties of his age, Shakespeare fashions religious others that serve as antagonists in several of his early plays specifically as figures that disturb or threaten reproduction. This connection will be clear if we briefly consider that (1) each of the three plays I am discussing here are haunted by the same kinds of questions about succession and reproduction that plagued Shakespeare's world, (2) each of the plays attempts to deal with this problem by locating deviant desire to disrupt this reproduction onto representatives of the same religious traditions that were feared by

Shakespeare's contemporaries, and (3) Shakespeare consequently employs his plays as a way to deal with, albeit temporarily, the reproductive anxiety of his world.

After all, *I Henry VI*, *Titus Andronicus*, and *The Merchant of Venice* all deal with questions about the uncertainty of succession and reproduction. The centrality of reproduction in these plays is most apparent in *I Henry VI* and *Titus Andronicus*, as both plays begin after an imperial ruler has died, and both plays dramatize how the death of a ruler can lead to chaos. While the succession-reproduction link is a little less obvious in *The Merchant of Venice*, perhaps because, as the 1590s proceeded, it became more difficult to talk about such things openly, the action of the plot is still driven by the death of Portia's father and the extent to which that death puts the world of the play in a precarious position.

In each of the plays, the fears about uncertain succession and reproduction are also driven and exacerbated by the presence of ostensibly deviant religious others. Joan desires the destruction of England, Aaron the destruction of Rome (a frequent stand-in for England on the Elizabethan stage), and Shylock seemingly longs for the death of Christianity itself. Drawing on familiar stereotypes about the Catholic, the Moor, and the Jew in England, Shakespeare makes these characters manifestations of the fear that percolated throughout his home country. More than religious others, they come to figure what we might call the queer. In pursuing their agendas, their desires for unholy power, polymorphous perversity, and reproduction through usury, these characters stand in opposition to what was thought to be healthy reproduction. Moreover, in crafting these religious others as queer, Shakespeare provides an avenue for his audience to work through their fears in ways that create a "them" through which an "us" can be defined at a time when English identity was extraordinarily frail.

It is also important to note that, while Shakespeare is drawing on the rhetoric of the

period in his construction of queer religious others who can be sacrificed in service to shoring up identity and reproduction at a time when such things are uncertain, he is also suggesting that such a process never really produces the stability that is desired. To see this irony, we need only consider the censure to which Shakespeare subjects Joan, Aaron, and Shylock. In each case, the punishment heaped upon the characters is something that will ultimately be ineffectual. As recent history would have taught Shakespeare and his contemporaries, burning one Catholic did not prevent the appearance of others, censuring the body of one Moor did little to silence others, and forcing one Jew to convert did little to deal with the issue of *conversos*. In other words, in reading Shakespeare's religious others as queers, we see not only Shakespeare shoring up identity but also revealing that the very grounds on which this is done form only stages in a process of infinite deferral.

Reading Shakespeare's Joan, Aaron, and Shylock in the ways I am suggesting here has at least three benefits for us. First, it resuscitates our understandings of characters who have all too often been dismissed or too simply explained. As I discuss in my treatment of Joan, Aaron, and Shylock in the body of this dissertation, each of these characters has proved troubling for critics. Both Joan and Aaron have consistently been viewed as lesser creations that are the products of a playwright not yet come into his full power. Shylock, meanwhile, is often glossed, not as he is in Shakespeare, but as we wish him to be. When we read these characters as queer, much of the criticism and misunderstanding that has been gathered around them can be pushed aside. These are not deficient characters; they are thoughtful engagements with the role religious others plays in the imagination of Shakespeare and his contemporaries that casted the religious other as queer in the process of identity formation.

Second, reading Shakespeare's religious others as queer extends an ongoing rethinking

of Shakespeare that recognizes the extent to which Shakespeare is not a transcendent mouthpiece for all humanity but rather an artist writing for his supper at a particular place in a particular time. Recognizing the extent to which Shakespeare casts religious others as queer also pushes us to recognize that Shakespeare's plays are doing very real and specific cultural work. In other words, reading Shakespeare's Joan, Aaron, and Shylock as queer reminds us that we cannot, as we so often do, decontextualize Shakespeare and his work since doing so is precisely what makes certain characters and plays seem deficient. Instead, we must recognize that Shakespeare writes and produces his plays at a very particular time and place and that we must bear this in mind if we are to read the work of Shakespeare himself and not of the various Shakespeare's that we might imagine.

Finally, approaching Shakespeare's religious others in *1 Henry VI*, *Titus Andronicus*, and *The Merchant of Venice* can tell us something about ourselves. At the same time that reading Shakespeare's religious others as queer encourages a return to the particulars of Shakespeare's world and a careful attendance to the cultural work his plays are doing, it also can spur us on to rethink our world. Shakespeare provides a model for understanding how the way we imagine religious others often has less to do with reality than it does with the need to shore up our fragile sense of identity at the moments that we feel the most vulnerable. In the process of all this, we can see the extent to which we continue to owe a debt to Shakespeare. He is not merely someone forwarding unresolved issues to modern ideologies, but rather the author of a body of work that underlies so much of what we still do and think.

### **Overview of the Following Chapters**

In chapter 1, I will explore Shakespeare's representation of Catholics with a particular

focus on Joan La Pucelle in *I Henry VI*. Where Joan has traditionally been read as a relatively ham-fisted attempt to deal with anti-Catholic sentiment in the period, I will suggest that Joan is better read as an adept engagement on the part of Shakespeare with the Catholic as queer. At the outset of the play, the untimely death of Henry V has left England in a vulnerable state. Where Henry V had heroically and victoriously tamed his French enemies, his death placed a young and ineffectual king on the throne and invited the ensuing struggle for power as successors fought amongst themselves. Amidst this struggle for succession, something Shakespeare's England potentially faced in the near future, Joan La Pucelle was seen, in English eyes, as rising to prominence and power and threatening to conquer England in the name of what Shakespeare represents in *I Henry VI* as a grossly disordered—Catholic—France. Thus, as England is working towards a cohesive identity, a project primarily located in Protestant religious doctrine and practice, this very project is relentlessly under assault by Joan's queer desires.

In chapter 2, I will turn my attention towards Aaron the Moor in *Titus Andronicus*. Like Joan, Aaron has most often been read as a defective character, the attempt of a still young playwright to deal with issues that he would better address in later plays. However, rather than see Aaron as a deficient draft of Iago, I suggest instead that he is better read as Shakespeare's portrayal of the Moor as queer. In *Titus Andronicus*, the newly returned Titus turns down the crowd calling for his investment as emperor of Rome, thereby setting up a contested discussion and, eventually, the disastrous ascension of Saturninus. At a time when strong leadership was required, Titus has abdicated the throne and left Rome, a common cipher for England in Elizabethan drama, leaving Britain vulnerable to a Moorish threat that would have called to the mind of Shakespeare's audience the 1571 Battle of Lepanto in which a Moorish invasion of Western Europe was only narrowly avoided. In

abdicated, Titus has allowed Aaron, a caricature of the lascivious Moor, to rape, pillage, and even cuckold the empire. Here, as was the case with Joan, Shakespeare stages a religious other as queer whose deviant desires oppose the potential for the state to reproduce itself.

Finally, in chapter 3, I will turn my attention towards Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*. Shylock has received far more critical attention than either Joan or Aaron, but he still presents a number of problems for critics. I will suggest that we can expand the best work on Shylock by considering him a representation of the Jew as queer. At the outset of the play, Portia's father has passed away and has left her succession up to the casket game, a reflection of the growing likelihood that succession would not be established before Elizabeth's death. While Bassanio correctly selects the lead casket, seemingly ensuring a safe succession, this process is interrupted by Shylock's desire for the reproduction of usury that was connected in the 1590s with the stereotypical Jew, and we see in this play a fear that this kind of reproduction will ultimately supersede the properly ordered reproduction of the household of Portia's father.

## Chapter I:

### *Joan La Pucelle, the Catholic Queer*

*I Henry VI* is the Shakespeare play for which many Shakespeareans seem to want to apologize. Likely written sometime in the wake of the failed invasion of the Spanish Armada in 1588 and first performed in 1591, *I Henry VI* is a history play that recounts the English struggle against French armies lead by Joan La Pucelle—Joan of Arc—and the dawn of the War of the Roses. As critics have been quick to point out, the play has a very different feel than many later plays by Shakespeare and is decidedly less polished than the more famous history plays covering the reigns of Henry IV and Henry V that would follow.

The rough and uneven nature of the play is perhaps best glimpsed if we consider the character of Joan. From the outset of the play, Joan is very clearly an antagonist to the valiant English hero Talbot. However, even as Joan is generally treated as a worthy enemy early in the play—she is, as Gabrielle Bernhard Jackson notes, the embodiment of the largely positive stage figure of the *virago*—in act 5 this status changes dramatically. Here Joan ceases to be merely a martial foe and morphs into a witch in league with demons hell-bent on the destruction of the English nation. In the process, the once strong and single-minded Joan is revealed to be a

deceptive *whore* all-too-willing to do anything—to tell any lie—to hold on to life and her chance to regain lost power.

This shift in Joan's character has long been a point of concern for critics of the play. Traditionally, it has been cited as evidence that the play suffers from a crippling lack of coherence, evidence that Shakespeare and his collaborators lost focus and failed to create a character that was consistent or believable. For many critics the unevenness of the play, especially that of its central antagonist Joan, is evidence that the play is, to put it plainly, bad. More recently, however, critics including Gabriel Jackson have argued that this desire for unity of character might be out of place in a play like *I Henry VI*. To judge the play as bad because Joan does not meet modern standards of characterization and consistency, critics have argued, is to misunderstand what Shakespeare and his audience were looking for. Rather than read this way, suggests Jackson, we would be wise to read Joan "topically," as consistent with her immediate surroundings and the action of any given moment. In this chapter, I will follow the lead of critics like Jackson and suggest that the seeming inconsistencies in Joan's character, and the play at large, are not unintended consequences of a poorly written play. Joan is not a poorly written character, but one that embodies the complex role that Catholics played in the English imagination at the end of the sixteenth century—a role that, as I will argue, sees Catholics as what modern critical theorists have come to call "queer."

In what follows I will lay out this argument by (1) reviewing in more depth the critical puzzle that Joan La Pucelle has posed for critics during the past 400 years, (2) exploring the complex role the Catholic played in the English imagination at the time Shakespeare was writing

*I Henry VI*, (3) arguing that the image of the Catholic upon which Shakespeare was drawing in writing his play was that of the Catholic as queer, and (4) rereading Joan specifically as an instance of the Catholic as queer.

### **The Problem with Joan**

Shakespeare's treatment of Joan La Pucelle in his *I Henry VI* has always presented something of a critical puzzle. In the first four acts of the play, Joan is, as James J. Paxson observes, characterized by her "military prowess, her cunning, and her single-mindedness as she aids the Dauphin Charles against the invading English" (149). Joan is from the outset a character marked as much by her grounded humility as she is by her martial ability. Moreover, despite being the subject of some rhetorical invective from the heroic Talbot, Joan is generally portrayed as, as Gabriel Bernhard Jackson has observed, a *virago*—as a powerful female warrior and a largely positive figure on the Elizabethan stage. In this light, Joan is variously called the following in the first four acts of the play: a "Sibyl, an Amazon, Deborah, Helen the mother of Constantine, and Astrea's daughter to the French, Hecate and Circe to the English" (48). The bulk of these associations are, as Jackson notes, "neutral or positive" ones (51). This is especially true of the labeling of Joan as an Amazon, a popular figure in dramas in the early 1590s that Jackson observes is usually either "neutral or positive" (51) and one that Jackson reminds us was linked by Edmund Spenser to Elizabeth I in his *Faerie Queene*.

However, all of this very quickly changes in 5.3 when Joan's prowess is revealed to be the result of a pact with fiends "cull'd / out of the powerful regions under earth" (5.3.10-11). After consorting with demons, Joan undoes almost everything she has been throughout the play

as she seemingly disowns her father and then claims the benefit of “belly,” desperately suggesting any number of sexual liaisons along the way. This presentation is, to be blunt, incredibly uneven, and leads to what Gabriele Jackson has described as “a coarse caricature, an exemplar of authorial chauvinism both national and sexual, or at best a foil to set off the chivalric English heroes of *I Henry VI*” (40). What is more, as Patrick Ryan has noted, this caricatured version of an often-represented literary figure in the period is unique to Shakespeare. In act 5, Joan abruptly ceases to be a martial foe and morphs into, as Patrick Ryan has observed, “a whorish witch and conjuror, exaggerating even the English chroniclers’ calumnies against her” (56). In the process, the once strong and single-minded Joan is revealed to be a deceptive trollop all too willing to do anything—to tell any lie—to hold on to life and her chance to regain lost power. Joan is, as Bernard Shaw remarks, a “beautiful and romantic figure,” who eventually devolves into a “sorcerer and a harlot” (286), or, as Leah S. Marcus puts it, “an impossible pastiche of laudable and despicable traits” (52).

This shift in Joan’s character, and the “impossible pastiche” that results from it has long been a point of critical interest. “Why?” critics have wondered, does Shakespeare create such a unique and uneven character? The seeming default response of the critical tradition is effectively summed up by M.L. Stapleton:

Critics have long been horrified by young Shakespeare's Joan of Arc in *I Henry VI*, no doubt preferring Shaw's Saint Joan (or the misty eyes of Ingrid Bergman) as the more "faithful" likeness of the historical person. They have disdained Shakespeare's spirited denigration of the French saint into Joan la Pucelle, "witch, 'dame,' strumpet, and trull," part of "an ageless antifeminist tradition," and have

scolded the playwright for bad verse. They hoped that she was not Shakespeare's creation at all, but the work of hack collaborators. (229)

Here Stapleton effectively captures the dislike, even disdain, in the critical tradition of *I Henry VI* for what Shakespeare has done with Joan. My aim in what follows is to track both the critical animosity for the play describe by Stapleton and to examine a turn in the treatment of the play beginning subtly in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and gaining steam in the last thirty years, within which the seeming deficiency of Joan, and *I Henry VI* more broadly, has been rethought by a range of critics.<sup>1</sup> In doing so, I hope to lay the groundwork necessary for seeing Joan as a figure of the Catholic as queer.ng

As Jean E. Howard has noted in her excellent introduction to the play in the *Norton Shakespeare*, the critical history of *I Henry VI* and of Joan stretches back to contemporary responses to the play, especially one by Thomas Nashe. For Nashe, *I Henry VI* was a celebration of English virtues that coalesced on stage in the figure of Talbot:

How would it have joyed brave Talbot (the terror of the French) to think that after he had lain two hundred years in his tomb, he should triumph again on the stage, and have his bones new embalmed with the tears of ten thousand spectators at least (at several times), who, in the Tragedian that represents his person, imagine they behold him fresh bleeding?  
(30)

As Howard notes, Nashe's laudatory comments, "part of Nashe's extended defense of stage plays," help to make a case for the play's popularity during the early 1590s. There is simply no

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<sup>1</sup> The critical history I am scoping out here is deeply indebted to the work of other recent critics on the play, including excellent work by Patrick Ryan, Albert Tricomi, and Gabrielle Bernhard Jackson. Patrick Ryan's review of the reception of *I Henry VI* in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was of particular value to my study.

evidence, in this first instance of criticism on the play, that Shakespeare's audience had objected to *I Henry VI* or had noticed the issues with Joan that would so vex later critics.

While *I Henry VI*, and with it Joan, seemed to have met with initial critical praise, affection for the play was blunted by the ensuing centuries. When the modern critical history of the play resumes somewhere around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there is no inkling of Nashe's celebration. Critics such as H.B. Charlton and John Dover Wilson lambast the play, in fact. For Charlton, *I Henry VI* was part of a trio of plays on the reign of the ill-fated ruler with "no dramatic form . . . no dominant interest, recognizable as dramatic interest, to hold the audience" (8). For Wilson *I Henry VI* is more simply "one of the worst plays in the canon" (ix). Moreover, this criticism of the play at large certainly carries over into criticism of Joan. We can see just that in a critique by Arthur Quiller-Couch, who, while generally celebrating the work of Shakespeare, expresses his wish that Shakespeare had "had no hand in the slanderous portrait of Joan of Arc sent down to us under his name" (v).

Much of the early criticism on the play and on Joan has thus been overtly negative, but a slightly more muted tone was struck in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While critics like E.M.W. Tillyard and David Bevington still regarded the play as among Shakespeare's lesser works—the result of too much youth and, perhaps, too many hands—they do not reject it as vociferously as many had before them. For these critics, *I Henry VI* was best understood as a product of its time, an example of, as Robert B. Pierce observed in 1971, "Shakespeare . . . seiz[ing] on the most immediately meaningful part of England's history and turn[ing] it into a great pageant on the moral causes and consequences of political disorder" (35). The treatment of Joan seems to have softened in this context since Tillyard seems to recognize that she may have been designed

intentionally to serve a specific role in a morality “pageant” rather than being merely the result of bad writing.

This move to re-situate *I Henry VI* and Joan in its early modern contexts in the middle part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century marked a significant turning point in the critical history. While the play and Joan’s character were still all too often overlooked in favor of later plays in Shakespeare’s corpus, there was at least a willingness to consider them as products of a particular historical period and thus not entirely deficient. This critical openness would exfoliate in the 1980s. While early critics had argued that *I Henry VI* and Joan were deficient creations, the rise of feminist criticism in the 1980s rethought this assumption. Perhaps the earliest example is the work of Coppelia Kahn. For Kahn, Joan reflects uneasiness about female rule during the waning years of the reign of Elizabeth I. Albert Tricomi sums up Kahn’s approach to Joan, noting that she was for Kahn a “virgin prophetess, mannish amazon, and seductive courtesan” in ways that make “Joan . . . a composite of the ways women are dangerous to men” (7). In other words, while Joan may seem to be inconsistent, this inconsistency can be resolved if we recognize that what is really happening is the staging of a widespread male anxiety that requires a caricature of the irrational and inconsistent female.

Following Kahn, Gabriele Bernhard Jackson has suggested that Joan was crafted to respond to a wide array of contemporary issues running the gamut from gender to religion to English politics, so much so that we should not expect to produce a unified character. Jackson even suggests that we forego the desire to find a unified character in Joan—something she and others identify with a modern critical concern and not something that would have been of interest to Shakespeare and his contemporaries—and accept instead that her character is best understood as a shifting response to the widespread fascination with witches and amazons in the period.

The pioneering work of Kahn and Jackson has been echoed by a bevy of critics in the 1990s that include Barbara Hodgson, Phyllis Rackin, Jean Howard, Leah S. Marcus and Nina Levine. For Hodgson, Rackin, and Howard, Joan is best understood as subversive and an attempt to undermine patriarchal authority. For Marcus and Levine, Joan is a pointed look at the role the female dominance of Elizabeth I played in English imaginations of the time. In all of these readings, Joan, in the words of Marcus, “airs a wide range of anxious fantasies which had eddied about the English queen in the years leading up to the Armada victory and in the Armada year itself, fantasies which could be allowed to surface only after the worst of the Catholic threat had receded” (66-67).

The trend to see *I Henry VI* and Joan as reflecting the concerns of Shakespeare and his contemporaries—of being the work of an artist responding to the desires and anxieties of his world—has since been expanded by critics who have argued that we should understand the seeming deficiencies that have troubled earlier critics as the thoughtful engagement in the play with artistic and religious concerns. The former position has been staked out by both M.L. Stapleton and James J. Paxson. Stapleton argues that *I Henry VI* and Joan clearly demonstrate Shakespeare’s engagement with the very popular chronicles of Hollinshed as well as the immensely popular “plays of Seneca and their rendition into English by John Studley, Jasper Heywood, Alexander Neville, and (editor) Thomas Newton” (230). In a similar vein, Paxson notes that *I Henry VI*, and more pointedly the very complex figure of Joan, are “the most direct and literal markers of residual medievalism” (128) in Shakespeare’s work and indicative of how much “the First Tetralogy draws most heavily on medieval dramatic and cultural models” (128).

Adding to this critical call to see Joan in light of Shakespeare’s contemporary cultures has been work suggesting we might also read Joan as responding to religious issues in the period

as well. As Richard Hillman has argued, Joan recalls several works in the period rooted in anti-Catholic and anti-French rhetoric. Accordingly, as Albert Tricomi observes, Joan more than likely stirred up in contemporary audiences a strange admixture of fear of Catholic threats and nostalgia for England's Catholic past. Ruben Espinosa expands on this interest in Joan as a religious figure, arguing that Joan is best understood as a fundamentally Marian character -- as a figure of the Virgin Mary that was so central to medieval Catholicism but that had fallen into disfavor in post-Reformation England -- that would have been threatening to English audiences (52). In the process, Espinosa links the paired rhetorics of fear of females and fear of Catholics that, as both Patrick Ryan and Francis Dolan have argued, were almost always working together in the period.

Two crucial strains emerge from the critical history of Joan that I have been retracing here. First, while the *I Henry VI* and Joan are often maligned, there has been a gradual shift in their critical reception over the years. The long-standing tendency among critics to malign the play for its roughness and seeming inconsistency—something that, as almost every critic working in the last thirty years has noted, is still the default position—has been increasingly replaced. Second, this growing willingness to reassess *I Henry VI* and Joan, especially during the last thirty years, has been largely rooted in approaches that seek to see play and character as having been produced and enjoyed in a particular context. Like Nashe, who would have seen the play in an Elizabethan theatre among scores of his contemporaries, these critics have been willing to marvel at the work of a popular artist fusing the interests and anxieties of the day—concerns about gender, religion, and the past and future of the nature—into an “impossible pastiche.”

The last thirty years has also laid the foundation for my argument in this chapter, as critics have variously recognized the roles gender, religion, and identity in the play. Where there was once a poorly conceived and executed character in a bad play, there is now a character that embodies concerns about the future of a nation under siege by Catholics. Joan is not inconsistent in any simple way; she is a meditation on the complexity and inherent danger of Catholics as they were perceived by England at the time. In addition, as I will argue in the next section, the role that Catholics play in the English imagination, which in turn serves as the basic stuff out of which Shakespeare fashions Joan, is fundamentally queer in the sense I am using in this study.

### **The Catholic in the English Imagination**

The growing reassessment of Shakespeare's Joan La Pucelle that I have been sketching has increasingly attempted to situate the character in Shakespeare's world: to look at Joan as a character written for late-sixteenth-century audiences. Following this trend, I want to suggest that Shakespeare, ever the canny artist, called on the complex, and I will argue *queer*, a role that Catholics played in the English imagination at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. In order to understand how Shakespeare's Joan La Pucelle in *I Henry VI* might best be understood as the Catholic as queer, we have first to understand both the complex, sometimes even paradoxical, position that Catholics occupied in the English imagination in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, as well as how much this image of Catholics was tied up with fears about the nation's ability to reproduce itself in the late sixteenth century given the uncertain succession (in 1591-92) that might follow Elizabeth I.

Just as several critics, chief among them Alison Shell and Arthur Marotti, have noted, Catholics occupied a unique position in the English imagination in Elizabethan England. At once foreign and familiar—foreign enemies bent on conquering England while at the same time an inextricable of England's past and present—Catholics were popular in Early Modern English

literature and culture long before Shakespeare. In what follows, I aim to tease out this complex, and, as I will argue at the end of this section, “queer,” nature of Catholics in the English imagination at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century by examining (1) the negative portrayals of Catholics figured as a frightening other that filled pages of poetry and prose in Shakespeare’s England, (2) the paradox that this treatment coexisted with the reality that Catholics remained a part of everyday life for English men and women in the period – so much so that this paradox became part of the public rhetoric about them -- and (3) how the complex role played by Catholics in the English imagination can be productively understood as queer.

**Catholics as Other:** As historians and literary critics have long pointed out, Catholics and Catholic nations were often a genuine threat to Shakespeare’s England. From almost the moment Elizabeth had supplanted her Catholic sister Mary on the throne, European powers had been actively working to remedy what they saw as a grievous wrong. Such efforts included attempts on Elizabeth’s life as well as direct military assaults. There were, as Francis Edwards has observed, numerous examples of the former with the best examples undoubtedly being the attempts in 1583 and 1586—the so-called Throckmorton and Babington plots—to assassinate Elizabeth and replace her on the throne with her Catholic cousin, Mary Queen of Scots. The best example of the later is no doubt the Philip II’s attempted invasion of England by sea in 1588 as part of a 15-year war on England waged by Catholic Spain. Both of these events would have been fresh in the memory of Shakespeare’s audiences. Such events were all the more powerful given how they echoed violent events connected with Catholics in western Europe. Perhaps largest in the English imagination was the 1572 Saint Bartholomew’s Day massacre in France, something witnessed by Sir Philip Sidney, Sir Walter Raleigh, and Sir Francis Walsingham and

immortalized in the work of Thomas Kyd.<sup>2</sup> This event had brought to a head religious tensions that had been bubbling below the surface for almost a half century in western Europe. Just over a decade later, the tenuousness of religious harmony in the period was strained again with the 1584 assassination of William of Orange in the Netherlands.

Added to these more overt threats was the fear that Catholics were secretly attempting to overthrow protestant England and raise up a Catholic nation in its place. As Arthur Marotti has observed, there was a pervasive fear that priests, and more specifically Jesuits, were entering England under cover of darkness. Once in England, these priests would rally loyalists who, as Marotti reminds us, were sometimes imaged as women, to the Catholic cause. Examples of this anti-Catholic rhetoric centered on women or priests include fictional characters ranging from Spenser's Duessa, as well as Archimago, in Book I of Spenser's *Faerie Queene* to figures from contemporary tracts such as Anthony Mundy's account of Thomas Campion.

Given the genuine threat posed by Catholics and Catholic nations in the period, it should not surprise us that there is no shortage of anti-Catholic imagery in the poetry and prose of Shakespeare's contemporaries. As Alison Shell observes in her germinal *Catholicism, Controversy and the English Literary Imagination, 1558–1660*, Catholics were repeatedly figured as perverse and grotesque in the period. Further, as Francis Dolan has argued, this anti-Catholic imagery was often rooted in familiar tropes like "the Whore of Babylon." Given the ubiquity of anti-Catholic imagery in the literature of the day, we might well turn to any number of contemporary works to glimpse the Catholic as other, although a complete survey of those

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<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed account of Sidney, Raleigh, and Walsingham at the massacre, see Stephen Budiansky's *Her Majesty's Spymaster: Elizabeth I, Sir Francis Walsingham, and the Birth of Modern Espionage*. For a treatment of Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* as a reaction to the massacre, see Frank Ardolino's "'In Paris? Mass, and Well Remembered!': Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* and the English Reaction to the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre."

sources is well beyond the scope of this study. For my purposes, it will be sufficient to consider the popular literary view of Catholics in England near the end of the sixteenth century in some key works and genres that effectively capture this widespread sentiment.

One of the best-known examples of anti-Catholic imagery in the late 16<sup>th</sup> Century comes from Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (the first three books of which were published in 1590, prior to the writing of *I Henry VI*). The anti-Catholic imagery in *The Faerie Queene* that portrays the Catholic as other is pervasive from the beginning of the poem. At the beginning of the Red Crosse Knight's journey in Book I, the Red Crosse Knight encounters two overtly anti-Catholic women as he first forays into Errour's den (I.i.14-26) and then meets Duessa (I.ii.13.3-4). Errour is an image of excess and perversion as well as a grotesque representation of disordered Catholic sexuality. Duessa, who first appears to be beautiful when glimpsed by the Red Crosse Knight but who is quickly revealed to have a Gordian and grotesque lower half, is an embodiment of the view that Catholics are not always so obviously dangerous and has often been read as a representation of Mary, Queen of Scots.<sup>3</sup> While her first appearance is that of a "goodly lady" (I.ii.13.2), Duessa's apparent beauty is, says Fradubio, only a mask that covers over her foul and deviant desires (I.ii.34.7-44.3). The shifty nature of Duessa's body dovetails with another anti-Catholic image Book I, that of Archimago. A "beadsman" with the ability to change his shape, Archimago is, like Duessa, a reminder that Catholics are not to be trusted.

As Alison Shell has compellingly argued, this image of the Catholic as hidden by a "veil of clouded perception" that, when torn down, can "reveal its hideous inside" (29) was also

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<sup>3</sup> On Duessa as a representation of Mary, Queen of Scots, see Richard A. McCabe's "The Masks of Duessa: Spenser, Mary Queen of Scots, and James VI." In this same piece, McCabe notes that Spenser doubled-down on his critique of Mary, Queen of Scots in Book V. While published some 5 years after Shakespeare first staged *I Henry VI*, Book V features a thinly veiled dramatization of Mary's trial that provides further evidence of anti-Catholic rhetoric in the period and which was very quickly banned in Scotland by James VI for this reason.

commonplace in the drama of the period. From Middleton to Webster, the Catholic was the preeminent figure of evil in the work of many Protestant dramatists. The view of the Catholic as strange or perverse so central in the work of Spenser, Middleton, and Webster was also on display in other popular texts of this era. In his "Parasitic Geographies," Julian Yates explores Anthony Munday's account of the capture of the Jesuit Edmund Campion by pursuivants at Lyford Grange in 1581—a figure who, as Arthur Marotti argues in his "Alienating Catholics in Early Modern England," is linked in the early modern English imagination to promoting women to positions of unnatural power in the Catholic church. In the final scene of Munday's account, there is, as Yates notes, "a scene of writing" (80) in which a sign reading "Edmund Campion, the Seditious Jesuit" (80) is hung around Campion's neck by pursuivants charged with transporting him to London to stand trial. This scene of writing, says Yates, betrays a fear that

Campion might simply don a disguise and fade back into the landscape, that he might retreat into another secret hiding-place, or that the real Campion remains at Lyford Grange concealed in some variety of double-blind. (80-81)

In Munday's account, we can see that the threat embodied in Catholics, and here, in the specific Catholic Edmund Campion, was a threat that, despite the obvious evidence of Catholic actions both abroad and at home, was at the same time elusive and part of the landscape of English life. Munday's fear, which was seemingly shared by many English women and men, was that Campion would, like so many other Catholic figures in the period, change shape and disappear seemingly into thin air. What's clear from these examples, and others offered in the work of Shell and Marotti, then, is that the Catholic was often portrayed as a frightening figure by

Shakespeare's contemporaries. Sometimes overtly hideous, but more deceptively compelling, the role of the Catholic in early modern England was often that of a bogeyman.

**Catholics as Part of Everyday Life:** The genuine threats posed by Catholics and Catholic nations notwithstanding, it would be a gross oversimplification to say that Catholics were *simply* bogeymen. As Alison Shell has put it, "one cannot overemphasize the closeness of negative and positive images" of Catholics in early modern English text. In addition to the construct of Catholic as other, there was also a sense that Catholics were treated by English Protestants with what Anthony Milton has described as a "qualified intolerance."<sup>4</sup> For Milton,

anti-Catholic histories have perhaps gone too far: that in seeking to free themselves from anachronistic assumptions of a country divided by rationally minded constitutional principles, historians have ended up generating an image of early modern Englishmen as trapped in a stifling anti-Catholic mentality. (86)

While there was fear of Catholics in early modern England, Catholics were also an important part of early modern English life, and "the starkly polarizing anti-Catholic ideology that recent historians have depicted was only one of the ways in which Catholicism was perceived and understood in the period" (86).

The extent to which Catholics might be productively understood as a common part of everyday life in England has been a topic of significant interest to historians. Following a century of literary and historical criticism in which the anti-Catholic polemic of writers like Spenser, Middleton, and Webster was seen as representative of early modern England as a whole,

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<sup>4</sup> While the primary focus of Anthony Milton's analysis in "A Qualified Intolerance" is early Stuart England, much of his work illuminates late sixteenth-century England as well. In particular, his understanding of England as still tied to its not too distant Catholic past might be even more striking in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century.

historians including Eamon Duffy, Peter Lake, and Christopher Haigh have questioned this received wisdom. As these and other critics have noted, the reality of early modern England, especially the years spanning Shakespeare's life, was far more complicated.

Catholicism was also an essential part of England's present. While the nation had officially been a Protestant nation since Elizabeth took the throne from her sister, Mary, in 1558, there were still a great many English women and men who retained their devotion to the Catholic religion. Elizabeth famously demanded outward compliance with the new state religion when she took the throne, but that express focus on outward compliance, especially when coupled with the relative laxity in the policing of such matters, made it easy during much of her reign for Catholics to continue to practice their faith. These Catholics were neighbors and family members. The qualified intolerance that Milton describes was therefore reflected in the relatively lax policies of Elizabeth I toward Catholics during much of her reign. There were, to be sure, moments of stress between Elizabeth and Catholic subjects. This was particularly true following her excommunication by Pius V in 1570 and, again, following the uncovering of the Throckmorton and Babington plots in 1583 and 1586, as well as the attempted invasion by the Spanish Armada in 1588. However, setting aside these moments, it seems Elizabeth had little desire to police private devotion. During the reign of her sister Mary, Elizabeth had been forced into a kind of outward conformity. Following this period, she seems to have been willing to demonstrate tolerance towards those in a similar situation. Her primary focus was, as she made clear in the 1558 Act of Uniformity, on keeping the outward appearance of conformity, thereby shoring up the ideological identity of the nation outlined in the Book of Common Prayer, which as Claire Dern notes, was aimed at "[offering] a vision of a standardized corporate identity" (186) in the period.

As Anthony Milton has compellingly argued, the extent to which Catholicism was intermixed with English history and life was part of the very fabric of day-to-day existence. The roads that one might walk to get from place to place were the very same that had been trod, and sometimes even laid out so that they could be trod, towards the many public feasts that had been so central to the Catholic calendar. Even the Protestant churches—those spaces that would at first glance seem to be most hostile to memories of the old religion—were in fact places where Catholicism remained evident. As Milton observes, the “many . . . sermons . . . delivered in churches that were still dominated by the images and physical structures of the Catholic past” (104).

Alongside the negative portrayals of Catholics in the work of Spenser, Webster, and others, then, there were a number of portrayals of Catholics, especially by Catholic writers, in early modern England that reflected this banality. The ubiquity of Catholic writing at this time, in fact, has been discussed by Arthur Marotti. As Marotti notes, works by Catholic writers in the period were numerous, and included poetry, dramatic works, emblem literature, and poetic and prose romances (45-46). A number of these authors were both successful in their own day and remain so now for scholars of the sixteenth century, chief among them Howard and Crashaw.

That said, the author whose work perhaps best exemplifies the strange fascination with Catholic writing in early modern England was the Jesuit Robert Southwell. We might expect that Southwell would have enjoyed very much the same fate as his fellow Jesuit Edmund Campion had in 1581, and, in many ways, he did. But in 1592, Southwell was arrested for treason, and, following torture and an extended stay in the tower, was hung at Tyburn in 1595. However, despite, and undoubtedly in part because of, his arrest, imprisonment, and execution, Southwell’s work was extraordinarily popular in the period. As Anne Sweeney notes,

Southwell's works went through numerous editions to satisfy a hungry readership. Further, it's worth bearing in mind that Southwell seems to have had some considerable influence on the work of Shakespeare. While there aren't any direct references to Southwell's work in *I Henry VI*, critics such as Gary M. Bouchard, John Klause, and Christopher Devlin have identified specific allusions to Southwell and his work in *The Merchant of Venice*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Romeo and Juliet*.

Further, as David Scott Kastan has recently observed, the commonness of Catholics and Catholicism in early modern English life that I have been describing is chronicled in the often-times unremarkable portrayal of Catholics and Catholic practices in many of Shakespeare's plays. Of particular interest to Kastan are the portrayals of Catholic clergy in some of Shakespeare's Italian comedies. In Kastan's words, "What . . . seems to me important, and largely unremarked, about [Shakespeare's] handling of Catholic elements is how often they neither display nor hide themselves. They don't seem to need to. They are just there" (50).

**Catholics as Complex – and Thus Queer:** What has hopefully emerged in the preceding pages is the fact that Catholics played a complex, and often paradoxical, role in the early modern English imagination. They were at once the frightening other and a part of the self; they were the abject (in Julia Kristeva's sense) that was cast off of the subject in horror, yet that was at the same time inextricable and thus never fully distant; and that which is both rejected by and disturbs the social order because it was once, and still remains in a limited way, a part of the subject. The abject is, says Kristeva, that which was once a part of me but also "what disturbs identity, system, order, that which does not respect borders, positions, rules" and which is accordingly "death affecting life" (4). There are a number of avenues that we might take to

understand such a complex understanding of Catholics in the period, but I want to suggest that the role the Catholic played in the imagination of Shakespeare's England is best understood as queer. More specifically, I want to explore the Catholic in terms of Lee Edelman's notion of queerness.

In his *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Edelman argues that the queer occupies the place of the death drive: that which is a threat to what he calls "reproductive futurity" and, paradoxically, something necessary or essential at the very same time. Expanding on this paradox in his "Against Survival: Queerness in a Time That's Out of Joint," Edelman remarks that "the position of the queer" is that of "those abjected as non-reproductive, anti-social, opposed to viability, and so as threats to the child who assures and embodies collective survival" (148). In other words, the queer is marked by sexually deviant desire that resists the social order so as to disrupt ordered reproduction but does so in ways that reveal the queer is nonetheless essential to the social fabric. The role of the Catholic in the early modern English imagination that I have been sketching out above fits surprisingly well with Edelman's notion of the queer as an articulation of a complex otherness.

In the first place, the queer is sexually deviant. For Edelman, and for many other queer theorists, the queer is by nature sexually deviant because of a desire for non-reproductive sexual gratification, which may not be confined to strict homosexuality. To be queer is to, at least in part, desire sexual gratification through activities that cannot lead to reproduction and subsequently through sexual activities that, were they to be taken on by a significant portion of the population, would lead to a frustration not merely of the reproduction of the individual but also of the culture or species at large. As Edelman himself puts it, "queerness names the side of those not 'fighting for the children'" (3) and the side embracing "sterile, narcissistic enjoyments

understood as inherently destructive of meaning and therefore as responsible for the undoing of social organization, nation, collective reality, and, inevitably, life itself” (13).

The focus on the disordered nature of Catholic sexuality in the early modern English imagination is clearly predicated on a similar set of concerns. Like the queers of Edelman’s own study, the Catholics of the early modern period were seen to be, as Francis Dolan has convincingly argued, engaged in disordered sexual practices that threatened to disrupt the logic of reproductive futurity. Catholics were often figured as simultaneously powerful and corrupt figures who, unlike Elizabeth (who was careful to drive a wedge between her womanly and kingly bodies), used their sexuality to ensnare and control. Also unlike the chaste figuration of the Protestant woman that was a mainstay of English writing about Protestants (one need look no further than Spenser’s *Una* for an example), Catholic women were the kind who fit a negative stereotype of women in the period that, as Natalie Zemon Davis has noted, saw women as both irrational and insatiable. Unfettered by the kind of control that proper Protestant women were subject to, Catholic women were the worst possible kind of women—women that, in Davis’ words, were “the lustier sex” (138) and, when “not amply feed by sexual intercourse” (124), were prone to seek out gratification wherever it might be found.

The queer perversity of Catholic women in the English imagination can easily be seen by once again turning to Spenser’s most famously Catholic woman. From her first introduction in Book I to her trial in Book V, Duessa is continually described as a figure beautiful on the outside and rotting on the inside—an image not infrequently linked to the sensuous decorations, spectacle, and ceremony associated with Catholic churches in the early modern English imagination. She seduces with her beauty, but that beauty is only a cover for decay and death, something made evident in the fact that she cannot have children. Ultimately, as McCabe has

observed, Spenser links Duessa to Mary, Queen of Scots with a thinly veiled representation of her trial in Canto IX of Book V. Duessa is figure who was often held up as the opposite of the chaste Elizabeth, represented by Mercilla in Book V, and whose insatiable desires extended well beyond flesh and to coveting the crown. Duessa's execution in Book V, like that of the real Mary, promises that sexual deviance will no longer be a threat to the future of England.

Despite this threat to futurity through deviant Catholic sexuality, the Catholic also remained essential to the English nation. It was, as Edelman discusses the queer, something that while abjected remained an essential part of the subject: the fabric of the English nation. While England embraced a proto-Protestantism under Elizabeth, it was clear that England's Catholic past, and in larger part its Catholic present, was an inextricable part of English identity. As much as Catholics, both within England's borders and on the continent, posed very a very real military and ideological threat to the state, Catholics were also played key roles in every part of English life, and it was not possible to separate the nation from its Catholic entanglements. In other words, Catholics were simultaneously a part of the social order and a threat to it. That is why they had to be abjected – and abjected as queer – as an otherness, a mixture of contradictory qualities, that was, and threatened even more to spread, *within* the nation and its history.

### **Reading Joan as the Catholic Queer**

Armed with all of the above, we can now return our attention to the seeming problems with Joan La Pucelle in Shakespeare's *I Henry VI*. As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, Shakespeare's creation of Joan has often been derided by critics as wildly uneven. She has been variously labeled a slanderous portrait of Joan of Arc, the inferior work of a young playwright still coming into his own, the result of too many collaborators, and, to borrow Marcuse's

language once again, "an impossible pastiche of laudable and despicable traits." To be fair, when read as a text uncritically extricated from the particularities of Shakespeare's world, such criticisms of the wildly uneven Joan seem to make some sense. However, when we do the work of reading Shakespeare's Joan in light of Shakespeare's world, the changes in her character in the final act of the play that might at first seem problematic begin to make a great deal of sense. To put it another way, Joan's inconsistency within *I Henry VI* is entirely consistent with the complex – and queer – a role that Catholics played in the English literary imagination of the late 16<sup>th</sup> Century.

While it has seemed to some that there is neither rhyme nor reason in the changes Joan's character undergoes in the final act of the play, I want to argue here that, if we read Joan as the Catholic queer, her character actually remains remarkably consistent throughout the play. Like Catholics in other English poems, plays, and tracts (some of whom I have discussed above), Joan is throughout the play both simultaneously a part of the everyday fabric of English life—*I Henry VI* is after-all a play focusing on the history of England—and a threatening and whorish fiend. We can read the Joan, both in the first four acts of the play *and* in the final act, as a figure that is navigating the often-paradoxical image of the Catholic in the early modern imagination: a Catholic queer that is at once threatening the futurity of England while at the same time a seductive, and sometimes even sympathetic, image of the Catholic.

This dual nature of Joan is established seemingly from the very first moment she is introduced in the play. She is first introduced by the Bastard of Orleans as "a holy maid" (1.2.51) who "by a vision sent to her from heaven / Ordained is" (1.2.52-53)—an introduction quickly followed upon by Joan detecting the Dauphin's attempts at deception. It is clear at this point in the second scene of the play that Joan is possessed of intellectual and martial abilities that have

endeared her to the French. Unsurprisingly, the French assessment of Joan is called into question a few scenes later when Talbot addresses her as “Devil or devil’s dam” (1.5.5) and “a witch” (1.5.6). Drawing on anti-Catholic rhetoric in the period, including the subtle linking of Joan to the Whore of Babylon, Talbot’s words place Joan squarely in the ongoing religious debates of Shakespeare’s England. The two versions of Joan—the maid and the whore, the familiar and the enemy—are repeatedly evoked throughout the first four acts of the play. The sum effect of such depictions of Joan is the establishing of Joan as what Bernhard calls a “virago” and Coppelia Kahn calls both a “virgin prophetess, mannish amazon, and seductive courtesan” and “a composite of the ways women are dangerous to men” (7). Joan is treated as equal parts terror and familiar and is crafted in ways that draw even on some of the rhetoric surrounding Elizabeth I. She is the embodiment of the role the Catholic plays in the early modern English imagination.

While tracking Joan’s seemingly dual nature in the first four acts of the play, it is also essential to note that the dual nature of Joan qua Catholic threatens the reproductive futurity of the English nation. As the play opens, England faces a dangerously unstable world. The country is in disarray following the death of the celebrated Henry V, and infighting amongst members of Henry IV’s court has led to a dangerous disarray in which, as the First Messenger notes, the various individuals jockeying for position now “maintain several factions;/and whilst a field should be dispatch’d and fought,/You are disputing of your generals” (71-73). Domestic instability has paralyzed the English nation leaving it vulnerable to its enemies, and England quickly finds itself facing the potential loss of lands on the continent to a France emboldened by English infighting. It’s into this context – the moment of a very uncertain transition from Henry V to Henry VI that could threaten the orderly reproduction of the nation—that Joan emerges as the French hero. With her every action, Joan stands opposed to the English nation at a time when

its healthy reproduction is anything but certain. And while the perversity of her desires will become more evident in the closing act of the play, even in the first four acts they can be seen as desires for the death of England in a way that would disrupt reproduction.

As I have suggested above, then, this dual Joan—the Joan who is both threatening other and yet still paradoxically familiar—is clearly established in the first four acts of the play. And, while critics have not always seen these early acts as Shakespeare’s best work, the portrayal of Joan therein has been relatively uncontroversial. What has been more controversial is the seeming shift in Joan’s character in the final act of the play when the source of Joan’s power is revealed to be a pact with fiends, so much so that her powers are, accordingly, unnatural. As I have argued early in this chapter, this change in the tone of the play has long troubled critics, but I want to argue that Joan’s entering into a pact with fiends in Act V is not really a departure but is instead wholly in keeping with the popular image of the Catholic in the English imagination of the period that was established in the first four acts. In order to see this image clearly, we must look at the most controversial passage in the play: Joan’s trial and (offstage) execution.

At the beginning of Act 5, scene 4, after York has called forward for Joan, whom he describes as a “sorceress condemned to burn” (5.4.1), the Shepherd whom she had earlier identified as her father laments that Joan’s imminent execution “kills thy father’s heart outright” (5.4.2) and prepares us for what he says will be a “timeless cruel death” (5.4.5). Joan’s immediate response is to call the Shepherd a “Decrepit miser” and “base ignoble wretch!” (5.4.7). Taken aback, the Shepherd assures those gathered that he is indeed Joan’s father, and Joan once again dismisses his claim, this time saying that the Shepherd’s claims here are only an attempt to “obscure my noble birth.” (5.4.22). This second rejection, in turn, leads the Shepherd to assert his claim to be her parent one more time before he, apparently distraught, calls for those

assembled to “burn her, burn her!” (5.4.34). The Shepherd’s final exclamation before he exits prompts Joan to one more time deny that she was “begotten of a shepherd swain” (5.4.38). The relatively quick exchange between the Shepherd and Joan, which compasses little more than 30 lines, might at first seem trivial. Since she has been revealed to the audience as one who consorts with fiends, we might well expect that Joan will begin to lash out. However, something more here is going on.

It’s not difficult to imagine that Shakespeare’s audiences would have heard a very particular reference in these lines. Having been thoroughly identified with Catholicism throughout the play, Joan is what Shakespeare’s contemporaries might have called a “papist”—one who submits to the authority of Rome that Catholics claimed, and Protestants denied, stemmed from the biblical Peter. Like Peter, Joan responds to the possibility of trial and the threat of death with a three times denial of a shepherd, a common biblical image associated with Christ. Joan even extends on this denial by saying not only that she does not know the man, the claim ascribed to Peter in all four of the Canonical Gospels, but that she is not even descended from him. More than merely lashing out or claiming some kind of greatness, Joan is effectively opting out of the vision of the Church as a family, another common image in the Bible, and placing herself in a different lineage. Faced with death, Joan argues that she is the “progeny of Kings” (5.4.39). Further, Joan suggests that the English characters assembled are “polluted with your lusts / Stained with the guiltless blood of innocents, / Corrupted and tainted with a thousand vices” (5.4.44-46). This last claim is one that would no doubt have been glossed by English audiences as ironic given that it was clearly Joan who was polluted, stained, corrupted, and tainted. More than mere rhetoric, Joan is suggesting that the reproduction of her lineage and her faith stands in opposition to the reproduction of an English state. In doing so, Joan figures herself

as an instance of the Catholic as queer—as one whose desires run counter to those of the state. Indeed, Joan's identification as queer is only magnified as the scene continues.

Just a few lines after her denials of the Shepherd, Joan makes the claim that she cannot be executed because she claims to be with child. Joan's strange attempt to claim the benefit of "belly" to forestall her execution in Act V has long perplexed readers. Despite little to suggest that Joan has been engaging in romantic liaisons throughout the play, Joan suddenly attempts to forestall her execution by claiming that she is pregnant. The strangeness of the situation is exacerbated as Joan offers an ever-shifting, and ever more absurd, list of names when she is asked who is the father of her child. While Joan's claims to be with child are quickly dismissed by those standing in judgment, and likely by the audience as well, there is something profound going on here. This is a staging of the threat that a perverse Catholic sexuality—one in which women have power—promises to England. Joan's conflicting claims of virginity and then the possible parentage of several different men invites us to see her complex and contradictory sexuality as a threat to orderly and normal reproduction.

We also need to take a few moments to think about Joan's use of the child here as a rhetorical tool. In invoking the child, Joan is attempting to play both on the fact that it was unlawful to execute a pregnant woman and on the important role the child plays in reproduction. This makes the individuals Joan claims to have fathered her child significant. When asked who fathered the child, Joan identifies French nobles and not English ones. She reminds us that her desires, even when they might result in some kind of reproduction, cannot and will not reproduce the English state. In both her denial of the Shepherd and her invocation of the benefit of "belly," Joan reveals herself to be the Catholic as queer—as the frightening other who desires to frustrate or disrupt reproduction that is healthy for the English state.

Presented by Shakespeare as the embodiment of the unreadable polysemy and threat of the Catholic – as Campion had been on his return to London in Munday’s account—Joan must be censured at the end of the play. Like the real Joan of the historical record, Shakespeare’s Joan is simply far too much of a threat to the established order of the English state if she is allowed to live. She is, as Talbot had been, never simply an individual. While the English continue to fight amongst themselves about the succession of Henry V, Joan’s presence becomes something that is larger than life. Joan’s power is thus not that of a single warrior, but rather that of an ideology. Given what she stands for, should she be allowed to live, she will wreak havoc on England well beyond anything she can possibly do by herself. Accordingly, Joan is burned at the stake in the closing act of the play in an act that is fitting not just because it fits with the historical record; it does, but it is also appropriate for Shakespeare’s London as a kind of purgative action that addresses issues far beyond the individual and momentary.

Joan’s ultimate fate has to serve as a moment of cultural catharsis, a moment in which those in the theater can face the threat of the Catholic continent in all of its queerness and then exorcise that demon via a familiar ritual. However, the familiarity of that ritual could be a double-edged sword. As both Anne Dillon and Brad Gregory have noted, England saw more than its share of religious executions during the reigns of Mary I and Elizabeth I. While that aspect of this period in history has often been overlooked, Dillon and Gregory have reminded us that thousands died by being burned at the stake in the confrontation between Protestants and Catholics in the latter half of the sixteenth century. It is unsurprising, when that context is considered, that Joan would join in this number. The stake provided a cultural shorthand, a common way of dealing with heretical positions that addressed the problem in religious and civil ways. Consequently, the

women and men at the playhouse would likely have been unable to escape the fact that this was still a common punishment.

Still, despite the thousands of men and women burned at the stake in the second half of the sixteenth century, relatively little had changed in the religious politics of England over that time. There were, to be sure, any number of changes in how individuals and nations conceived of themselves, but the swath of executions in England had not changed the fact that the continent remained a threatening political and military specter for England. In the same way, the execution of Joan does not make a palpable difference in the world of the play. While it does provide a cathartic moment for those on stage and in the audience, the threat of the Catholic Joan was made to represent cannot ultimately be contained. While Joan is punished, the threat of the Catholic—perhaps best embodied by the havoc Margaret of Anjou wreaks in subsequent plays—necessarily remains.

## **Conclusion**

There is no doubting that *I Henry VI* will remain a point of disagreement for critics of Shakespeare—especially in light of the recent decision to list Christopher Marlowe as a co-author of the play in latest edition of the *Oxford Shakespeare*—and some critics will likely continue to see the play, and its central antagonist Joan La Pucelle, as deficient when compared to Shakespeare's more celebrated works. However, if we choose to see the play in this way, we run the risk of missing something important.

When we choose to read Joan as a deficient character, we do so because, as Gabrielle Bernhard Jackson reminds us, we read her as failing to meet our expectations. Joan seemingly lacks the unity that we expect from a character, but she would likely have been perfectly

consistent to those watching the play in the Elizabethan theater. In other words, Joan's having been so long-maligned says very little about her and a great deal about us. Reading Joan as queer reminds us that we need to approach Shakespeare with care and that his work cannot simply be decontextualized and deployed in the ways that make immediate sense to us or help us to fill out some agenda today. Instead, we need to see Shakespeare as an artist working in a particular time and place in which his characters were written to meet the needs of Shakespeare and his audience and not readers removed by the distance of centuries. In sum, it's not simply that reading Joan as an instance of the Catholic as queer can resuscitate the fortunes of a long-maligned character; although it does do this, it also forces us to rethink the things we know about Shakespeare, about Shakespeare's England, and even about ourselves.

## Chapter 2:

### *Aaron the Queer Moor*

A second queer threat to the emergent English nation at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century was that of the Moor, which the younger Shakespeare first maps onto the body of Aaron in *Titus Andronicus* (1592). Like the Catholic in chapter one, the figure of the Moor in the imagination of early modern England has emerged as a complex one in recent years. For a long time, critics viewed the Moor in Shakespeare, and more specifically in *Titus Andronicus*, as a loosely defined and fantastical figure whose construction reflected an ostensible lack of interaction between real “Moors” and English men and women in the sixteenth century. However, more recent work has suggested that Moors, more than many other alien groups, were, like Catholics, part of everyday English Life at the time of Shakespeare. English women and men would have had not infrequent interaction with Moors, especially those women and men living in London. As such, the caricatured version of the Moor that is presented in Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* is not merely the one-dimensional figure that is prevalent in many older critiques but is instead a careful congealing and amalgamation of a complex of tendencies under a single -- and I would argue queer -- banner.

The itinerary of this chapter is to build on the more nuanced figure of the Moor in the

sixteenth century English imagination that has been emerging in recent criticism and to tease out the resulting construction of the Moor as queer in Shakespeare's Aaron the Moor in *Titus Andronicus*, though I will very briefly turn to *Othello* in my conclusion. Aaron, like *Titus Andronicus* itself, has been a subject of much critical debate over the years. For some, Aaron is best understood as the work of an immature author that shares some things in common with later villains, most pointedly Iago. Other critics have suggested that we view Aaron as a reflection of undifferentiated English fears about a racial group with whom England had little contact. I want to suggest that reading Aaron as queer makes him not primarily a deficient early character nor a representative of unknown groups mistakenly collapsed together, but instead an attempt at locating a range of supposed forms of "queerness" in a single "othered" figure and does so in a play that reveals *Titus Andronicus* itself to be a more nuanced and thoughtful play than some have suggested.

In what follows, I will make this argument by (1) reviewing past critical treatments of both *Titus Andronicus* and Aaron, (2) exploring the complex role the Moor played in the English imagination at the time Shakespeare was writing *Titus Andronicus*, (3) arguing that the image of the Moor upon which Shakespeare was drawing in writing his play was that of the Moor as queer, and (4) rereading Aaron specifically as an instance of the Moor as queer, all towards articulating how reading Aaron this way extends the critical rethinking of both Aaron and *Titus Andronicus* that has been writ large in recent years.

### **The Scholarship on Aaron and *Titus Andronicus***

From the late sixteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century, the critical history of *Titus Andronicus* is a story of dismissal, and the critical history of Aaron the Moor is

largely a story of relative silence. Celebrated by Shakespeare's contemporaries, *Titus Andronicus* has long been maligned by Shakespeareans as a lesser creation, so much so that both the subject matter and style of this play have *Titus Andronicus* have led generations of critics to reject *Titus Andronicus* altogether or accept as true the tradition of Ravenscroft that "it was not originally his [Shakespeare's] . . . and he only gave some master-touches to one or two of the principal parts of characters" (qtd in Kolin 3). Perhaps unsurprisingly, such a poorly-received play has led to a relative dearth of commentary on Aaron over the years. While so many of Shakespeare's plays feature characters about whom volumes upon volumes have been written, Shakespeare's other famous Moor among them, Aaron has been generally passed over.<sup>1</sup> I therefore want to briefly explore the critical history of both *Titus Andronicus* and Aaron the Moor and then begin to explore a recent shift in critical fortunes of both *Titus Andronicus* and Aaron that, as I will argue, begins to help us see Aaron as an instance of the Moor as queer.

As Philip C. Kolin has noted, *Titus Andronicus* has "been called the 'black sheep' . . . of the Shakespearean canon" (3). And, as Kolin reminds us, critics have offered any number of apologies on behalf of the play over the years. Starting with the seventeenth-century playwright Edward Ravenscroft, some have claimed that the play is so bad that it is impossible to attribute it to Shakespeare. Samuel Taylor Coleridge and others, while admitting the play was likely Shakespeare's creation, have suggested that *Titus Andronicus* is best understood as a

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<sup>1</sup> A search of the *World Shakespeare Bibliography* for articles with "Aaron" in the title yields only 4 results prior to 1990 and more than 20 since. Similarly, a search for articles with the word "Moor" in the title yields 35 results prior to 1990 and 79 since (only three entries have titles containing both words, and all of these were published after 1990). While such searches cannot be taken as an exhaustive survey, especially given that the *WSB* cataloging does not take into account work prior to 1960, they are illustrative of a massive spike in critical interest following a relative dearth.

commercial product unfit for Shakespeare's genius. As Coleridge puts it, *Titus Andronicus* was “obviously intended to excite vulgar audiences by its scenes of blood and horror” (qtd in Kolin 99). Still others, Phyllis Rackin among them, have suggested the play must have been written very early on in Shakespeare's career and thus displays the defects of a writer still coming into his own. In short, for much of its critical history, critics have held *Titus* to be, in the words of T.S. Eliot, “one of the stupidest and most uninspired plays ever written.”

As both Jane Kingsley-Smith and Kenji Yoshino have observed, however, after centuries in which *Titus Andronicus* was either ignored or rewritten with the aim of making it more palatable to ever-changing tastes, the play has begun to enjoy something of a critical renaissance in recent years. As Yoshino puts it, “Recent decades have seen a revival of interest in the original, unexpurgated play” (204). Further, says Yoshino, this revival of interest in the play has been mirrored by an increase in the number of critical treatments of *Titus Andronicus*. Spurred on, as Kolin notes, by a change in the focus of critical scholarship on *Titus Andronicus* in the 1940s, 1950s, and the 1960s—a shift from the focus on authorship studies rooted in Ravenscroft to a more serious engagement with the play itself—*Titus* has begun to move slowly in from the margins of the canon. Moreover, says Yoshino, the last several decades in particular have seen a growing interest in *Titus Andronicus* as modern audiences and critics have embraced the play in light of a willingness to see it as a revenge tragedy that is the product of a particular time and place and a growing sense that we are, in our modern world, surprisingly able to see parallels with such an Elizabethan world-view in our own times.

This evolving critical understanding of *Titus Andronicus*, after all, has occasioned a similar evolution in work specifically on Aaron the Moor. While many of Shakespeare's characters have captured the popular imagination of audiences and critics for as long as people have written about

Shakespeare, Aaron has long been met with relative silence. While some critics have suggested that Aaron was, in the words of JA Bryant Jr., “one of the uniquely Shakespearean . . . things about Titus,” what little ink was spilled in investigating Aaron has focused, as Kolin observes, on reminding audiences that Aaron was a lesser creation when compared to Shakespeare’s later villains.<sup>2</sup> The tendency to ignore Aaron or to reduce him to a prop through which to understand Shakespeare’s more mature villains, though, began to wane in the aftermath of germinal works by Fredson Bowers and Bernard Spivak. Bowers and Spivak argue that, far from the lesser creation of a playwright yet to come into his own, Aaron is a complex figure that both recalls and expands upon the stage villains, and more specifically the Vice characters, that preceded him. After Bowers and Spivak have issued the call to see Aaron as complex and worthy of critical attention, there has been a growing critical interest in the character. Some of this criticism, such as Gordon Smith’s and William Woodson’s, has argued that Aaron was best understood as a prescient engagement with the criminal pathology that has emerged in twentieth-century psychology. Around the same time, Eldred Jones, while eschewing the explicit interest in criminology, has made a similar suggestion that Aaron is best understood in terms of the alien that is a threat wholly external to the state.

More recently, critics such as Emily Bartels have suggested that Aaron should be understood in light of discourses surrounding the Moor in Shakespeare’s England. Where Bowers and Spivak had seen Shakespeare’s creation of Aaron as essentially looking towards the past and Smith, Woodson, Helivi, and Draper saw the character as in some way looking towards the future, more recent scholarship has suggested reading Aaron in the context of Shakespeare’s

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<sup>2</sup> On Aaron as a model for Iago see Robert Fleissner’s “What the Pot Calls the Kettle; or, Is Iago not Also Black?” On Aaron as a model for both Iago and Othello see Bruno Gallo’s “‘Aaron proto-Iago e proto-Othello.’” On Aaron as Othello’s father see Beryl Hughes’ “Othello's Antecedents.”

As was the case with my discussion of the critical history of *Titus Andronicus*, my briefly review of the critical history of Aaron is deeply indebted to the work of Philip C. Kolin.

England. This final critical turn in scholarship on Aaron -- something that was just beginning when Kolin assembled his critical history of Aaron in 1995 and which has only grown since -- is of particular interest to this study.

Where earlier treatments of Aaron—those from Ravenscroft through Jones—seem to have principally focused on Aaron’s villainy, his blackness, or the seeming intersection of the two, following Bartels there has been growing interest in understanding him as Aaron *the Moor*. This turn pushes us to explore how Aaron needs to be seen in the light of a complicated discourse surrounding the Moor in the period. The result has been increasingly complicated understandings of Aaron that have pushed his critical trajectory ever further away from the view that he was an immature work of a unpracticed hand. In addition, a critical link between the Moor and deviant sexuality rhetoric in the last few years, something I will discuss in the next section, has not yet been adequately accounted for, I believe, in studies of Aaron.

### **The Moor in Shakespeare’s Time**

As I have noted in the previous section, there has been a growing interest in working to understand the complex figure of the Moor in Shakespeare that has spurred on, and I will argue can continue to spur on, the critical reevaluation of *Titus Andronicus* and Aaron the Moor. As Emily Bartels has observed, to speak of the Moor in Shakespeare is to speak of a figure that is “first and foremost a figure of uncodified and uncodifiable diversity” (5), that functions as a “site where competing, always provisional axes of identity come dynamically into play, disrupting our ability, if not also our desire, to assign the Moor a color, religion, ethnicity, or any homogenizing trait” (7). In other words, to speak of the Moor in Shakespeare is to speak of a perplexing indeterminacy that always seems to be just beyond our grasp. In this section, I want to explore

how this understanding of the Moor has evolved in the past sixty-seventy years and to lay the groundwork for further expanding treatments of the Moor and of Aaron the Moor specifically. To this end, I will track Emily Bartels' germinal unpacking of the critical history of the Moor, explore how that critical history has been expanded more recently in the work of critics such as Nabil Matar, and lay the groundwork for my own argument that the Moor might effectively be understood as queer.

While there is, as Bartels notes, good reason to believe that the Moor was a complicated figure on Shakespeare's stage, the modern critical history of the Moor seems to begin with the assumption that this was not so. Initially, Bartels reminds us, the "Moor came into scholarly discussion as an 'African'" (10)—as a figure all-too-often uncritically associated with blackness. As Winthrop Jordan notes in his hugely influential *White Over Black*, there has been a long-standing associate between blackness and evil in the western world that has colored the presentation of black figures in literature (4-11). And, as Kim F. Hall has noted, such views have often drawn on the assumption that physical blackness was an outward sign rooted in "Christian symbolism with death and mourning, sin and evil" such that it became almost impossible to "separate 'racial' signifiers of blackness from traditional iconography" (4). In other words, Shakespeare's engagement with Moors seems to have initially been read as an engagement with blackness and viewed mainly in terms this moral association between evil and blackness. Read this way, representations of the Moor in Shakespeare, Aaron the Moor among them, ran the risk of being reduced to one-dimensional figures.

As Bartels notes, "The association of Moors with Africa remained a critical starting point" (11) throughout much of the scholarship of the 1960s, 1970s, and the 1980s. While some critics acknowledge that Shakespeare and his contemporaries would have understood Africa as "neither a

single nor an homogenous place” (10), the critical default still seems to have been to read the Moor as an engagement with blackness that all too often ignored such complexity. However, postcolonial, new historicist, and feminist critics have gradually begun to chip away at the tenuous connection between Moor and African that had underwritten so much early criticism. In the 1990s, critics such as Kim Hall, Ania Loomba, and Emily Bartels began to move criticism on the Moor away from the simple association between the Moor and Africa and towards a more complex picture of the Moor. In part, this shift stemmed from a more focused engagement with the Moor as an amalgam of identities in the period that could not productively be understood simply as black or other. As Emily Bartels herself puts it, “Renaissance representations of the Moor were vague, varied, inconsistent, and contradictory. . . the term ‘Moor’ was used interchangeably with such similarly ambiguous terms as ‘African,’ ‘Ethiopian,’ ‘Negro,’ and even ‘Indian’ to designate a figure from different parts or the whole of Africa (or beyond) who was either black or Moslem, neither, or both” (434). While a critical understanding of the roles of race and blackness remained important in discussions of the Moor, these critics also stressed the extent to which the very idea of the Moor called upon a wide array of associations beyond blackness. Accordingly, Emily Bartels has described the use of the Moor in plays as a confrontation with an exotic alien on the Renaissance stage. Meanwhile, for Kim Hall and Ania Loomba, the Moor was a reflection of the growing reach of English colonial ideology.

The critical history of the Moor in Bartels that I have been tracking here has been further developed and expanded in recent years by critics such as Nabil Matar and Imitaz Habib.

According to Nabil Matar, much of the work done in the 1990s by critics like Bartels seems to have assumed that there must have been very little contact between England and the “Moors,” that English men and women might well encounter Moors in Europe but that they were not a part

of everyday life in England. This line of reasoning suggested that Shakespeare's staging of the Moor as a condensation of a great diversity was the result of common cultural perception.

However, as Matar notes, this was not the case in reality:

No other non-Christian people interacted more widely with Britons than the Muslims of the Ottoman Empire, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the North African regencies of Tunisia, Algeria, and Libya, along with Morocco . . . These Muslims were real in a physical and linguistic sense, and represented the most widely visible non-Christian people on English soil in this period  
(3)

As Matar makes clear here, Moors were not simply some distant other in Shakespeare's England through whom England could fashion its identity, but real people who were encountered both abroad and at home. As Matar reminds us, the frequency with which English men and women interacted with what Shakespeare terms Moors was such that they "continually appear in English documents" in the period (21).

At the same time that critics have articulated the need to understand the Moor as a part of everyday life in Shakespeare's England, so too have critics begun to unpack a key rhetorical trope in the period in which the Moor was cast as both lascivious and as sodomite. Following events such as the Battle of Lepanto in 1572, the Moor represented a potent military threat that was, as both Matar and Daniel Vitkus note, essential to present as an "other" for the construction of a Protestant English identity in the period.<sup>3</sup> Militating against the ostensibly chaste and heteronormative world of Protestant England, the Moor, like other perceived threats to English

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<sup>3</sup> See Daniel Vitkus's "Turning Turk in *Othello*: The Conversion and Damnation of the Moor" and Nabil Matar's "Europe's Mediterranean Frontier: The Moor."

civilization, was often seen as a figure that was both lascivious and sodomical. The former characterization, that of the Moor as lascivious and desiring miscegenation, has been sufficiently well established that I need not explicitly revisit those arguments here.<sup>4</sup> The latter characterization, that of the Moor as sodomite, still requires more attention.

According to Ian Smith, the view of the Moor as sodomite was present in a wide variety of both dramatic and travel literature in Shakespeare's England. Further, the ubiquity of the Moor in both dramatic and travel literature, says Nabil Matar, necessitates that we understand contemporary representations of the Moor as sodomite both as common and, accordingly, as having a significant influence on the work of playwrights like Shakespeare. There was, as Ian Smith has observed, a fear of Moorish "multiplication by force—instead of reproduction . . . Thus the repeated condemnations of sodomy admit a troubled recognition of a very troubling military problem" (198). And, as Smith notes, this particular fear that "As the object of Islamic aggression, the masculine Christian was incorporated into an entirely other symbolic system . . . whose relational premise is sodomitical" (199), was a fundamentally queer one (to which I will soon return). All of this brings us to a place where I think we can recognize that the Moor is perhaps best understood as queer.

### **The Moor as Queer**

What has hopefully emerged in the preceding pages is that, in the past fifty to sixty years, the Moor in Shakespeare's England has emerged as a complicated character, a frightening figure that resisted classification and was associated with deviant sexuality while at the same time existing as a relatively unremarkable part of everyday life in England. My aim in

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<sup>4</sup> For more on the Moor and miscegenation, see:

this section is to unpack how this complex understanding of the Moor in Shakespeare's England might be understood as queer. In doing so, I will suggest that the Moor in Shakespeare might be productively understood as queer in at least two ways: as a figure whose complexity makes him difficult to pin down, on the one hand, and whose ostensibly deviant sexual appetites threaten to disrupt orderly, heteronormative reproduction, on the other, all at a time of pointed anxiety about the future of the Anglo-Saxon race in England.

The notion that the Moor in Shakespeare might be understood as queer by virtue of the inconsistency and contradiction pointed out by Emily Bartels has already been suggested by Ian Smith. In his analysis of *Othello*, Smith draws on both extensive travel literature in the period and Shakespeare's *Othello* and argues that Othello, a character Smith notes is identified with "persistent construction of the North African, Muslim, or Turk as sodomite," can be read as queer in no small part because:

In the early modern period, race is constitutionally queer insofar as it is never a unified, fixed category but posits a social identity produced from a number of intersecting, overlapping conceptual conjunctions—including color, religion, geography, and sexuality . . . a criss-crossing of categories . . . [that] produce an aggregate, layered consolidation that catalogues the multiple ways by which a certain social identity can appear to be unified and prudentially stigmatized. (Ian Smith, 200)

In other words, the amalgamation of "overlapping conceptual conjunctions" wrapped up in *Othello*, and more generally the Moor, reveal the Moor to be a shifting figure that can be loosely fashioned as a symbolic "other" and cast off – "abjected" in Julia Kristeva's sense -- for the sake of shoring up the identity of English social subject. The Moor is queer because it

resists any clear categorization and is instead an amalgam of identities in a way that resists and destabilizes England's attempts to understand itself relative to the rest of the world. Smith's argument is both compelling and instructive for anyone wanting to think about Shakespeare's construction of the Moor in terms of queer theory. And while Smith's explicit focus in his analysis of *Othello* is on travel and the role of the inn as a site of cultural exchange, his understanding of the Moor as "overlapping conceptual conjunction" is quite useful for me in my analysis of Aaron.

While Ian Smith has provided a firm foundation from which to argue that the Moor in Shakespeare might be productively understood as queer, I want to suggest that we continue to push at another supposed deviance in the Moor as well: the extent to which the Moor was imagined as both lascivious and sodimical by Shakespeare and his contemporaries, both in ways that spur on miscegenation and unhealthy (or non-existent) reproduction. The Moor, as so constructed, is not queer simply because it allows for uncertainty that transgresses norms to be rendered into a single form, but also because his supposedly insatiable desire for sex, and particularly for non-reproductive sex, is a desire that can disrupt the orderly, heteronormative reproduction of the state.

As Lee Edelman has argued, queerness names an opposition to reproductive futurity. In Edelman's own words, the "death drive names what the queer, in the order of the social, is called forth to figure: the negativity opposed to every form of social viability" (9). If the logic of the social is rooted in heteronormative reproduction and thus in the figure of the child—it is the child, says Edelman, that "invariably shapes the logic within which the political itself must be thought" (3)—the queer is that which is opposed to reproduction and to the child. Accordingly, says Edelman, the queer promises the "lure of sterile, narcissistic enjoyments understood as

inherently destructive of meaning and therefore . . . responsible for the undoing of social organization, collective reality, and, inevitably, life itself” (13).

The persistent sense the Moor just such an agent of miscegenation and sodomy, as it is tracked by Nabil Matar, Imtaz Habib, and Ian Smith, entirely matches Edelman’s discussion of “sterile, narcissistic enjoyments.” Inherently non-reproductive sexual acts—at least when viewed from the kind of cultural imperialist standpoint that was common in Shakespeare’s England -- are ostensibly narcissistic insofar as they seem directed at immediate enjoyment and do not leads to orderly heteronormative reproduction. Given all this, it seems that the Moor as a supposed miscegenator and sodomite is a figure whose desires threaten the logic of reproduction throughout civilization.

Drawing on Smith and Edelman, then, we can productively understand the Moor in Shakespeare’s England as a figure that is queer in at least two ways. In the first, the Moor is queer because it is impossible to pin down and thus disrupts attempts at understanding. In the second, the Moor is made an emblem of perverse desire that threatens to interrupt the heteronormative logic of reproduction. In both cases, the Moor in Shakespeare is consequently a figure who challenges the orderly reproduction of the state. Having established this notion of the Moor as queer, I want to turn now to an examination of how such an understanding of the Moor might help us to understand Shakespeare's Aaron better.

### **Aaron the Queer Moor**

Read as the queer Moor, we can now see, Aaron is both a figure of, in the words of Ian Smith, “overlapping conjunctions” and a character who has the kinds of “narcissistic desires” discussed by Edelman. As such, Aaron the Moor is a character who stands in opposition to and

threatens orderly, heteronormative reproduction of the state and, I will argue, a character whose actions accordingly have the potential to spur the world on towards madness. That Aaron is a character that is both the product of “overlapping conjunctions” and who evinces “narcissistic desires” can be established if we consider, first, his relationship to other characters in the play—the extent to which he is a character always on the margin and threatening the middle—and, second, how his numerous deviant desires throughout the play make him a threat to reproduction itself within the world of the play.

Aaron, after all, is indeed an odd character in *Titus Andronicus*. His first appearance in the play is in 1.1, where Aaron does not have a line and is not directly referred to by any of the characters. Instead, he simply is introduced by the stage directions as Aaron the Moor; in the 1594 quarto his name is listed as “Aaron the More” and in the First Folio as “Aaron the Moore.” Despite the minor variations in spelling, in both cases Aaron is identified when he takes the stage as *the Moor*. Drawing on the work I have discussed above on, I want to suggest that in identifying Aaron as such, Shakespeare was drawing on a complex understanding of the Moor circulating around the time he was writing *Titus Andronicus*, which already hinted at queer elements. The appellation *the Moor* here then signifies a character who, from his very first appearance, functions as a figure in whom is concentrated uncertainty and inconsistency – and, as I will show, the rest of the play bears this complex out. While Aaron is ostensibly linked to Tamora and the goths early on the play, as the plot develops his alliances shift in ways that reveal him to be a character who resists any categorization. Aaron is certainly not a Roman in the world of the play, nor is he a goth. He treats Tamora and her sons as tools, as disposable means to secure his own ends within the world of the play. What becomes clear in the play is that Aaron is not a character whose identity can be fixed. Rather, he is a character whose identity embodies what Bartels calls the

“uncodified and uncodifiable.”

That Aaron is an outsider, even among outsiders, and a character who resists simple categorization is something that did not go unnoticed by Shakespeare’s contemporaries. Henry Peacham’s c. 1595 drawing of *Titus Andronicus* in performance is a more or less contemporary illustration of Aaron that stresses his queerness (see fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Henry Peacham’s sketch of *Titus Andronicus*.

As Peacham’s drawing reminds us, Aaron literally stands apart from the other players—both the Andronichae and the Goths—while at the same time becoming the focus of the entire composition. The lines of the image ostensibly converge on the central figures of Titus and Tamora, who form the supposed core of the action, but Aaron pulls our eyes off center and toward the edge. Aaron is a dark black figure in a sea of outlines, something threateningly solid at the edge of uncertainty. A stark contrast to everyone else in the scene, the weight of Aaron draws our eyes away from the center of the stage and creates two focal points in the image. Aaron’s opposition to the two opposing sides in the image is both an indication of his own status as other and a rejection of the simple Roman-versus-Goth binary that tries to dominate the stage in his absence. Put simply, Peacham’s drawing suggests that Shakespeare’s contemporaries read Aaron,

both in the drawing itself and in the play, as a figure who is absolutely other and always on the margins. He stands at the edge of the scene, beyond the Romans and the goths and their confrontation. And there at the edge of the scene, Aaron stands with phallic sword drawn, threatening in no small part because of his desires. He is the frightening black figure who threatens to forcibly penetrate the entire scene, to satiate his desires at the expense of everyone else.

Let us now turn, then, to the issue of Aaron's deviant desires in the rest of play, starting with Aaron's role in the infamous pit scene in the second act. This sequence really begins in 2.1 prior to the actual issues at the pit. At the outset of act 2, Aaron encounters Demetrius and Chiron while the two are expressing their own desires for Lavinia. Both Demetrius and Chiron understand that, since she is Bassianus' betrothed, there is no clear way for them to act on their desires. Ever the plotter, Aaron councils the pair to simply take what they want from Lavinia by raping her during a hunt the following day, advice that Demetrius and Chiron are quick to take. Then, two scenes later, Lavinia and Bassianus are separated from the hunting party when they come across Aaron and Tamora embracing, enacting, as Bassianus calls it, their "foul desire" (2.3.?). As Lavinia and Bassianus taunt the pair, Demetrius and Chiron seize the opportunity to stab Bassianus and toss his body into a nearby pit and then rape and mutilate Lavinia.

From Aaron's sexual embrace with the married empress to Demetrius and Chiron's desire to rape Lavinia to the stabbing of Bassianus (an act that Bruce Smith has identified with the representation of sodomy on the early modern stage), the pit scene that I have been describing ends up being an orgy of perversity. We might well argue that this scene depicts any number of characters satisfying such their desires, but I want to suggest that there is value in reading the scene as an enacting of the kinds of desires often associated with the Moor in Shakespeare's

England. In other words, while it appears that Tamora and Aaron are engaged in the satisfaction of a mutual desire and that Demetrius and Chiron are raping and murdering to satisfy their own desires, lurking behind all of this is the Moor. It is Aaron that has suggested to Demetrius and Chiron that they satisfy their desires as a way of satisfying his own desire for vengeance. Aaron has provided the opportunity, and it is Aaron that stands to benefit most from what has happened. Like the dark figure with phallic sword drawn at the edge of Peacham's drawing, Aaron somehow remains on the margin while at the same time being the principal instigator. It is therefore in this scene that Aaron the Moor is revealed to be Aaron the agent of miscegeny and Aaron the sodomite. In other words, Aaron is revealed to be character possessed of deviant desires that serve no ends but his own and yet also as a character who can instigate perversity in others, as though his embodiment of deviance is contagious and can turn white people towards it.

Aaron's deviance is on display again in both act 3 and act 5. In act 3, scene 1 Aaron dupes Titus Andronicus into cutting off his hand as a ransom for his sons. Claiming to be the bearer a message and an offer from Saturninus, Aaron suggest that if Titus "love thy sons" (3.1.151) then he will consent to trading a hand for them. Having just a few short scenes ago orchestrated the dismemberment of Lavinia, something Titus has seen for the first time just before Aaron arrives with his supposed offer from Saturninus, Aaron now seeks to dismember either Marcus, Lucius, or Titus. Aaron is clear about why he is doing this, saying "O how this villainy / Doth fat me with the very thoughts of it!" (4.1.202-3). In act 5, scene 1, Aaron, now at the mercy of Lucius, not only admits that he is the architect of all of the evil that has been done in the play, but also registers his disappointment at not having been able to do more. Pressed by Lucius to express some guilt for what he has done and caused, Aaron laments that he did not visit more ills upon the earth.

To observe that Aaron has perverse desires in the play is one thing. But we still need to establish that these desires are what Edelman has called “sterile, narcissistic enjoyments . . . inherently destructive of meaning.” This extremity will become clear if we consider how Aaron satisfying his desires poses a threat to ordered, heteronormative reproduction in the world of the play. We can begin by looking at Aaron’s desire for Tamora. The issue with Aaron’s attraction to is rooted in the fear of miscegenation in the period. Since she is the newly crowned Empress of Rome, the orderly reproduction of the state requires that she have a child with Saturninus to continue the family line. This issue is all the more pressing in a world in which the death of children is the driving force behind so much of the violence in the play. As we find out, Aaron has satisfied his desire for Tamora on more than one occasion, and the result of this coupling is a bastard son. Aaron’s desire for Tamora is thus a desire that is necessarily linked with miscegenation and is associated with a willingness to imperil the future of the state through a kind of reproduction that is socially unproductive. He is only interested in his own gratification and seems even to embrace the extent to which that gratification threatens orderly reproduction.

There is a similarity in Aaron’s desire for vengeance even as it underwrites Demetrius’ and Chiron’s desire for Lavinia. Here we see desire that leads to both an unproductive death and to the frustration of another royal line. The former is apparent when we remember that, as Bruce Smith has argued, male martial penetration in Shakespeare is often an image meant to call to mind sodomy and “to die” is a common euphuism for orgasm at this time. Read with all this in mind, the murder of Bassianus becomes a symbolic instance of sodomy at the hand of the Moor. The death of Bassianus in this way once again disrupts the possibility of orderly reproduction as it forestalls the possibility of his and Lavinia’s producing an heir. This outrage is following by the rape and mutilation of Lavinia which further underscores the extent to which the Moor as

queer can disrupt reproduction in a way that potentially combines the horrors of both Aaron's bastard and Bassianus' death.

While the pit scene in 2.3 provides key examples of Aaron's perverse desires and how they threaten to disrupt orderly reproduction in the world of the play, such queer horrors are by no means limited to this scene. We see similar perversity and disruption in Aaron's beheading of Titus' sons, something he does to further fulfill his desire for vengeance and cruelty, which also disrupts the possibility of the reproduction of yet another Roman family. We see it too in Aaron's desire to protect his own child. Seeing as that child is a bastard whose very existence threatens Rome, Aaron will stop at nothing to ensure that this child lives and that he remains a threat. All of this is drawn together quite nicely in Aaron's famous declaration to Lucius in 5.1. Here Aaron is asked by Lucius if he has any regrets for his destructive actions in the play, and Aaron answers "Ay, that I had not done a thousand more" (5.1.124). Facing death, Aaron declares that he desires only more destruction, a reproduction of increased destruction, not white reproduction. He is thus supremely the queer Moor who wants to satisfy himself in ways that imperil civilized fecundity.

### **Aaron the Queer Moor and *Titus Andronicus***

Now we can turn back towards *Titus Andronicus* itself and consider how this reading of Aaron might contribute to the project of critically reexamining this play as a whole. Reading Aaron as queer not only fleshes out his character but calls on us to see in the play a theme of reproductive anxiety at a time of crisis in England about that very issue. As I have argued in both my introduction and the preceding chapter, Shakespeare's England found itself facing great political uncertainty at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. While Elizabeth I had presided over an extended period of relative peace since taking the throne in 1558, there was a legitimate fear that

such peace would not endure beyond her death. The “virgin” queen, Elizabeth had not produced an heir to the throne, and thus it seemed clear that she was likely to be the end of the Tudor line. And while issues of succession were nothing new to English history, two factors -- the importance of the Tudors in shoring up fractures in English monarchical succession following the war of the roses and the relative stability of the decades immediately preceding Shakespeare’s writing *Titus Andronicus* -- made the idea of uncertain succession particularly frightening. That Elizabeth I lacked a clear successor to the throne was all the more disconcerting for the women and men of Shakespeare’s England given that there seems to have been constant reminders that England faced a hostile world. From the attempted Ottoman incursion into the Mediterranean thwarted at the battle of Lepanto in 1572 to the attempted invasion of the Spanish Armada 1588, England faced reminders throughout Elizabeth’s reign that there were those of many races hostile to the aims of the nation. And while Elizabeth had proven strong, wise, or lucky enough to protect England throughout her very long reign, there was no guarantee that this stability would continue under her successor.

Uncertain succession was something that Shakespeare returns to again and again, particularly in his early work. Several of his early plays, *I Henry VI* and *Titus Andronicus* among them, begin in the midst of turmoil about who will succeed a recently deceased king. In each of these cases, there is a sense that things have been going well under the previous ruler but that there is no guarantee that good fortune will continue under whoever succeeds to the throne. In addition, Shakespeare’s focus on monarchical infighting in his plays is often attended by a warning that periods of transition are often periods of national vulnerability. When characters in Shakespeare spend too much time focusing on personal and political machinations at times of fragile succession, as they do in *I Henry VI* and *Titus Andronicus*, they open the state up to

external threats from those who desire to frustrate the reproductive logic of the state.

While issues of succession and anxiety permeate a number of Shakespeare's plays in the 1590s, I want to focus here explicitly on the role they play in *Titus Andronicus*. As the play opens, Rome faces an issue of succession. The emperor having recently died, there is a debate between his two sons, Saturninus and Bassianus, as to who should rule Rome. There is a brief moment in which it appears that the issue will be settled when Titus is offered the crown instead of either of the emperor's sons. However, Titus declines the crown, citing his old age, and puts his support behind Saturninus, given that he, as the older brother, seems to have a stronger claim to the throne. While it seems that this issue of succession in the opening scene of *Titus Andronicus* is quickly settled, reading Aaron as queer, as I am suggesting, draws out the issues of uncertain reproduction and cultural anxiety that I have been discussing and, in the process, reveals the play to be well more than the "black sheep" – even in its use of a black character – that so many have thought it to be over the years.

If we look carefully, the uncertainty of succession in the play that is clearly an issue in the opening scene never really subsides. Throughout the play, characters spurred on by wrongs done in that first scene become so consumed with the notion of revenge that they fail to realize, until it is too late, that their infighting has left Rome vulnerable. As Peacham observed in his drawing, the Romans and Goths spend so much time on events that continue to circle around Titus's execution of Alarbus in 1.1, that they fail to register that it is Aaron—the dark figure on the margins with his phallic sword drawn—who embodies the greater threat. While Titus, Saturninus, Bassianus, and Tamora are all worried about one another, Aaron, the queer figure on the margins, is free to follow his desires in ways that undermine reproduction.

When we bear all of this in mind, it quickly becomes clear that *Titus Andronicus* is

undoubtedly more than a bad play. It is also clear that *Titus Andronicus* is more than a revenge tragedy that deserved the acclaim it received from contemporary audiences. More than an exercise in gore, *Titus Andronicus* it is a sustained meditation on how fragile reproduction can be at a time when England was faced with legitimate concerns about its future. It is a play that reminds English men and women in Shakespeare's England that, if they fall to squabbling at a time of pointed anxiety about the reproduction of the nation, they will ensure their own destruction just as certainly as the Goths and the Romans do in *Titus Andronicus* – perhaps at the hands of a figure from outside the internal parties competing for power in England itself. Indeed, if we stop and think about it, even Aaron's execution near the end of *Titus* is rendered hollow as his bastard son lives on among the bodies of the slain Romans and Goths, thereby suggesting that it is his lineage and not theirs that might be reproduced. Rolled up in the ineffectual censure of Aaron at the end of the play is a reminder that the work of identity formation is never complete and that both the individual and the state always remain vulnerable.

### **Conclusion**

Long dismissed as one of Shakespeare's lesser creations, we now see, *Titus Andronicus* has enjoyed something of a critical renaissance in recent years. As critics have grown more sensitive to the complex role the Moor played in the imagination of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, so too have they become more receptive *Titus Andronicus*. Reading the Aaron the Moor as queer -- as embracing deviant desires that threaten to disrupt reproduction -- helps to extend the growing reassessment of *Titus Andronicus*. Above and beyond this, reading Aaron the Moor as queer also provides us with an important reminder that we need to approach Shakespeare with care.

Aaron has long lived in the shadow of Shakespeare's more famous Moor. Where Aaron

has been dismissed, Othello has been read much more favorably. This is, at least in part, because Othello better fits our own preconceived notions of what Shakespeare is and what he was doing in the plays. At least since A.C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tendency*, critics have found in Othello a romantic figure that is both captivating and worthy of our pity. A poet, as Bradley describes him, Othello has been read as a passionate character who, while manipulated to a tragic end, is someone with whom the audience can sympathize. There is no such sympathy to be found in anything Aaron elicits from his audience. As a result, where Othello has been cast as somehow speaking to or touching us, Aaron has remained elusive. The problem in such an approach ought to be obvious, since reading Shakespeare's famous and infamous Moor in this way tells us far more about ourselves than it does about Shakespeare. Rethinking Aaron as queer challenges this solipsistic tendency and pushes us to try to see Shakespeare and his characters more as his own audience might have.

### Chapter 3:

#### *Shylock the Queer Jew*

The third of the principal threats I find to the (re)production of a unified English identity in Shakespeare's early plays -- a threat which Shakespeare maps onto the body of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* (1596-7) -- is the "queerness" of the Jew. Shylock has been a critical preoccupation for a great many critics, and the multitude of work on Shakespeare's infamous Jew has yielded an often-conflicted picture. For some, Shylock is an instance of the stereotypical Jewish villain that owes, as Robert A. Logan has argued, a major debt to Christopher Marlowe's Barabas in *The Jew of Malta* (1589). Others have argued that Shylock is a more sympathetic figure through whom Shakespeare attempted to criticize anti-Semitism. Still others have suggested that such approaches to the character fail to fully recognize the complex role the Jew played in the imagination of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. Building on this call towards a more thoughtful and critical understanding of the Jew in Shakespeare's England, I want to suggest that we can productively read Shylock as a queer religious other who is figures as a pointed threat to heteronormative reproduction at a time of pointed anxiety about reproduction in England.

Like *I Henry VI* and *Titus Andronicus*, the *Merchant of Venice* is a play that has a great deal to say, in its own way, about reproduction precisely at a time of pointed reproductive anxiety in England's history. By the time the play was first performed, it had long-since become abundantly clear that Elizabeth I would die without an heir and perhaps, at least in 1597, might even die without a clear plan of succession. Such fears only exacerbated by events like the attempt on Elizabeth's life in 1594 in the infamous Roderigo Lopez incident. A *converso*, Lopez was physician-in-chief to the queen who was arrested, tried, and hanged for making an attempt on her life.<sup>1</sup> While Lopez insisted on his innocence to his dying breath, for many his supposed actions were evidence that *conversos* were not to be trusted: no matter how far removed they were from their own Jewish past, *conversos* would always be hostile to the existence and reproduction of a Christian state. I want to suggest that, ever the savvy artist and cultural critic, Shakespeare drew extensively in crafting Shylock on this fear that Jews might disrupt heteronormative reproduction and that, accordingly, Shylock can be productively understood as queer.

In what follows, I will make this argument by (1) briefly exploring past critical approaches to Shylock that have grounded critical work on the character for generations, (2) examining how a critical turn in the past twenty years has pushed us to see Jew in Shakespeare's England, and Shylock in particular, in more complicated terms, (3) arguing that this critical turn in the approach to Jews in Shakespeare's England allows us to understand the extent to which Shylock can be understood as queer, (4) rereading Shylock specifically as an instance of the Jew

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<sup>1</sup> Critics writing about Jews in the period have used both "converse" and "maranno" to describe Jews and their descendants who had converted to Catholicism, and later Protestantism. I have opted to use converse throughout, because, as Miriam Bodian notes in "'Men of the Nation': The Shaping of Converso Identity in Early Modern Europe," "Until recent years when *converso* has become the preferred expression, the term *marrano*—a pejorative term from the medieval period . . . was routinely used by scholars to refer to *converses* or to crypto-Jews" (49 n2).

as queer, and (5) articulating how reading Shylock as queer productively extends a critical rethinking of both Shylock and *The Merchant of Venice* writ large in recent years.

### **“Which is the Jew”**

As Kenneth Gross has argued, “Shylock’s complex afterlife in performance, fiction, and criticism . . . is more extensive than that of any other character in Shakespeare’s plays, save perhaps Hamlet” (x). From Shylock’s early beginnings as what was very likely a comic figure on the Shakespearean stage through to a 20<sup>th</sup> century that saw him treated as everything from vile villain to sympathetic victim, Shylock has been imagined and reimagined by directors and critics alike. The long history of Shylock’s afterlives has made the character difficult to write about or stage effectively. As Robert King puts it, “no director, even the most sensitive to social and political contexts, could mount a coherent production of the play and at the same time satisfy an audience’s various readings of history” (58). However, understanding the critical history of Shylock is an essential first step in rethinking our approach to the character.

As Jacob Adler has noted, Shylock was long a character played “by a comedian as a repulsive clown or, alternatively, as a monster of unrelieved evil” (341). While it so often seems strange to people encountering the play for the first time or to those with only a passing knowledge all too often informed by problematic adaptations of the play, Shakespeare penned *Merchant of Venice* as a comedy. And while the definition of comedy has changed in the last 400 years, it’s not a stretch to suggest that Shakespeare’s audience would have found plenty of reason to laugh at Shylock. Read this way, Shylock is a caricature constructed out of myriad anti-Jewish stereotypes that abounded in the period. This link has led some to surmise that Shylock was very likely first portrayed in keeping with the tradition of the stage Jew. As John Gross has noted, the

stage Jew was rooted in exaggeration of supposedly Jewish characteristics like a hooked nose or red hair—characteristics that could make any given portrayal laughable. As Gross describes things,

to an Elizabethan audience, the fiery red wig that he almost certainly wore spelled out his ancestry even more insistently than anything that was actually said. It was the same kind of wig that had been worn by Marlowe's Barabas, and before that by both Judas and Satan in the old mystery plays. (16-17)

In other words, Shakespeare's Shylock, says Gross, likely drew on a tradition in which exaggerated and stereotyped characteristics simultaneously marked the figure of the Jew on the stage as visually other and worthy of laughter and derision.

Even as early modern audiences would likely have seen Shylock as evoking a kind of cruel laughter, it's also no surprise that he was a monstrous figure at the same time. In his argument on the debt owed by Shakespeare to the convention of the stage Jew, Gross notes that what had become the costume of the Jew in the Elizabethan theatre owed a significant debt to how "both Judas and Satan" had been played in the mystery plays (17). To draw on the idea of the stage Jew, then, was to simultaneously employ ridiculous costuming that might well induce laughter but might at the same time link the figure of Shylock to Judas and Satan, characters who, especially in the moralizing context of the mystery plays, were meant to evoke fear and horror. Shylock was, therefore, a character who could be simultaneously humorous and monstrous.

Eventually, this long history of portraying Shylock as "repulsive" or "monstrous" was joined by an understanding of Shylock as a sympathetic, an approach to the character that grew in popularity following Edmund Kean's portrayal of Shylock in 1814. Whether or not Kean's

portrayal of Shylock was entirely new, it's clear that this particular performance of that character had a profound effect on many an interpretation or criticism that came after. The view of Shylock as a sympathetic figure is often rooted in the idea that Shylock is very much justified in his desire for revenge in the play. As Shylock himself notes, he has often been wronged by Antonio (and by Christians more generally) and that he has been cast aside for his Jewish faith and for his enactments of usury, a practice the Christian characters in the play are all too happy to use to their own ends when it suits them. As a result of all of this, Shylock feels dehumanized and seeks out vengeance that is perhaps due him, only to be thwarted again by a less-than-just legal process commanded substantially by the disguised Portia.

The tendency to approach Shylock as a comedic, monstrous, or sympathetic figure, in any case, has continued on into the twentieth century, with the sympathetic Shylock more and more dominating approaches to the character. However, as Andrew G. Bonnell has observed, in the twentieth century, the tension between the various approaches to Shylock has been renewed as Shylock has been deployed both in service to the ideology of the Nazi Reich and, decades later, as a condemnation of the kinds of virulent anti-Semitism that had grounded the ideology of Nazi Germany. For Nazi Germany, Shylock was a useful rhetorical prop. Shylock allowed Nazi Germany to draw on the cultural caché of Shakespeare, an author, as Bonnell reminds us, the Nazis would even come to claim as German so as to underpin the campaign against Jewish women and men. This Nazi Shylock was a monstrous and repulsive figure that far exceeded the anti-Semitism that had come before.

In the long shadow of the Nazi death camps, this repulsive and anti-Semitic Shylock was once again reimagined. As numerous critics have argued, it is difficult to stage the *Merchant of Venice* after Auschwitz. In Arthur Horowitz's words,

*The Merchant of Venice*'s contemporary performance history is awash in guilt, controversy, re-examination and re-interpretation—becoming a receptacle for innumerable ethnic, religious and political corrections, adaptations and emendations—subversions and provocations—with adaptors and directors willfully mandating their own standards of positivity and negativity. (Horowitz 8).

In response to the horrors of the Holocaust and the use of Shakespeare to undergird the ideology that led to its very existence, Shylock has been reimagined once again as a sympathetic figure. As had been the case with Kean's Shylock, the focus was once again on how the negative treatment of Shylock was unjustified—on how figures like the Nazis were so blinded by hatred that they failed to comprehend the humanity of Jewish men and women.

It should be clear by this point, then, that the long critical and performance history of Shylock is one in which the binary of the unsympathetic and the sympathetic Shylock has been continually reworked and redeployed in service to many different ideologies. As such, it seems that the critical history of Shylock is in many ways not a critical history of Shylock but a critical history of humanity in the Western world. In other words, readings of Shylock have more and more have less to do with understanding the character that Shakespeare wrote then with, to borrow a line from Peter Gross, "one's wider reading of European history" (352). Hence to read about the critical and stage history of Shylock is to read not about Shylock only but about how we come to understand ourselves and how we envision our futures. This tendency does something more haunting in it as well. In reviewing the critical history of Shylock, we end up seeing how much we have allowed, even hastened, the enslavement of Shylock to our own ideological programs. All too often, Shylock has become, especially in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, a tool through which to argue the supposed virtues of the Third Reich, the horrors of

its anti-Semitism, the late modern west, and almost anything else we can imagine. In the process, we have too quickly dismissed the historical and artistic particulars of Shakespeare's England as powerful grounds for understanding Shylock as Shakespeare wrote and staged him. It is therefore to these I now want to turn.

### **Shakespeare's England, Shylock, and the Jews**

What role did Jews, and more specifically Shylock, play in the early modern English imagination, and how might understanding such constructs affect our understanding of Shylock and *The Merchant of Venice*? These have proven difficult questions to answer. It's clear that early modern authors wrote a great deal about Jews and Jewishness. However, despite the great deal of time spent by Shakespeare and his contemporaries dealing with what James Shapiro has called "Jewish questions," there has been, for most of the critical history of *The Merchant of Venice*, very little work attempting to understand just why this is the case and what exactly early modern English authors thought of Jews. By and large, critics have been content to read the play as emerging from a culture in which there was no real interaction between Gentiles and Jews and an assumed anti-Semitism was practically universal. Accordingly, critics have argued that Shakespeare must be understood as either a man of his times or, perhaps, as a humanist voice crying out against them. While such views have held sway for a long time, our understanding of the role the Jew played in the early modern imagination, like that of the Catholic and the moor, has enjoyed something of a critical renaissance in recent years. Rather than see Shakespeare's England as simply embracing or responding to a supposedly near-universal anti-Semitism in the period, a growing number of critics have argued that Jewish characters like Shylock were more likely part of an attempt to navigate an English identity crisis by, as James Shapiro puts it, using

“Jewish questions in order to answer English ones” (19) In what follows, therefore, I will track this shift in our understanding of the role that Jews played in the early modern English imagination and will do so in a way that lays the groundwork for understanding this reassessment of the Jew as opening up an avenue to understanding the Jew as queer.

Much writing on Shylock, perhaps the most famous figure of the Jew emerging from Shakespeare’s England, misunderstands the role of the Jew in the early modern English imagination by making it coterminous with the understanding of the Jew that prevailed in medieval England and in the cycle plays. The presumption in the work of earlier critics such as Gross and others -- that Shylock must surely have been part of an older dramatic tradition -- has been challenged by critics who point out that there does not seem to be any real referent for this connection in the play itself. While acknowledging James C. Buhlman’s caution that understanding the role of the Jew in early modern England does require *some* understanding of the history of anti-Semitism and of the tradition of the stage Jew, Charles Edelman suggests that we cannot let such things unduly dominate our readings of characters like Shylock.

Drawing on James Shapiro’s insightful discussion of the real presence of Jews in England in his *Shakespeare and the Jews* (55-88), Edelman notes that it was “simply not true that everyone in Elizabethan England, and hence everyone on the stage and in the audience at *The Merchant of Venice*, was an anti-Semite” (101). In other words, the attempt to read Jews in Shakespeare’s England principally in light of the tradition of the stage Jew tacitly and wrongly assumes a homogeneous view of Jews that stemmed from a lack of contact, much of which seems to be an invention of our own and not necessarily called for by the play itself. If this is the case, though, why have critics so often turned to the figure of the stage Jew in trying to understand Shakespeare and his contemporaries?

According to James Shapiro, this error stems from a misguided belief that there was little or no contact between Gentile men and women and Jews in Shakespeare's England. Jews were officially expelled from England in 1290, and there were no self-professed Jewish settlements from approximately that time until 1657, the year in which Cromwell allowed Jews to return to England. For generations of critics, the expulsion of the Jews meant that there could not have been any real Jewish presence in Shakespeare's England and that, accordingly, imagined Jews like Shylock must necessarily have been based in older rhetorical tropes. Of course, this is just not true. Not only was there contact between English men and women and Jews on the continent in the period, but there was also a Jewish presence in England itself in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. In addition, there were also significant numbers of what were called *conversos*: women and men with Jewish roots whose families had converted under the threat of death or expulsion.

The issue of *conversos* was of major importance in early modern Europe. While for centuries Christian Europe had maintained a belief that Jews were categorically and visibly different than Christians—they supposedly looked different, smelled, and were possessed of certain stereotypical characteristics like a hooked nose or red hair—by the late sixteenth century it had become clear that this was not the case. Following a number of events in Europe that spurred on paranoia that anyone might secretly be a Jew, key among them the Spanish Inquisition, the Jew moved from being something that was categorically and visibly different to someone who was not so easy to distinguish from the Christian.<sup>2</sup> This shift raised a number of issues in the period, not the least of which was the fear that one might turn Jew—something that, as Shapiro notes, Shakespeare and his contemporaries addressed again and again. The obsession with the presence of Jews, or supposed Jews in the case of *conversos*, was so great that, as

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<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the role the Spanish Inquisition inspiring on fears of secret juice, see Shapiro's *Shakespeare and the Jews* (34-63).

Shapiro observes, “virtually every major writing, theologian, and political figure of that period at some point” wrestled with what Shapiro calls “Jewish questions” (24). However, as Shapiro argues, such questions seemed to have less to do with understanding Jews and Jewishness than they did with understanding what it meant to be English. Jews, especially *conversos*, were a part of everyday life, but more than that they were a feared threat to the Gentile British conception of everyday life.

England was at a time of pointed epistemological and ideological uncertainty in the closing years of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In this period of extraordinary social, political, and religious upheaval, precisely what it meant to be English was in a state of flux. One way to address this lack of a define Englishness was through a process of negative predication, to “identify those who were English by pointing to those who were assuredly not” (26). The expulsion and extended absence of Jews from England meant that in part Englishness could be defined as opposed to Jewishness. After all, to be Jewish was to deny the Christian foundations of Englishness that had only been amplified during the English Reformation.

The expulsion and exclusion of Jews and Jewishness from England, however, was not by itself sufficient when Shakespeare was writing to shore up the ideology of what it meant to be English. Despite the expulsion and exclusion of Jews, there was a pervasive fear that there were Jews, and more pointedly *conversos*, in England. This fear of secret Jews threatened to undermine attempts to use Jewishness as a way to better understand Englishness. The solution in the work of Shakespeare and his contemporaries was to make a visible the invisible, to locate Jewishness on the body of a particular Jew like Skylock that would, in turn, make it possible to use the Jew as a prop. More than merely expressions of anti-Semitism, then, the caricature Jew

of Shakespeare's England was a figure created out of the need for certainty in the face of uncertainty.

Read through the lens of Shapiro's interest in the prevalence of Jewish questions in the period, the Jew on the stage and page in Shakespeare's England becomes a way of dealing with issues of identity by projecting onto an imagined other a kind of in-Englishness—a way of using the stage to help determine “Which is the merchant here? And which the Jew” (4.1.174). In addition to providing a robust framework for understanding Shakespeare's crafting of Shylock that takes into account the complex role that the Jew played in the early modern English imagination, Shapiro's argument also helps us understand how the Jew was conceptualized as queer.

### **The Jew as Queer**

This change in our sense of Jews were seen to be during Shakespeare's time has led us to a point where we can explore the extent to which such engagements with the Jew, and particular Shakespeare's engagement with the Jew in the figure of Shylock, are an engagement with the Jew as queer. As I have argued in previous chapters, the queer has been discussed in the work of Lee Edelman as that figure which embraces ostensibly selfish desires that frustrate heteronormative reproduction. The queer attempts to sate her own desires despite, or even because, how much doing so will disrupt heteronormativity. As Edelman argues, in that fashion, the queer comes to occupy the place of the death drive in the cultural imagination; hence the queer comes to stand as that which opposes reproduction and thereby life itself. As was the case with both the Catholic and the Jew, Edelman's conception of the queer is once again a powerful tool to understand the early modern English engagement with the figure of the Jew. This link

will become clear if we consider how representations of the Jew in the period construct the Jew not merely as other or as threatening, but specifically as threats to ordered reproduction in the period.

At the heart of this argument is the extent to which the Jew, as James Shapiro has argued, was reconstructed a way to secure English identity through negative predication. This process of defining the self in opposition to the Jew can be reframed in terms, again, of what Kristeva has termed “abjection,” the process of casting off that which the self sees as anomalous, disgusting, abhorrent, and opposed to a conventional view of life, all in a way that allows the self to separate itself from that which both originates in the self but necessarily challenges its coherence. For Kristeva, abjection is a response to just the kind of breakdown in meaning that Shapiro describes in his treatment of Jewish question, a thinking-through of the power of anti-Semitism to shore up meaning similar to how Kristeva addresses the work of Céline in the second half of her *Powers of Horror*. In the midst of uncertainty regarding precisely what it meant to be English at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Jew, and more specifically the *converso*, could be cast off as something opposed to a standard vision of life in a way that provided some sense of identity to those who were not “the other.” Reframing the construction of the Jew in Shakespeare’s England as being rooted in a process of abjection allows us to understand how and why we might understand the Jew as queer, since it seems very clear that the Jew is being cast off as a threat to life and in the service of developing and preserving Gentile identity. What is more, in Shakespeare in particular, this process is often accomplished in ways that are focused explicitly on sexuality and reproduction. As we will see, it’s not merely that the Jew is somehow different or other, but is different or other in ways that challenge heteronormative fecundity.

As Shapiro details in *Shakespeare and the Jews*, there was a tendency in the early modern English imagination to link the Jew to a number of supposed physical characteristics that set off the Jew as other. Of particular interest to Shapiro was the persistent belief in the period that Jews were black and that they smelled, tropes that fit well with enactments of abjection. That Jews were black, something that Shapiro locates in mythologies of the Jewish race and nation during this period, served as a key marker of their difference for many: they were thought black so “that they may be known by other nations to be that people whom God had punished and rejected” (Fletcher 56 qtd. in Shapiro 175). This mark of blackness was joined by the *foetor judaicus*, the “unusually persistent belief that a hereditary feature transmitted by Jews was their stench” (36). This understanding of the Jew as marked by physical difference was at least partially responsible for the correspondence between early modern treatments of the Jew and the figure of the stage Jew that I discussed above.<sup>3</sup> But, as Charles Edelman notes, while such stereotypes may have been common in the work of some of Shakespeare’s contemporaries, there is little or no reference to these particular stereotypes in Shakespeare’s Shylock. As Edelman himself puts it,

If that [caricature of the stage Jew] is the picture we want . . . we have gone outside of *The Merchant of Venice* to see it, since, as Gross reminds us, however ubiquitous stories about Hugh of Lincoln and well poisoners might have been, none of the traditional charges are alluded to in the play: nothing about Christ killers, sorceress, ritual murders, crucifiers of children, or host-desecrators. (101)

Where others like Marlowe had explicitly drawn attention to these physical differences in *The Jew of Malta*, Shakespeare seems to have avoided them.

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<sup>3</sup> Given the relative cost and paucity of costumes in the period, we cannot overlook the possibility that some of the affections the stage Jew shared with earlier portrayals of Judas and Satan might have resulted from the desire to reuse costumes on hand as much as any programmatic attempt to link associate the Jews with those groups.

Even so, while Shakespeare may not have employed some of the most common anti-Semitic tropes that were popular in the period, he did employ other stereotypes that were rooted in issues of sexuality and reproduction. Of particular interest to the present study is the extent to which Shakespeare seized upon two stereotypes associated with the Jew: the Jew as circumciser and as usurer. It is these two stereotypical associations that I want to argue can help us see precisely how Shakespeare rendered the Jew as pointedly queer. Focusing on the Jew in Shakespeare as circumciser and as usurer allows us to see a Shylock who, though often invisibly so, is nonetheless working to disrupt English reproduction *either* by making the Christian the Jew through circumcision *or* by fostering a monstrous reproduction through usury that would, in turn, frustrate the heteronormative reproduction so essential to England's emerging identity.

There has been a great deal of work in recent years that explores the role that circumcision played in early modern England -- and more specifically in *The Merchant of Venice*.<sup>4</sup> In the early modern English imagination, circumcision did double work. It both threatened to mark one off as a Jew and also carried with it an additional threat of possible castration. There was a common fear in the period, one that Shapiro finds permeating every imaginable kind of writing from ballads to broadside and from plays to polemics, that Jews would kidnap Christians and have them forcibly circumcised. This particular fear was so potent in Shakespeare's England that it was often referred to simply as the "Jewish Crime." Not only was this a fear of the physical harm that might be perpetrated, but it was also a fear, engendered by the transition away from the Jew as obvious other to the Jew as potentially invisible, that any particular person might be made Jew. This idea of turning Jew was one that, as Shapiro notes,

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<sup>4</sup> Here again Shapiro provides the authoritative treatment. See his chapter "The Pound of Flesh" in *Shakespeare and the Jews* (113-130).

Shakespeare himself plays with numerous times (29), and it revealed an urgent anxiety at the time about what it meant to be English.

The more extreme version of this supposed Jewish crime, as I note above, was that Christians would not just be forcibly circumcised, but they would, in fact, be castrated. This supposed extreme even more clearly disrupts the reproductive logic that was so important to England at a time when its future was anything but certain. Castration meant the lack of the ability to produce children, the lack of progeny, and the impossibility of securing a future through reproduction. This threat was particularly terrifying when anyone could be a secret Jew. By casting off such figures via abjection, Gentiles might feel that they could thwart this particular fear. If the Jew could be identified, if the Jew could be marked and labeled as opposed to the heteronormative order and then separated from the emerging sense of self, then the possibility of forced circumcision or castration could supposedly be reduced and a sense of identity could be maintained.

Alongside the fear that a Jew might forcibly circumcise a Christian or even castrate him was a second stereotype embodied by Shylock, that of the Jew as usurer. Fear of “the Jewish crime” was a fear that Jews might use physical violence as a way to frustrate reproduction. The fears stemming from usury took this threat a step further, since, in this view, reproduction was not only disrupted but possibly replaced by a perverse kind of reproduction. The link between usury and disordered reproduction has been well established in the work of Arthur L. Little Jr., Jody Greene, and Will Fisher. In Little’s words, “usury does not differ profoundly from sodomy” at Shakespeare’s time and in fact “usury stands for sodomy” in the *Merchant of Venice* (220). The sodimical nature of usury puts it squarely in the realm of deviance, but we must be careful not to confuse sodomy with non-reproduction too quickly. While usury was linked with deviant

sexual practices, it was also linked with a kind of reproduction in which money begets money in ways that ostensibly reproduce Jewishness.

These supposed challenges to and disruptions of orderly and normative hetero-reproduction represented by the “Jewish crime” and usury, we must remind ourselves, were of interest to Shakespeare at a time when England was in a very precarious position. English identity at the end of the sixteenth century was, as I have suggested already, linked to a nascent sense of Protestantism that provided the foundations for what Benedict Anderson has called an “imagined community.” As constituted in the early modern English imagination, the Jew was seen to be working against this project. Tied up in Judaism itself was a denial of Christianity, and by extension Christian England, that manifested itself in a wide variety of stereotypes that were prevalent in the period. Taking together, then, the “Jewish crime” and usury were not simply an assault on reproduction at the level of the individual unfortunate enough to fall under the sway of the Jew’s supposed power. Instead, these entanglements threatened to disrupt the reproduction of an entire state.

This more complicated understanding of the role of the Jews in the early modern English imagination that has emerged in last 20 years can now help us understand how the Jew occupies the space of what we might call queerness. Jews were not merely bogeyman embraced because of some kind of unthinking and universal anti-Semitism in Shakespeare’s England. In the dominant ideology of Shakespeare’s world, Jews desired to disrupt normative reproduction at the same time they embraced their own ostensibly perverse desires for usury. In other words, Jews were queer.

### **Shylock as Queer**

Reading the Jew as queer in the way I have suggested above allows us to reassess Shakespeare's Shylock. As I noted earlier, Shylock has most often been discussed in terms of anti-Semitic or philosemitic impulses, as a character that is either, in the words of D.M. Cohen "crudely anti-Semitic" (53) or which rises above such anti-Semitism. In other words, Shylock has been read in ways that have more to do with our own view of the world than they do with what Shakespeare may have been drawing on and attempting to accomplish. Read through the lens of queer theory, Shylock becomes less a reflection of the simple Christian-Jewish binaries invoked by some modern readings of his character and more of a provocative attempt to deal with what it means to be English at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

The first step in recognizing Shylock as a queer Jew is drawing out the extent to which the *Merchant of Venice* is a play that at its core deals with questions of reproduction. This "core" may not be as immediately clear here as it was in plays like *I Henry VI* and *Titus Andronicus*. Both of those plays dealt overtly with issues of succession following the death of a sovereign. This is certainly not the case in *Merchant of Venice*. However, if we look carefully, we will find that, despite different packaging, the *Merchant of Venice* is every bit as interested in issues of reproduction as the other plays I have addressed in this study. As Arthur L. Little Jr. and Mark Shell have both noted, production and reproduction are at the center of the play. In Little's words, "Marriage depends on a properly regulated heterosexuality—that is, a heterosexuality that policies and balances the relationship between sexual and material production" (219). From the beginning of the play, the action of the *Merchant of Venice* seems to center on the eventual marriage of Bassanio and Portia and on ensuring that marriage is stable and that it engages both sexual and material (re)production in ways that are appropriate to a heteronormative world. From the very first scene in which Bassanio seeks financial help from Antonio to travel to Belmont and

woo Portia, everything the play aims at either bringing Bassanio and Portia together or strengthening their union to ensure the marriage can lead to what its dominant ideology sees and healthy and socially-valuable reproduction.

Stepping back from the particulars of the play, it is not too difficult to see how this focus on the need to ensure orderly and heteronormative reproduction draws on reproductive anxiety in Shakespeare's England in much the same way that *I Henry VI* and *Titus Andronicus* did. At the time the *Merchant of Venice* was first written and performed, it had long since become clear Elizabeth I would not find the kind of match that Portia's father has tried to ensure for her and that Elizabeth would accordingly not produce an heir. This failure of Elizabeth to secure an ideal match had left England in a precarious position within which the memory of recent social, political, and religious turmoil—and a longer history of such things that went back to the Wars of the Roses that the *Henry VI* plays recall—also threatened to be the future of the nation as well. While it was too late for Elizabeth and for England to secure the kind of orderly reproduction that it might have desired, this desideratum could be accomplished within the world of the play. It is this impulse to ensure orderly and heteronormative reproduction within *The Merchant of Venice* that Shylock as queer threatens to overthrow.

Shylock's assault on heteronormative reproduction in the play begins from almost the first moment we meet him. While the bond he signs with Antonio initially seems as though it will, in fact, drive the desired and normative reproduction forward, the bond actually ends up threatening reproduction. While Bassanio, Antonio, and others are working to secure reproduction through the deal they have made, Shylock is working in the opposite direction. He has no interest in the marriage of Bassanio and Portia and no stake in the broader heteronormative world of the play. Instead, Shylock's interests are entirely self-focused. Shylock

has an interest in having his money beget more money and in getting vengeance against Antonio and by extension the Christian world. The first of these is evident if we explore a little more deeply just how much Shylock associates money and usury with an ostensibly perverted view of reproduction that runs counter to heteronormative sexuality.

While Shylock does not attach interest to his bond with Antonio, he makes it clear at numerous points in the play how central usury is to his identity as a Jew. In doing so, Shylock is staking out a case for his own investment in what has been described by Green, Fisher, and Little as a sodimical desire—the desire for sexual gratification in ways that cannot possibly end in heteronormative reproduction and, in the case of usury, actually ends in what was long held to be an unnatural reproduction. This conundrum is all the more clear if we remember that usury is tied up in desire and reproduction in ways that produce only more money and not the child that is, as Little notes, “*the sign of (heterosexual) civil order*” (218). This tangle becomes clearer if we consider Shylock’s response to Jessica’s running off with Lorenzo. While Shylock has good reason to be perturbed that his daughter has run off with a Christian—especially given the ills done him by Christian characters in the world of the play and the fact that she has both defied him and robbed him—his response to the situation is telling. According to the account provided by Solanio, Shylock does not call after just his daughter, but after his daughter and his ducats: “My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter!” (2.8.15). Shylock conflates daughter and ducats; he conflates that child that is the normal and proper end to heteronormative reproduction with the ingredients and products of usury. At this moment, Shylock’s desire for the return of his daughter and the return of his money are seemingly inseparable. The two are one in his mind. Given this blurring of differences, it is not surprising that Shylock seems to take little interest in

the other kinds of heteronormative reproduction going on the play. In his mind, reproduction is as much about the unnatural reproduction of usury as much as it is about biological reproduction.

While Shylock thereby registers his engagement in kinds of reproduction that are, to borrow a phrase from Francis Meres' *Palladas Tamia* (1598) "sterile and barren" (qtd. in Greene 11), the play also makes it clear that he is interested, not just in unnatural replication, but also in disrupting heteronormative reproduction. In his famous speech in 3.1, Shylock notes that Antonio has often spurned him for no other reason than that he is a Jew. In Shylock's words:

He hath disgrac'd me, and hind' red me half a million, laugh'd at my losses,  
mock'd at my gains, scorn'd my nation, thwarted my bargains, cool'd my friends,  
heated mine enemies; and what's his reason? I am a Jew. (3.1.53-57)

This litany of abuses has driven Shylock to make an investment not in the marriage of Bassanio and Portia but in an arrangement that might provide him a chance to enact revenge on his tormenter. This deception is most clear if we consider that Shylock makes the cost of the forfeiture of the bond a pound of Antonio's flesh. As James Shapiro has noted, the pound of flesh in *The Merchant of Venice* is inextricably tied up with what is known as the "Jewish Crime," with the abduction and forcible circumcision or even castration of Christian males by Jews. The pound of flesh is not simply a pound of flesh, but rather a verbal marker of this deeper threat. Accordingly, the fact that this pound of flesh is described as being both "what part of [Antonio's] body pleaseth me (1.3.128) and "nearest [Antonio's] heart" (4.1.22) is important. These descriptions drive home the fact that Shylock's conditions on the bond aim both at satisfying his disordered or unnatural desire to see money beget money and does so in ways that cut to the core of the Christian desire in the play for ordered, heteronormative reproduction.

The contrast between Shylock's unnatural desires and the heteronormative desires of seemingly everyone else in the play comes to something of a head when Shylock pursues his bond in front of first the Duke of Venice and then Portia in Act 4, Scene 1. Arguing that "by our holy Sabbath" (4.1.36), a reminder that Shylock's "our" is very different from the Christian "our" of Venice, Shylock is very clear that his aim is to satisfy his own desires. As he is being questioned by the Duke, Shylock refuses to provide a reason for his fervent pursuit of the bond and goes so far as to say "I am not bound to please thee with my answers" (4.1.65). More than a mere rejection of what he seems to think is a rigged game, Shylock is at this moment reminding us that he rejects both the authority and the logic of the state. He will pursue what he desires and not what he is ordered to desire, and he will do so even though and perhaps even because it will undercut the state. Shylock makes this stance clear as he continues to reject every offer for an alternate satisfaction of the bond. He will have the pound of flesh "'nearest his heart'" (4.1.238) or he will have nothing—he will enact the supposed "Jewish Crime" and ensure that reproduction is impossible at all costs. Having been so long spurned for pursuing his own desires, Shylock has now declared all-out war on the reproductive futurity of his persecutors.

What is clear at this point is that Shylock's desire to promote disordered reproduction and to frustrate a heteronormative future stands in opposition to the reproduction of the English nation itself. If we recall that England is in a precarious position of reproduction and that what is being reproduced is a nascent Christian state, albeit a Protestant one, then the threat in Shylock's attempt to frustrate heteronormative reproduction, or to turn members of the city secretly Jewish, is a potent one. It's not simply the case that Shylock is a stereotypical Jew or that he desires negative things; his desire is for the eventual end of Christendom at a time when the notion of

Christianity was bound up inextricably with the still-emerging English nation. Shylock is therefore queer, particularly in Edelman's sense of that word.

In this connection, we should also remember that Shylock is not the only character that critics have read as embracing ostensibly disordered desires in *The Merchant of Venice*. As Arthur L. Little Jr. reminds us, "The short reading of *The Merchant of Venice* is that Antonio wants to 'marry' Bassanio" (216). Antonio's homoerotic desire for Bassanio has been a point of interest for many, but, as Jonathan Freedman has observed, there is a crucial difference between Antonio's desire and Shylock's. While Shylock's desires in the play remain unchecked until the end, something to which I will return later, Antonio's desires are, from the outset, rechanneled in ways that actually prop up heteronormative reproduction. Far from threatening or disrupting anything, Antonio's love for Bassiano becomes a driving force that moves the play towards the marriage of Bassanio and Portia and therefore towards reproduction.

By now it seems clear that what Shakespeare is doing with Shylock is something different than generations of critics have suggested. Read through the lens of queer theory, Shylock is not an expression of anti-Semitism or philosemitism. Shylock is the Jew as queer that poses a threat to the ordered reproduction of the world of the play at a time when reproduction is anything but assured. Reading Shylock in this way not only helps us to understand the character better but also provides some additional insight into the play itself. When we read Shylock as an instance of the Jew as queer, it becomes clear that, as is the case with so many of Shakespeare's plays, the *Merchant of Venice* plumbs the depths of what precisely it means to be English. By crafting Shylock as a queer Jew, Shakespeare is setting up the playhouse as a place in which his culture stages conflicts over what constitutes identity in late 16<sup>th</sup>-century England. More specifically, this comedy becomes a way to think through the precarious state of the English

nation. Absent a clear sense of what it meant to be English,, as Shapiro reminds us, the *Merchant of Venice* gives us both a representation of what Englishness is not and provides a cathartic way of both recognizing the Jew and censuring him in service to an act of abjection that shores up a sense of the Gentile and heteronormative self.

That Shylock represents a challenge to Englishness is evident if we consider the extent to which Venice is a figure for England in the play. As both David McPherson and Virginia Mason Vaughan have noted, Venice was a popular metaphor for England for Shakespeare and his contemporaries. Like Venice in the 1590s, England was an island nation that felt beset on all fronts by forces that might be hostile to it. When we read the larger world of Venice in the play, Belmont included, as representing England, it becomes clear that Shylock's queer desires are a threat not just to the world of the play but to everyday life for an English audience. Accordingly, the censure of Shylock at the end of the play by Portia is especially symbolic. Near the end of the play, Portia enacts what seems to be a crippling sentence on Shylock: he is to forfeit both his goods and his life. The death sentence is commuted by the Duke almost immediately, and shortly thereafter Antonio says that Shylock can keep his goods, without which, says Shylock, he is nothing, provided that Shylock passes his goods on to Jessica and Lorenzo and that Shylock becomes a Christian.

On the surface, such a sentence seems to be the ideal way to deal with Shylock. Forcibly converted, and thus no longer legally able to pursue usury, Shylock has seemingly been rendered non-threatening. However, we cannot let it escape us that Portia's judgment against Shylock mirrors what happened to Jews in England's history. The Edict of Expulsion in 1290 had banned Jews from England, though it was not as if Jewish men and women simply picked up and left. Rather, it was not entirely uncommon for Jewish families to convert when faced with the

prospects of expulsion or death. The penalty handed down against Shylock thus seems to simply repeat something that has already happened and that, given the fear of *conversos* in Shakespeare's England, had not been all that effective. It is hard to imagine that Shakespeare sees Shylock's punishment and subsequent conversion as being any more potentially effective than the conversions that had come before it. In a world where the fear of *conversos* and the threats they posed to an uncertain sense of Englishness—part of the the driving force behind the need to create Shylock in the first place—the play ends with Shylock becoming yet another *converso*. In other words, the play, a tool ostensibly crafted shore up our identity, is also a potent reminder that this identity is forever fraught and unstable and that the queer, as I have defined it here, is a necessary evil of sorts. Shakespeare seems to understand at this moment that the processes by which identity is established, the processes of abjection and queering, are processes that could potentially undercut themselves even as they continue to be necessary for the construction and preservation of an English identity.

## **Conclusion**

The *Merchant of Venice* is a play and Shylock an antagonist that have long drawn both ire and praise for the way they present Jews and Jewishness. By and large, those praising and railing against the play and its antagonist have done so without taking critical stock of the role Jews played in the imagination of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. What I hope I have shown in this chapter is that such goals are, as James Shapiro suggests, misguided. To read *The Merchant of Venice* in this way is to insert ourselves too much into it. This is not to say, of course, that we cannot read the present back in the past, and doing so can allow Shakespeare's plays to become important tools for our efforts to understanding ourselves. However, situating

his plays in the context of Shakespeare's England opens up pathways that ultimately open out both Shakespeare's world and our own. Reading Shylock as queer allows us to see Shakespeare as a man working through complex philosophical and ideological problems in a nation undergoing an identity crisis. Further, it reveals for us the extent to which the reproduction of the state was anything but certain in the minds of Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

Shakespeare crafts Shylock in a way that allows his audience to see that which they fear. Shylock becomes a body on which to locate the fears about Jews and secret Jews and their desire to wreak havoc on Christian England. He also provides a body that can accordingly be tracked, judged, and censured. The irony is, of course, that in doing all this Shakespeare at once provides something cathartic -- so much so that we can imagine the audience celebrating alongside Gratiano when he hails the turn of fortunes at Shylock's trial, exclaiming "O learned judge! Mark, Jew, a learned judge!" (4.1.301) -- but he also intimates something troubling in the process. Shylock's punishment, though possibly cathartic in the moment, is somewhat hollow in the end. In subjecting Shylock nearly the same treatment that Jews had faced following the Edict of Expulsion, Shakespeare reminds us that attempts to use the Jew as a scapegoat in the way he is doing in the play only defer the problem. Banishing what terrifies us and threatens our sense of identity may be a useful tactic in the short term, Shakespeare suggests, but the sense of identity such actions provide is only a temporary construction in the face of changing and changeable cultural values.

## Conclusion

Throughout this project, I have been working to demonstrate that Shakespeare crafts Joan La Pucelle, Aaron, and Shylock as queer religious others that threaten to disrupt heteronormative reproduction. I have also argued that, in these characterizations, Shakespeare is working to use the queer as a tool for shoring up English identity at a time during which what precisely it meant to be English was up for grabs. As I suggested in the introduction to this project, I believe that reading these characters as I am suggesting has three principal benefits: it resuscitates our comprehension of characters who have all-too-often been dismissed or oversimplified; it helps us recognize that Shakespeare is not a transcendent mouthpiece of humanity but rather an artist writing for his supper; and it can tell us something about ourselves, all at the same time. Concurrently, too, reading Shakespeare's religious others as queer encourages a return to the particulars of Shakespeare's world and a careful attendance to the cultural work his plays are doing, even it also can spur us on to rethink our own world. In this conclusion, I want to revisit each of these claims, with a particular emphasis on the last one.

The first benefit, and likely the most obvious one, is that reading Joan, Aaron, and Shylock as queer has the potential, as I have suggested throughout this project, to resuscitate

these all-to-often maligned characters for today's audiences. Joan, Aaron, and Shylock have all had troubled critical histories. Both Joan and Aaron have consistently been viewed as lesser creations. Consistently judged by unfair standards, including their lack of supposed consistency and the fact that they do not look like the kinds of characters we might expect to find in Shakespeare, discussions of Joan and Shylock seem more likely to elicit a groan than anything else. While Shylock has undoubtedly garnered much more critical attention than even Joan and Aaron combined, and while that attention has sometimes come in the form of praise, he too has been misunderstood. Consistent attempts to read Shylock as being clearly and simply anti-Semitic or philosemitic -- attempts that are almost always, as a rule, rooted in the politics of the critic -- have too often stripped away the complexity of the character and reduced him to an ideological prop.

Reading Joan, Aaron, and Shylock as queer allows us to remedy these ills of the critical tradition. When we read these characters as queer, it becomes much more difficult to read Joan and Aaron as less than Shakespeare's other creations or to assume that we can continue to make Shylock speak for us. Queer theory helps us to militate against the presumption of deficiency in Joan and Aaron as well as the tendency to erase the complexity of Shylock. What is revealed in the process is that these characters are perhaps more than we thought they were, that Shakespeare crafted queer religious others with an adept hand and a keen understanding of how such characters could help to shore up an increasingly vulnerable sense of identity in an England that faced an uncertain future.

While the most obvious benefit of this project is the resuscitation of Joan, Aaron, and Shylock, I also want to suggest there are much bigger issues at stake. Reading these characters as queer requires that we work to recognize that *I Henry VI*, *Titus Andronicus*, and *The*

*Merchant of Venice* do genuine and specific cultural work in Shakespeare's England. There seems to be a tendency to want to view Shakespeare on our terms. I have had the great fortune to work with some incredible students in the Shakespeare classes I have been teaching for the past five years at Arizona State University's Downtown Phoenix campus, and they have been a continual source of inspiration as well as catalysts to rethinking the things I thought I knew. However, I have also noticed that they all seem to come to the classroom with the belief that the main value in Shakespeare is that we can relate to his texts and better understand ourselves. There is, of course, a kernel of truth in this (something to which I will return in a few moments), but I have been struck by the extent to which the students with whom I have worked have been encouraged to see Shakespeare as merely a tool that can be decontextualized in service to our own needs. Moreover, while I do not doubt that there are myriad reasons why students just emerging from adolescence might take such an approach to Shakespeare and that there might be a natural self-centeredness in them that is yet to be rooted out, I refuse to believe that everything can be explained by the seemingly inevitable solipsism of youth.

If we briefly survey the innumerable tools available to students who are working to understand the work of Shakespeare, it's hard to miss a tendency to read Shakespeare as the poet of universal human nature, as less a man from Stratford and more the "Bard of Avon." While we would be foolish to ignore Shakespeare's knack for crafting plays that seem to have a timeless quality to them, we can't allow ourselves to fall into the trap of forgetting that Shakespeare was writing in a very particular time and place. Yes, Shakespeare has been translated into every imaginable language and transported to every imaginable country, but this is not a justification to forget that he also had his own language and his own country. When our first impulse is to dress up Shakespeare's work to better suit our own sensibilities—an

impulse that everyone seems to agree did considerable damage to Shakespeare in the Victorian era and yet is acted upon almost reflexively now—we miss something profoundly important.

Reading Shakespeare's Joan, Aaron, and Shylock as queer reminds us that we cannot impulsively decontextualize Shakespeare and his work. It forces us to remember that Shakespeare's world is not ours and that we need to take time to consider the work that these texts were doing in Shakespeare's England. This is not to say that we cannot talk about the ways in which these plays might deal with universal human truths (although there are problems when we take this too far). However, we must recognize that Shakespeare writes and produces his plays at a very particular time and place and that we must bear this in mind if we are to read the work of Shakespeare himself and not of the various Shakespeares that we might imagine.

Finally, I want to turn to what I see as being the last and most important benefit of reading Shakespeare's Joan, Aaron, and Shylock as queer. Reading these characters as queer provides a model for understanding how the way we imagine religious others often has less to do with reality than it does with the need to shore up our fragile sense of identity at the moments that we feel the most vulnerable. While this might, at first glance, seem to run counter to the claim that reading Shakespeare's religious others as queer pushes us back towards the text, I want to argue that in being pushed back to the text we are inevitably forced to rethink what we know about ourselves and our world

People like to heap praise on Shakespeare, and, at one time or another, he and his work have likely been graced with every possible superlative and praise that we could imagine. He is a poet and a philosopher -- and very often the voice of our better angels that might shout down our demons. Our opinion of Shakespeare seems to be so high that we rush to claim him

as one of our own. In fact, this phenomenon is so common that it's even jokingly referenced in the film *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country* (1991) where a Chancellor Gorkon claims that "You've not experienced Shakespeare until you have read him in the original Klingon." It seems that Shakespeare's work is so profound and his stature so large that, by the 23<sup>rd</sup> century he will become not just the poet of humanity but of sentient species across the universe.

The problem is, of course, that while we are quite comfortable heaping praise on Shakespeare, this too often seems to come at the expense of looking at him critically. This is not, to be sure, true of each and every engagement with Shakespeare. As I have noted throughout this project, there seems to be a growing interest in looking at Shakespeare more critically and in his own context. Having said this, the impulse to see the best in Shakespeare, and with it to assume he represents the best of an in us, remains dominant. It is also worth noting that in continually recreating Shakespeare in our own image, we fail to recognize that we make him a prop of the very kinds of ideologies we might embrace. And, as has become increasingly evident in the United States in the past few years, this very often means claiming Shakespeare for a logic of white supremacy that is still very much a part of our national identity.

There are a number of ways of resisting the urge to see Shakespeare as one dimensional and ultimately a reflection of our best selves. Unpacking Shakespeare's crafting of Joan, Aaron, and Shylock as queer is one of them. When we pay careful attention to the way Shakespeare seizes upon widespread stereotypes of religious others that feed a politics of fear, we recognize that as a person who was equally a businessman and artist and thus all too willing to feed the machinery of fear in service to putting backsides in the audience. We are

reminded that Shakespeare did not always transcend the world in which he lived, but sometimes catered to it even when he challenged it to think about the social issues of his moment. Further, we are reminded that we too are not immune to the draw of feeding the crowd. In other words, we are reminded that Shakespeare sometimes represents the worst in our humanity – a worst that continues in both similar and altered ways today -- and that we might not be the enlightened individuals we may want to be.

In sum, my hope is that reading Shakespeare's treatment of religious others in *I Henry VI*, *Titus Andronicus*, and *The Merchant of Venice* requires that we rethink our relationships with the characters, the plays, Shakespeare, and ourselves. These are, of course, innumerable routes to this same end, but I think this approach has been a most revealing one.

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