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BOOK REVIEW

Blood Relations: Christian and Jew in *The Merchant of Venice*. Janet Adelman. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008. Pp. xi+226.

Janet Adelman (1941–2010) was a major force of innovation in the field of Shakespeare studies and Renaissance literature. Her book *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, "Hamlet" to "The Tempest"* (1992) remains one of the most cited works of psychoanalytic feminist criticism of Shakespeare. As professor at the University of California, Berkeley, from 1968 to 2007, Adelman had a shaping influence on several generations of undergraduate and graduate students. *Blood Relations*, the final monograph in her illustrious career, extends Adelman's groundbreaking studies of gender, psyche, and culture in Renaissance drama into problems of religion and ethnicity, combining historicism with psychoanalysis, feminism, and race theory in order to craft a nuanced account of the hermeneutic and political world of Shakespeare's England.

Like Kenneth Gross's *Shylock Is Shakespeare* (2006), also published by the University of Chicago Press, Adelman is fascinated with the fate of the conversos—Jews who underwent forced conversion to Christianity in Spain in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Whereas for Gross the plight of the conversos signifies above all the passage of direct forms of Jewish identity into the innuendos and subterfuges of modern thought, for Adelman the conversos represent the possibility of English contact with actual Jews whose persistence ultimately indicated both the origins of Christianity in Judaism and the imperfect character of all conversion: "The conversos were Jews who had become Catholics who had become Protestants who were—maybe—still Jews after all" (11). In Spain, forced conversion ended not with the successful assimilation of the "New Christians" into Spanish life but rather in the formulation of blood laws designed to keep the Jewish

element separate from the rest of Christian society. Adelman argues that contact with Spanish conversos in London led Englishmen such as John Foxe and William Shakespeare to conceive of Judaism as a race rather than a religion: “Proto-racialized thinking about conversos appears to have been both conceptually available and conceptually useful to Shakespeare’s contemporaries” (77). Much of the work of *Blood Relations* consists in hunting down the iconography of race—above all the language of blood but also images of skin color and bodily stigmata—in order to argue that “the process of racialization” was “a response to the prospect of Jewish conversion” (78).

Whereas Gross attends almost exclusively to Shylock, Adelman’s book, built out of a set of intricate readings of the play in relation to contemporary biblical commentaries, sermons, tracts, and entertainments, reserves its most brilliant analyses not for the stage’s most famous Jew but for other less examined characters and incidents. Highlights include her readings of the clown Launcelot’s “conversion” from the Jew’s service to the Christian’s; Jessica’s vexed place between the “blood” of protoracial thinking and the “manners” of a more humanist account of religious affiliation; Morocco and Aragon’s relationship to emerging typologies of race and nation; and Antonio’s enigmatic sadness, which she reads as an expression of Shakespeare’s own simultaneous desire for and resistance to self-disclosure. It is as if Adelman, perhaps in reaction to the dominance of Shylock in our memories of this play, decided to approach the question of Judaism from the wings rather than center stage in order to orchestrate a more varied and unexpected picture of the play’s religious and cultural fantasies.

Perhaps the strongest and most revelatory material in this richly textured, tautly argued book revolves around the Jacob and Esau story, long ago disclosed by Lars Engle as a crux of the play’s conversionary economies but subjected by Adelman to a much more thorough exegetical accounting. Her analysis of Jessica’s cross-dressing as a form of symbolic circumcision (“as though she must be marked as a member of the circumcised before she can be allowed to leave her father’s house” [100]) makes brave new sense of this familiar theatrical device. Adelman brilliantly brings the story of Dinah and her Shechemite rapists (circumcised and then slaughtered) to bear on Jessica’s relation to her Christian lover in order to argue that the fear of a conversionary circumcision of gentile by Jew governs the play’s imagery of cutting and bleeding.

Blood Relations perfects the historicist reading of the play, long in the making through the work of critics such as Mary Janell Metzger, M. Lindsay Kaplan, and Ania Loomba, while also pushing the historicist reading into new territories through Adelman’s distinctive attention to problems of gender and sexuality. Key components of the historicist reading include conceptualizing religion as a major tool of ideology and social control,

assembling a hermeneutic horizon defined by the author's historical location and attending to the birth of racial and nationalist thinking in the early modern period. Adelman's analysis delivers an expanded sense of England's demography and the forms of racial imagining required to manage that landscape, as well as new insights into the exegetical complexity of Shakespearean drama and evocative reframings of the play's minor characters.

As with any approach, there are costs as well as gains. By insisting on the racialization of the Jews in Shakespeare's drama, Adelman perhaps unintentionally devalues the theological and existential questions posed by Judaism as a religion. Although Adelman claims to read the book from her "perspective as a Jew" (ix), she brings little of the Jewish tradition itself to bear on the play. Adelman elucidates key stories such as Jacob and Esau, Dinah and the Shechemites, and Noah and his sons via many layers of Protestant commentary and polemic, but she leaves aside midrashic, Maimonidean, or modern Jewish interpretations. Is it not worth noting, however, that Jessica's division between "blood" and "manners" is not simply a Christian import but an existential tension resident within Judaism itself, which both accepts converts and jealously guards its borders? In Adelman's account, theological universalism is the dubious possession of Christianity. But what of universalist thinking inside Judaism, including the messianic movements that led to Christianity, but also to Sabbati Svi, the seventeenth-century messiah who has received so much recent attention in critical theory and Jewish philosophy?

Paul himself is the greatest example of the ambiguities of Jewish universalism, since he enunciated the humanist, egalitarian, and inclusive strains within Jewish thinking with such hermeneutic power that he ended up providing Christianity with its most potent anti-Jewish tropes and figures. Adelman's Paul belongs fully to Christianity understood as an ideological system; there is no attention in her book to Paul's own recourse on universalizing and messianic impulses within Judaism or to the recent Pauline renaissance in critical theory (Jacob Taubes, Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou), with its very different mapping of Paul's problems and promises.

To say that Adelman's Paul is Calvinist rather than messianic, or to note that her Old Testament is more Christian than Hebrew is not to criticize her readings, which pursue other goals and do so with brilliance, learning, and finesse. Jewish habits of reading are ultimately irrelevant to Adelman's historicist project, since such materials would not have been directly available to Shakespeare and his like-minded contemporaries. Readers will have to decide for themselves if Adelman's historicist account of *Merchant* makes sufficient sense of this play today or if we should supplement the racial reading of Shakespeare's Jews with other spheres of meaning and imagination. Such possibilities include the universe of Jewish literature and thought, the

discourse of citizenship and the public sphere nascent alongside racial thinking in early modern England, and conceptions of religion that favor the existential over the ideological, the Abrahamic over the sectarian.

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