

BRETT D. HIRSCH

“In the Likeness of a Jew”

Kabbalah and *The Merchant of Venice*

It has been argued that the Kabbalah influenced Shakespeare, and that evidence for this claim is to be found in *The Merchant of Venice*. This argument, first asserted by Daniel Banes in 1975 and reaffirmed in 1978,¹ has attracted little critical attention, save for tacit approval by the late Dame Frances Yates. In more detail, the Banes thesis is that the Kabbalah “inspired much of the romantic poetry” in *The Merchant* and that Shakespeare “artistically wove subtle Kabbalistic embellishments into the multi-stranded tapestry of his complex drama” (iv). Banes traces these Kabbalistic footprints back to their source, which he finds in the Christian Kabbalah of Francesco Zorzi (or Giorgio), highlighting parallels between the text of the play and Zorzi’s treatise *De harmonia mundi* (Venice, 1525), both in its Latin original and French translation, *L’Harmonie du monde* (Paris, 1578). Further parallels are drawn between particular scenes of *The Merchant* and a range of references to Kabbalah, Christian or otherwise. Although basing her opinion on Banes’s earlier and weaker (i.e., 1975) version of his thesis, Yates concludes that his “argument contains many valuable insights” and his “strong case” was weakened only by “high-handed procedure.”² Nonetheless, Yates is happy to affirm Banes’s position that “Shakespeare, like Spenser”

found the Christian Kabbalah “of the Friar of Venice congenial.”³ The suggestion is not of itself far-fetched and without merit, as recent studies have brought to light similar influences on other Early Modern authors, particularly Marlowe, Spenser, and Milton.⁴ My aim in this article is to embark upon a critical analysis of the Banes argument and the proofs offered in support by way of close examination of both the texts of the Kabbalah and the play. I propose to begin by first defining *Kabbalah*, and then outlining its development and appropriation by Christian authors, and its reception in Shakespeare’s England.

Kabbalah is a vexed and complex term, still under debate among academic circles.⁵ The dominant school of thought, primarily made up of former students of Gershom Scholem, essentially endorses the positions held by their late teacher. Joseph Dan, like Scholem, states that *Kabbalah* in Hebrew means *tradition*, and in our current context refers to “a particular kind of esoteric, secret tradition concerning the divine world,” which the Kabbalists believed was “given to Moses on Mount Sinai and was transmitted secretly from generation to generation.”⁶ It is this model of the Kabbalah that I will utilize in this article, since it is more consistent with the historical evidence and, more importantly, since it is the model adopted by Banes in his work.

Origins of Kabbalah

Kabbalah is usually broken into historical periods that roughly correspond to the production of a key text or the introduction of radical figures. For instance, the Kabbalah in its infancy is conventionally referred to as Early Kabbalah, emerging with the production of the *Sefer ha-Bahir* (Book of Brightness) in the twelfth century.⁷ The Early Kabbalah continues until the

composition of the *Sefer ha-Zohar* (Book of Splendour) in the thirteenth century, marking the beginning of an age where Jewish mystical thought received popularity, even from outside the Jewish community.⁸ This phase in the development of Kabbalah is referred to as Classical or Zoharic Kabbalah. Since its inception all subsequent Kabbalistic thought has tended toward commentary on and further development of the themes raised by the *Zohar*, to the point that the Kabbalah is often considered synonymous with the *Zohar* itself. As one critic has noted, "it would not be straining a comparison to say that what Marx's *Capital* has been to Communism the *Zohar* has been to Kabbalah."⁹

Although the *Zohar* continues to preoccupy the majority of critical attention by Kabbalists and scholars alike up to present times, the *way* in which the *Zohar* could be interpreted (as with other core texts) was revolutionized by the radical figure of Isaac Luria. Luria and his teachings signify the period referred to as Later or Lurianic Kabbalah. Essentially, Luria's revolutionary idea was to suggest that before the beginning of time "there was *never a state of perfection*" (emphasis mine), but rather "an innermost, hidden, potential crisis within the eternal Godhead." According to Luria, creation was flawed because certain elements, latent within the Godhead from the outset, refused to adopt the functions designated to them. This "primordial catastrophe" was described as *shevirah* (breaking of the vessels), and to rectify this Luria introduced the concept of *tikkun*, or "mending" (of the vessels). In practical terms, *tikkun* meant following the commandments and the performance of righteous deeds. In doing so, the divine "sparks" that were shattered would be, one by one, restored to their original glory. Put simply, Luria argued that God was *not* a perfect being, that creation was a flawed process, and it is up to humanity to restore the balance, transforming the Kabbalah "from a nonhistorical quest

for the secrets of the primordial process of creation” to “the historical quest for ultimate redemption.”¹⁰

The Lurianic Kabbalah did not only offer a dynamic approach to redemption, but a refiguring of many concepts and doctrines from earlier periods of development. For instance, the doctrine of metempsychosis (*gilgul*) received greater attention and became more flexible, allowing transmigration into all forms of nature where it had previously only conceded the migration from human soul into an animal body as a form of atonement for particularly heinous sins.¹¹ Similarly, the concept of *sefirot*, a “complex and dynamic structure of divine powers” which designate active “manifestations that are either part of the divine structure or directly related to the divine essence, serving as its vessels or instruments,”¹² was incorporated and reinterpreted into the Lurianic model. These divine emanations, in order, include: *keter elyon* (supreme crown) or simply *keter* (crown); *chokhmah* (wisdom); *binah* (intelligence or understanding); *gedullah* (greatness) or *chesed* (love); *gevurah* (strength or power) or *din* (judgment); *tiferet* (beauty) or *rachamim* (compassion); *netzach* (victory or endurance); *hod* (majesty); *yesod olam* (foundation of the world) or simply *yesod* (foundation); and *malkhut* (kingdom). Often the *sefirot* are aligned diagrammatically in the figure of a tree (the tree of emanation) or in the shape of a man (*Adam Kadmon*, the primordial man). The *sefirot* also function symbolically and metaphorically. For instance, the *sefirot* facilitated the creation of an ethical symbolism that aligned Biblical figures with particular *sefirah*, as well as accommodating systems of cosmology, aligning elements and cosmic entities with those of the *sefirot*.¹³

Having briefly outlined the development and concepts of the Kabbalah, we now turn to the phenomenon of the appropriation and integration of its symbols, sources, concepts and methodologies into

Christian culture during the Renaissance: the Christian Kabbalah. It is in this form that Banes argues that Shakespeare was not only privy to Kabbalistic imagery and symbolism, but that he actively wove them into his drama.

Christian Kabbalah

Keeping in mind the important distinction between Christian Kabbalah and Christian Hebraism,¹⁴ scholarly opinion is divided on the issue of which person or period marks the beginning of the former. The majority maintains that Giovanni Pico della Mirandola was the first Christian Kabbalist;¹⁵ others posit Ramon Lull,¹⁶ or argue that the movement began much earlier, either as an extension of the missionary activities of late thirteenth-century Spanish *conversos*¹⁷ or as the result of a possibly earlier transmission of Hebrew texts outside the Jewish community.¹⁸ None of the scholarly positions can claim absolute certainty as to when or who marks the birth of the Christian Kabbalah.

While it seems plausible that an earlier birth of the movement is possible, it would be safest to assume that Pico presents the first mainstream study. Italian Humanism, particularly the school of thought headed by Marsilio Ficino in the fifteenth century, undeniably laid the groundwork for mainstream Christian scholarly exposition of Hebrew sources, esoteric and otherwise. Ficino was "the first to argue that a single truth pervades all historical periods,"¹⁹ and Pico, as his successor, was eager to apply his master's concept of *prisca theologia* to the Mosaic period, to rediscover the secret wisdom of the Hebrews. In 1486, at the age of twenty-three, Pico produced some nine hundred theses, synthesizing Christian ideology with that of other religious traditions and science, and offered these for

public debate in Rome. Pico believed that the revelations recorded by Moses on Mount Sinai were, like the teachings of Orpheus, Pythagoras and Zoroaster, shrouded in secrecy; that spiritual, deeper understanding of such sacred truths was revealed only to a privileged few, i.e., the Kabbalists. For Pico, illuminating whatever divine truths Judaism had to offer was only possible through study of the Kabbalah.

Such an endeavor was bound to be difficult, if not overwhelming. Considering the enormous charge that Pico had taken upon himself, his results, albeit limited, were nothing short of amazing. Like him, his study was ambitious, imperfect, and reflected both youth and genius. Perhaps the insurmountable challenge for Pico was obtaining reliable source materials on the Kabbalah. Of the many scholarly attempts to catalogue the Kabbalistic influences on Pico,²⁰ the consensus seems to be that the Hebrew scholars of greatest influence included Elijah del Medigo, Flavius Mithridates and Jochanan Alemanno.²¹ Mithridates's involvement as translator played an enormous role in terms of both choice and translation of the materials on which Pico's Kabbalah was founded. His translations for Pico included works outside what is generally considered mainstream Kabbalah, and were, for want of a better term, misleading. The "symbolic language" of the Kabbalah was "sometimes transformed in the translations of Mithridates almost beyond recognition," where "names denoting divine manifestations or properties are replaced with what look like symbolic numbers," and the result is the potential for "confusion of the relationship between mysticism and magic in Kabbalah."²² In short, Pico's sources were limited and restricted to a particular stream of Jewish thought, itself at times outside Kabbalah, and always subject to the whims of his translators. Despite this, or perhaps consequently, Pico's studies led him to the conclusion that the truth of Christianity could best be demonstrated by Kabbalah and magic—a conclusion later toned down

after intense scrutiny by the Church. Pico's *Conclusiones* had a remarkable effect on his peers. His studies created a stir that would lead others to take up the charge where he left it. Although he may not represent the first Christian Kabbalist, Pico's legacy lies in recognizing "the centrality and priority of Hebraic culture in Western civilization,"²³ a trend that would become firmly entrenched by the work of Johannes Reuchlin.

While Pico's contribution to the Christian Kabbalah lies in the "recognition of the antiquity and authenticity of the Kabbalah," it is Reuchlin's work which "placed the Kabbalah within the framework of the Hermetic-esotericist context as far as language is concerned." It is here that the Christian Kabbalah becomes a distinct path and breaks away from its Hebrew counterparts, for the Christian Kabbalists "rejected or marginalized the symbols which were central to the *Zohar* and most other Kabbalistic works."²⁴ For the next two centuries, Reuchlin's *De arte cabalistica* (Hagenau, 1517) presented the prototype for Christian Kabbalistic exposition. From this point onward, until the seventeenth century and the works of Knorr von Rosenroth and Kircher, the emphasis of Christian Kabbalistic inquiry lay in the exposition of Midrashic methodologies; that is, the *gematria*, *notaricon* and *temurah*, and "the commentaries on the forms of the Hebrew letters and their meanings." Reuchlin and his followers believed such exegetic techniques to be unique to the Kabbalah, a mistake due to the characterization of post-biblical Hebrew texts in general as Kabbalah. These techniques that so fascinated Reuchlin and those who followed him were methodologies from Midrashic and Talmudic sources, many of which "developed without any dependence on the Kabbalah." While some Kabbalists utilized these techniques considerably (particularly those whose texts were translated for Pico), others ignored them completely. As a result, the Christian Kabbalah is different "in content and form and its basic conceptions,

from the Hebrew esoteric tradition designated by that name."²⁵

It is here that we meet the figure of Francesco Zorzi, the Franciscan friar of Venice, whose *De harmonia mundi* Baner argues is the ultimate source of Shakespeare's Kabbalah. While Zorzi's *De harmonia* was widely circulated, his direct access to sources of Kabbalah as reflected in that text is limited. In comparing Zorzi's use of Hebrew sources in *De harmonia* with his later *Problemata* (Venice, 1536), we "immediately perceive a sharp rise in quality," especially in his "use of the *Zohar*," which while "almost absent in the *De harmonia mundi*" appears to be cited extensively in his later text.²⁶ Although "moving in new directions," there is actually nothing in Zorzi's Kabbalah "which is not already implicit in Pico."²⁷ Pico, Reuchlin, and Zorzi share Hebraist attitudes toward non-biblical Hebrew sources, maintaining their import and relevance to Christianity. The friar's symbolism, however, is intensified beyond utilizing the "Hebrew language and alphabet as vehicles of theology,"²⁸ to incorporate the traditional symbols of Christianity, music, Franciscan mysticism, and, in particular, its angelology. It has been suggested that Zorzi's *De harmonia*, due to its popularity and wide circulation, influenced other figures in the Renaissance literary and philosophical world.²⁹ Whether this influence extends to Shakespeare is where we now direct our attention.

Kabbalah and Shakespeare

Progress in Christian Kabbalah was inevitably dominated on the Continent since the Jews had been officially expelled from England. In time, however, Christian Kabbalah eventually found its way to England with John Colet, who returned to England after studying with Ficino and Pico in Italy. Other

figures in the propagation of Christian Kabbalah have been noted, such as John Fisher, Everard Digby, Henry Smith, Henoah Clapham, and Henry Ainsworth;³⁰ but the key individuals in England during the sixteenth century were undoubtedly Hugh Broughton and John Dee. Broughton³¹ was a controversial Puritan divine and Hebrew scholar, whose grasp of the Hebrew language and sources is reminiscent of Postel, and whose combative nature and penchant for nonconformity parallels Bruno, whose own visit to England was met with confrontation and controversy. John Dee was a polymath, whose involvement in philosophy, cartography, mathematics, and the entire spectrum of occult sciences would bring him both respect and patronage, and later notoriety and obscurity.³² More important than the figure of Dee himself was his impressive library, and his contacts within the political and literary spheres of Elizabethan England. Dee's library contained copies of Pico, Reuchlin, Galatin, Zorzi, and Postel, along with Hebrew grammars and lexicons. Certainly the Christian Kabbalah, in some form, was circulated in England during Shakespeare's time; however, the rest is speculation. Despite its romantic appeal, the "School of Night" theory is not generally accepted; and even if it were, there is no evidence of Shakespeare's involvement with Raleigh's group.³³ Both Banes and Yates seem to take a link between Dee (or his library, to be precise) and Shakespeare for granted. Perhaps Shakespeare had other sources. Bruno was in England for a time, and since we can safely assume that Shakespeare read Latin, French, and possibly Italian,³⁴ why does Shakespeare need to be linked with Dee at all?

Analysis of the Banes Thesis

Banes's argument is simple: Shakespeare had access to Zorzi's *De harmonia*, and therefore he had access to Kabbalistic imagery and symbolism. In support of his thesis, Banes cites the following evidence: Shylock argues in accordance with the *Zohar* in discussing Jacob and Laban; Shylock, Antonio, Bassanio, and Portia align themselves with the *sefirot*, and the etymology of the names Bassanio and Portia affirms this; Graziano's interjection during the trial scene articulates the Kabbalistic doctrine of *gilgul* or metempsychosis; and finally, Lorenzo's description of the Heavens parallels those in the *Zohar*. Let us now assess each of these claims in turn.

1. PURPORTED SOURCES OF
SHAKESPEARE

It should be clear from the summary above that there is a heavy reliance on the *Zohar* as evidence for these assertions. This is problematic because, as we have seen, Christian Kabbalists at the time had limited access to the *Zohar*, among other texts.³⁵ (Even in our present time there are no complete renditions of the entire *Zohar* into English based on reliable scholarship.³⁶) In any event, Banes hardly quotes Zorzi, instead finding recourse to the *Zohar* directly, apparently treating Zorzi as a floodgate and including the Jewish Kabbalah as a source in and of itself. This is dangerous ground for any scholar, since it indulges in arguments by proxy. Similarly, Banes blurs the lines between Classical and Lurianic Kabbalah. His interpretations of the Kabbalistic concepts that he argues are evident in *The Merchant* are clearly Lurianic: he discusses the primordial man (*Adam Kadmon*) and the shattering of the divine (*shevirah*), and the performance of virtuous deeds to restore it (*tikkun*). To suggest that Luria and

his teachings were incorporated into the Christian Kabbalah of Zorzi is not only far-fetched but illogical, because it is anachronistic: Isaac Luria taught his disciples only briefly before his death in 1572, nearly a half century *after* Zorzi's *De harmonia* was published.

Shakespeare is thought to have written *The Merchant* between 1596 and 1598, which would allow approximately twenty years for him to have encountered Luria's Kabbalah, which Luria himself never penned or published during his lifetime. Scholem notes, moreover, that some purported writings of Luria were in fact those of his disciples and their own followers, and that for the most part these writings remained in manuscript, although a few were published between 1572 and 1650.³⁷ Further, Moshe Idel makes a persuasive argument that Lurianic Kabbalah was not as readily available as Scholem suggests. Idel stresses that the "printing of the *Zohar* in Italy and the dissemination of Kabbalah among Christians" prompted the return to strict secrecy in the circle of Isaac Luria, and that the "widespread dissemination of Lurianic Kabbalah," particularly in the wake of Sabbatianism "assumed by modern scholarship" is "yet to be demonstrated by detailed studies."³⁸

The argument against the influence of Lurianic Kabbalah gains further weight when we consider the sources to which Shakespeare purportedly had access. Banes suggests that the Kabbalistic sources available to Shakespeare, supposedly through John Dee and his extensive library, were primarily those of Pico, Reuchlin, Paracelsus, Agrippa, Zorzi, Giordano Bruno, Blaise de Vigenère, Guillaume Postel, and the works of Dee himself. None of these sources was influenced by the teachings of Isaac Luria, and many of these thinkers were dead before manuscript versions of Luria's Kabbalah were circulated in private. If any form of Kabbalah influenced these European thinkers at all, they were to find it in the form of the Early and

Classical Kabbalah. Even the Christian Kabbalah during this time, which purported to build on these foundations, did not represent a true reflection: as we have seen, the sources used were usually scarce and subject to suspect translations or a limited understanding of Hebrew, or the sources did not belong to the Kabbalah at all.

Sources aside, Banes does not adequately answer the question of motivation: why would Shakespeare incorporate Christian Kabbalah into his play? There is no suggestion of its influence permeating into anything else he produced. There is nothing to suggest that he was at any point interested in Christian Kabbalah. Shakespeare certainly was aware of esoteric movements and occult sciences in his time, a fact plainly evident in *The Tempest* as well as in numerous references to astrology, alchemy, divination, natural magic, and the supernatural in his plays. If we remember that Shakespeare was writing for his audience, we should also remember that the majority, if not all, of these allusions are those that his audience would have readily appreciated or at least been familiar with. This would not have been the case if he were to embed Christian Kabbalah in his play. The majority of his audience simply would not notice, let alone appreciate it. Further, the suggestion by Banes that Shakespeare sought to align his characters with particular *sefirot* is to oversimplify what are unmistakably complex personalities; Shakespeare was simply too good a playwright to resort to caricatures for his main *dramatis personae*.

Which raises an important point that has not been taken into consideration: *The Merchant* is a play—it is to be *performed*—where the text is acted, spoken, and always moving. Shakespeare did not expect his audiences to bring an abacus or to take notes during the performance, and actors do not pause onstage to explain allusions made in the dialogue. For this reason, occult or obscure references made onstage are typically

overt, and where they are not they are usually accompanied by explanation in the dialogue. This is also true for Shakespeare's contemporaries: in *Doctor Faustus*, Marlowe's references to Agrippa are explicit; and in *The Duchess of Malfi*, Webster's doctor has to explain in detail Ferdinand's lycanthropy, presumably because the audience would not have been familiar with it. All of the alleged references to the Kabbalah in *The Merchant* lack this directness and are not supplemented with explanation. Non-dramatic poetry is different, in that it is textual, static, and allows its audience to study and scrutinize what is on offer. Obscure references, anagrams, word play, and numerology more readily fit into this mode. Studies have uncovered examples of these arcane aspects embedded in the poetry of Spenser, Jonson, Milton, and Marvell, as well as in Shakespeare.³⁹ In Shakespeare's generation poetry readily circulated: generally, however, playwrights needed to protect copyright and did not publish their dramatic works until they were no longer being performed, since the Stationer's Register could provide little protection against plagiarism. Further, playwrights seem to have had little control over the way in which compositors set out their work; hence arguments that purport to establish numerological allusions based on line and scene numbers are suspect, if not totally unsound.

2. JACOB AND LABAN

The first proof offered by Banes is Shylock's discussion of Jacob and Laban with Antonio (1.3.70–95). Banes maintains that Shylock's argument, that Jacob prevailed over Laban "through his own perspicacity and initiative," is the view shared by the *Zohar*, while Antonio's view, that "Jacob's successful breeding experiments" were "not the result of his own efforts" but the result of "an act of Providence, or chance," is

not endorsed by the Kabbalah (32). The relevant passage from the *Zohar* reads:

Rabbi Eleazar remarked that all these verses contain deep lessons, based on what we have learned from tradition, to wit, that some blessings from above are obtained by action, some by speech, and others by devotion. So that whoever wishes to draw down to himself blessings must exercise prayer ... yet there are blessings that cannot be obtained by prayer, but only by action. (*Zohar*, 1.161a)

Banes seems to have misinterpreted Antonio. Clearly Antonio argues that Jacob's success is "fashioned by the hand of heaven" (1.3.92) and not by chance. If, as Shylock suggests, Jacob is successful because he is "blest" (1.3.88), then his success is still outside his own agency. It is the will of God, an act of Providence, for God has blest him. Even if we agree with Rabbi Eleazar's statement from the *Zohar* that some blessings are obtainable by "action," it is still not actionable in the sense that God is compelled to confer such a blessing. It is still by His will and His will alone. The Biblical verse itself suggests that Jacob acted on God's guidance, and the *Zohar* affirms this as "Jacob, the simple man, acted throughout with wisdom," that is, divine guidance (1.161a). Further, the *Zohar* distinguishes between the "blessings he obtained from his father, through the exercise of craft" and those he received from God (1.146a). Therefore, the *Zohar*, if anything, purports to add support to Antonio's argument, not to Shylock's. Even Zorzi's discussion of Jacob and Laban in his *Problemata*, which purports to rely extensively on the *Zohar*, suggests that Jacob's success was due to divine favor and not magic; considering also that even if Jacob used magic he could not compete with Laban, the most celebrated Magus of the East (28b–29a).

Shakespeare has Antonio question why Shylock has brought the Jacob-Laban story into their discussion: "Was this inserted to make interest good, / Or is your

gold and silver ewes and rams?" (1.3.93–94). Banes's argument ignores this question. To ignore this question is to perhaps misunderstand the passage entirely. Antonio's response is made both in rebuttal and in jest. He is poking fun at Shylock. Perhaps Shylock, by his inclusion of the Jacob-Laban story, was patronizing Antonio, in the sense that he was under the impression that Antonio, as a Christian, would not recognize or understand the reference. However, Shylock's impression is wrong. Not only does Antonio understand the reference, but also he corrects Shylock's incorrect ascription of Jacob's success to his own agency. Why else would Shakespeare include this passage? It is comedy, not Kabbalah. Alternatively, as Antonio suggests, this is merely another example of Jewish equivocation. It would not have come as a surprise to an Elizabethan audience to find that "The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose" (1.3.97). In both cases Kabbalah is noticeably absent.

3. NAMES AND FUNCTIONS

As discussed before, the *sefirot* became incorporated into ethical symbolism that aligned particular Biblical figures with divine attributes. Banes includes this symbolism in his analysis of the play: Shylock becomes "Shylock-Jacob" and Antonio "Antonio-Laban" (34). It is interesting that Shylock is likened to Jacob (and therefore with mercy) and Abraham (and therefore with abundant love), since this clearly is out of character, particularly during the trial scene. Apparently aware of this, Banes allows for change as the play progresses:

When Shylock invokes Abraham and Jacob in the early scenes of the Play, he declares himself a compassionate adherent of Lovingkindness and Mercy. Later, when he has been tormented beyond endurance and he falls into murderous madness, he

abjures his allegiance to Abraham and Jacob. He allies himself with Isaac and deserts to the ranks of rigorous Judgment. As he himself then asserts in court: "I stand for judgment!" (39)

It is difficult to see Jacob or Abraham reflected in Shylock. First, the alignment is too simple. To suggest that Shylock has "invoked" Jacob or Abraham is too much of a stretch. It is not an invocation, but rather a reflection of Shylock's sanctimonious character that he should incorporate biblical figures and references into his everyday speech. Further, Shylock has no monopoly on making such references; other characters also make biblical allusions. In these instances, are other characters making similar invocations? Consider the scene with Lancelot and Gobbo (2.2.69–76) that echoes Jacob's deception in gaining his blind father's blessing. In this instance, would not Gobbo become Isaac? Does Lancelot become Jacob? Shylock's actions belie his words: he does not act with abundant love when he *invokes* Abraham, nor does he act with mercy when he swears upon Jacob's staff. He does not become *aligned* with a particular patriarch (and their corresponding *sefirah*) simply by mentioning their names. The only case where there is a possible consistency between his actions and his adherence to a patriarch is during the trial scene. Here Shylock relentlessly pursues his rightful claim, exclaiming "I stand for judgment!" but he personifies neither Isaac nor Judgment in doing so.

Similarly, Banes aligns Portia with *tiferet*, because she mediates between Shylock and Antonio (or *din* and *chesed* respectively); since her name is derivative of the Latin word for beauty, *pulchra*; and since this is consistent with references in the play that associate Portia with the sun (41–42). However, Banes's arguments are unconvincing for several reasons. First, Portia is hardly unbiased in her role; she is a mediator between Shylock and Antonio only in the loosest sense that she comes between them. Secondly, Banes's

etymology is far too contrived and simplistic: it completely dismisses the spectrum of alternative, and in some cases more plausible, sources for Portia's name. It is generally accepted that Shakespeare borrowed the name Portia from Cato's daughter (as Bassanio himself suggests at 1.1.166). Even if we were to consider alternative sources, the name may have been derived from the Latin *porca* (sow), *porta* (gate), *portio* (share), *fortia* (strong), as well as *pulchra* (beauty) as Banes suggests (40). Finally, the association of Portia with the sun is based on two grounds: Bassanio's reference to her as "fair, and fairer than that word" (1.1.162) whose "sunny locks hang / On her temples like a golden fleece" (1.1.169–70, emphasis mine), and Portia's own words in the final scene, "let me give light, but let me not be light" (5.1.129, emphasis mine). As was discussed earlier, in addition to supplementing ethical symbolism, the *sefirot* also became integrated into systems of cosmology: "the four elements, the four winds, and even the four metals (gold, silver, copper and lead)" are indications of "*gedullah, gevurah, tiferet* and *malkhut*," and "the sun and the moon" are indications "of *tiferet* or *yesod* and *malkhut*."⁴⁰ So the link between *tiferet* and the sun is there, but is the link between Portia and the sun evidenced by these two lines? Bassanio's reference to her is not so much an alignment with the sun as with the golden fleece, "Which makes her seat of Belmont Colchos' strand" (1.1.171); and Portia's assertion of giving light rather than *being* light is more telling of a resolve of hers to avoid being wanton, "for a light wife doth make a heavy husband" (5.1.130).

Banes argues that since Portia is the sun, then Bassanio is her moon (43). Again this assertion relies on etymology and cosmological symbolism: Banes suggests that the moon and the element of lead are indicative of *yesod*, which translates to foundation or basis, from which Bassanio derives his name. First, it has been noted that the origin of the name is likely from the Latin *bassus* (low): "Bassanius" was "a Roman name

for a man of short stature or low morals." If scholarly "attempts to link the name to the [Latin] *basio* 'to kiss' and the [Greek] *basanos* 'touchstone' (alluding to the caskets) are farfetched contrivances,"⁴¹ then Banes's etymology has even less chance of being persuasive. Secondly, Banes is incorrect in asserting that *yesod* is associated with the moon. As highlighted before, both *yesod* and *tiferet* are associated with the sun, and the moon with *malkhut*; similarly, lead is associated with *malkhut*, and not with *yesod*. Finally, the ascription of the moon symbol to a male character is problematic. As discussed earlier, the Kabbalah associates the moon with *malkhut*, which is the domain of the *shekhinah* or divine presence, which is distinctly feminine.⁴² Throughout the *Zohar*, discussions of the moon are interpreted as references to the *shekhinah*.⁴³ Accordingly, if there were to be any character symbolically aligned with the moon, it would be a woman.

4. METEMPSYCHOSIS

For Banes, Graziano's interjection during the trial scene displays an awareness of the doctrine of *gilgul*, or metempsychosis, in the play (54). Graziano interrupts the trial proceedings, calling Shylock a "damned, inexorable dog" (4.1.127) whose desires "are wolfish, bloody, starved, and ravenous" (4.1.137). Shylock's apparent ferocity and bloodlust move Graziano to "hold opinion with Pythagoras," that "souls of animals infuse themselves / Into the trunks of men" (4.1.130–32). As we have seen, however, the doctrine of *gilgul* was fairly restrictive in the Early and Classical Kabbalah when it came to transmigration from human soul to animal. The literature that approved this concept was careful to restrict such movements into animals alone, and not into lower forms of life, also making the provision that such a process was unidirectional: "Such a wandering

never constitutes an advance or ascent from the animal to the human world, but rather, in line with the idea of its being a punishment for the soul, an abasement from the human to the animal."⁴⁴ Even in terms of Lurianic Kabbalah, with its broader understanding of the doctrine of *gilgul*, the position asserted by Banes is unfounded, because Kabbalah would not allow the ascension of a wolf's soul into the body of Shylock. Kabbalah *would* allow Shylock's soul to enter into the body of a wolf, provided his sins were particularly heinous, but not vice versa. In any event, Graziano himself suggests that the source is not Kabbalah, but Pythagoras, and we have no reason to doubt him.

5. LORENZO AND HEAVENS

After the ordeal of the trial scene, we are reacquainted with the young lovers Lorenzo and Jessica. In the course of their amorous wordplay, the pair sits and marvels at the wondrous night sky above, serenaded by musicians. Lorenzo expounds on the sights and sounds:

Sit, Jessica. Look how the floor of heaven
Is thick inlaid with patens of bright gold.
There's not the smallest orb which thou
behold'st
But in his motion like an angel sings,
Still choring to the young-eyed cherubins.
Such harmony is in immortal souls,
But whilst this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.
(5.1.58–65)

Banes argues that Lorenzo's description of the cherubim as "young-eyed" is affirmed in the *Zohar*, as are his descriptions of the "floor of heaven" (51–53); and that the Neoplatonic elements of the speech are easily found in *De harmonia* and other texts (73–77).

That *De harmonia* accounts for traces of Neoplatonism is accurate and requires little further investigation, since Zorzi's study is usually considered as belonging to the tradition of Neoplatonic speculation as fostered by Ficino and other figures—a characterization affirmed by his reliance on Plotinus and Ptolemy.⁴⁵

Similarly, Lorenzo's description of the cherubim as "young-eyed" is consistent with the *Zohar*: passages speak of cherubim having the form of children (1.228b), or the faces of tender children (1.18b). However, it should be noted that one would be hard pressed to find an example in art or literature of an elderly, decrepit cherub. The description of cherubim as having child-like features is a commonplace in Jewish as well as Christian literature. Even the Talmud, while discussing the construction of *sukkah*, investigates these descriptions:

What is the derivation of cherub?—R. Abbahu said, 'Like a child', for in Babylon they call a child Rabia. Said Abaye to him: If so, how will you explain the Scriptural text, The first face was the face of the cherub and the second face the face of a man, seeing that the face of a cherub is the same as that of a man?—[One has] a large face and the other a small face. (*Seder Mo'ed*, Mas. *Sukkah*, 5b)

While the Kabbalah may provide a valid source for such a general trope, Banes's argument is not persuasive. There are too many likely alternatives, such as the etymological speculation presented in the Talmud or, arguably more relevant in this particular case, depictions of cherubim in popular literature and artwork. The case for Kabbalah in this instance is surely outweighed by the alternatives.

Conclusion

While the possibility that the Kabbalah influenced Shakespeare exists, it certainly is not plausible in the case of *The Merchant*. There is no proof of Shakespeare's access to or interest in the sources, and the question of motive is left unexplained. Banes's suggestion that Shakespeare used the Kabbalah to "invest Shylock with an aura of ethnic authenticity" (28) is hardly persuasive. Neither is his explanation for Shylock's disgrace and loss at court: that it is a defensive tactic on Shakespeare's part—an affirmation of his Christian adherence—for to present a superior Jewish character would be to flirt with dangerous, if not heretical, thinking (97–105). If Shakespeare could not take it upon himself to endow Shylock with an *authentic* Jewish name, why would he litter the entire play with Kabbalistic imagery? There is simply not enough evidence from the play to suggest that the Kabbalah played any distinctive role in its construction. All of the passages where the influence of Kabbalah is alleged to be present may be just as adequately, if not more persuasively, explained by any given number of viable alternatives. In some instances, such as Nerissa's discussion of astrology, the play makes no effort to delineate any particular source or tradition, and as such it cannot be taken as evidence for the influence of Kabbalah.

University of Western Australia

NOTES

I wish to thank Christopher Wortham for his unwavering support, guidance, and friendship; Yasmin Haskell and Susan Broomhall for their generosity in providing translations; Bob White for his critical eye; and Joyce Ahn for her insightful editorial suggestions.

All references to Shakespeare are taken from The Oxford Shakespeare, ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). All

references to the Zohar are taken from *The Zohar*, ed. Harry Sperling and Maurice Simon (London: Soncino, 1931–1934). All references to the Talmud are taken from *The Babylonian Talmud*, ed. Isidore Epstein (London: Soncino, 1935–1952).

¹. Daniel Banes, *The Provocative Merchant of Venice* (Silver Spring: Malcolm, 1975); and *Shakespeare, Shylock and Kabbalah* (Silver Spring: Malcolm, 1978). All subsequent references to Banes are to the 1978 (revised) edition, and are placed in context.

². Frances A. Yates, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age* (London: Routledge, 1979), 151.

³. *Ibid.*, 156.

⁴. Representative studies include: Yates; Hilary Gatti, *The Renaissance Drama of Knowledge: Giordano Bruno in England* (London: Routledge, 1989); John S. Mebane, *Renaissance Magic and the Return of the Golden Age: The Occult Tradition and Marlowe, Jonson, and Shakespeare* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989); Jason P. Rosenblatt, *Torah and Law in Paradise Lost* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Stanton J. Linden, *Darke Hieroglyphicks: Alchemy in English Literature from Chaucer to the Restoration* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1996).

⁵. Robert Alter, "Jewish Mysticism in Dispute," *Commentary* 88 (1989): 53–59.

⁶. Joseph Dan, *The Heart and the Fountain: An Anthology of Jewish Mystical Experiences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 8–9. Dan differs from Scholem in his stricter emphasis on the distinction between *mysticism* and *Kabbalah*, since "Jewish mysticism began a thousand years before the appearance of the Kabbalah" and "there is no intrinsic connection between Kabbalah and mysticism," save that many Jewish mystics were indeed practitioners of the Kabbalah (*ibid.*).

⁷. Representative studies of the Early Kabbalah include: *The Bahir*, ed. Aryeh Kaplan (New York: Weiser, 1979); *The Early Kabbalah*, ed. Joseph Dan (New York: Paulist, 1986); Gershom Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1987).

⁸. Representative studies of the *Zohar* include: Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 3d ed. (New York: Schocken, 1954); Isaiah Tishby and Fischel Lachower, *The Wisdom of the Zohar: An Anthology of Texts*, 3 vols., trans. David Goldstein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Yehuda Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993); Pinchas Giller, *Reading the Zohar: The Sacred Text of*

Kabbalah (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Arthur Green, *A Guide to the Zohar* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

⁹. Philip Beitchman, *Alchemy of the Word: Cabala of the Renaissance* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 11. I have edited Beitchman’s “Cabala” to “Kabbalah” for the sake of consistency and to avoid confusion.

¹⁰. Dan, *The Heart and the Fountain*, 33–35.

¹¹. The sins requiring atonement through *gilgul* into animal form usually involved some form of sexual depravity, although other examples have been cited. See Gershom Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead: Basic Concepts in the Kabbalah* (New York: Schocken, 1991), 197–250; *Kabbalah* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1974), 344–50; and Gedalyah Nigal, *Magic, Mysticism, and Hasidism: The Supernatural in Jewish Thought* (New Jersey: Aronson, 1994), 55–62.

¹². Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 112.

¹³. Scholem, *Mystical Shape*, 15–55; *Kabbalah*, 105–16; and *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (New York: Schocken, 1965), 100–105.

¹⁴. The difference is essentially one of intention. A Christian Hebraist seeks to gain insight into the sources of Christianity through a thorough understanding of the Hebrew language and Bible, whereas a Christian Kabbalist believes that Hebrew sources (non-biblical or oral traditions of biblical interpretation) serve to demonstrate the truth of Christianity.

¹⁵. Joseph L. Blau, *The Christian Interpretation of the Cabala in the Renaissance* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat, 1944), 17–21; Beitchman, *Alchemy*, 65.

¹⁶. Yates, *The Occult Philosophy*, 11–18.

¹⁷. Gershom Scholem, “The Beginnings of the Christian Kabbalah,” in *The Christian Kabbalah: Jewish Mystical Books & Their Christian Interpreters*, ed. Joseph Dan (Cambridge: Harvard College Library, 1997), 17–51. For a more detailed discussion, see Harvey J. Hames, *The Art of Conversion: Christianity and Kabbalah in the Thirteenth Century* (Boston: Brill, 2000).

¹⁸. François Secret, *Le Zôhar chez les kabbalistes chrétiens de la Renaissance* (Paris: Mouton, 1964).

¹⁹. David B. Ruderman, *Kabbalah, Magic, and Science: The Cultural Universe of a Sixteenth-Century Jewish Physician* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 140.

²⁰. See in particular: Chaim Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter with Jewish Mysticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989); Klaus Reichert, "Pico della Mirandola and the Beginnings of Christian Kabbalah," in *Mysticism, Magic, and Kabbalah in Ashkenazi Judaism*, ed. Joseph Dan and Karl E. Grözinger (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1995), 195–207; Moshe Idel, "The Magical and Neoplatonic Interpretations of the Kabbalah in the Renaissance," in *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century*, ed. Bernard Dov Cooperman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 186–242.

²¹. B. C. Novak, "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and Jochanan Alemanno," *Journal of the Warburg & Courtauld Institutes* 45 (1982): 125–47.

²². Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter*, 77, 151.

²³. Ruderman, *Kabbalah, Magic, and Science*, 141.

²⁴. Joseph Dan, "The Kabbalah of Johannes Reuchlin and Its Historical Significance," in *The Christian Kabbalah*, 80, 65.

²⁵. Dan, *The Heart and the Fountain*, 47.

²⁶. Giulio Busi, "Francesco Zorzi, a Methodical Dreamer," in *The Christian Kabbalah*, 102.

²⁷. Yates, *The Occult Philosophy*, 40.

²⁸. Dan, "Catalogue of the Exhibition in the Houghton Library, 12 March–26 April 1996," in *The Christian Kabbalah*, 210.

²⁹. Busi, "Francesco Zorzi," 115.

³⁰. For an overview of the dissemination of Christian Kabbalah in England, see Secret's chapter "La kabbale chrétienne en Angleterre" in *Les kabbalists chrétiens*, 229–38; or Beitchman's chapter "The Kiss of the Spouse, Cabala in England (1497–1700)" in *Alchemy*, 209–92.

³¹. I have been unable to locate any studies devoted entirely to Broughton. A notable study that engages with Broughton's Hebraism is G. Lloyd Jones, *The Discovery of Hebrew in Tudor England: A Third Language* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983). Dan Isaac, "The Worth of a Jew's Eye: Reflections of the Talmud in *The Merchant of Venice*," *Maarav* 8 (1992): 349–74, has recently speculated that the Talmud, through Broughton, is a source for the style of argument used by Portia in the trial scene of *The Merchant*.

³². Representative studies of Dee include Nicholas H. Clulee, *John Dee's Natural Philosophy: Between Science and Religion* (New York: Routledge, 1988); and Deborah E. Harkness, *John Dee's Conversations with Angels: Cabala, Alchemy, and the End of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

³³. As has been adequately addressed by Muriel C. Bradbrook, *The School of Night: A Study in the Literary Relationships of Sir Walter Raleigh* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932).

³⁴. This is established in an excellent study by Jonathan Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993); Thomas W. Baldwin, *William Shakespeare's Smalle Latine & Lesse Greeke* (Urbana: Illinois University Press, 1944).

³⁵. Cf. Secret, *Le Zôhar*.

³⁶. Although the Kabbalah Centre has published its edition of the entire *Zohar* in English, its academic merit is questionable. Daniel Channan Matt, an academic of standing in the field, has undertaken the task of producing a scholarly edition. The first two of an intended twelve-volume corpus (known as the Pritzker edition) became available in early 2004, with two additional volumes expected each year.

³⁷. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 422–26.

³⁸. Idel, *New Perspectives*, 257.

³⁹. On Spenser, see: A. Kent Hieatt, *Short Time's Endless Monument: The Symbolism of the Numbers in Edmund Spenser's Epithalamion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960); Alastair Fowler, *Spenser and the Numbers of Time* (London: Routledge, 1964); Denis Saurat, *Literature and Occult Tradition: Studies in Philosophical Poetry*, trans. Dorothy Bolton (London: Bell, 1930).

On Jonson, see: Richard Harp, "Jonson's 'To Penhurst': The Country House as Church," *John Donne Journal* 7 (1988): 73–89; A. W. Johnson, *Ben Jonson: Poetry and Architecture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

On Milton, see: Lyndy Abraham, "Milton's *Paradise Lost* and 'The Sounding Alchymie,'" *Renaissance Studies* 12 (1998): 261–76; Philip Beitchman, "Following Lucifer: Miltonic Evil as Gnostic Cabala," *Esoterica* 1 (1999): 61–78; Matthew S. Biberman, *John Milton: The Triumph of 'Christian Hebraism' in Verse* (Ph.D. thesis, Duke University, 1998).

On Marvell, see Lyndy Abraham, *Marvell and Alchemy* (Aldershot: Scolar, c1990).

On Shakespeare, see: Malabika Sarkar, "The Magic of Shakespeare's Sonnets," *Renaissance Studies* 12 (1998): 251–60; Thomas O. Jones, *Renaissance Magic and Hermeticism in the Shakespeare Sonnets: Like Prayers Divine* (Lewiston: Mellen, 1995).

⁴⁰. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 111.

⁴¹. *The Shakespeare Name Dictionary*, ed. Madison Davis and A. Daniel Frankforter (New York: Garland, 1995), 45.

⁴². For more on the symbolism of the *shekhinah*, see Peter Schäfer, *Mirror of His Beauty: Feminine Images of God from the Bible to the Early Kabbalah* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2002); Scholem, *Symbolism*, 104–8, 147–51.

⁴³. The *shekhinah* is also associated with the sabbath, on which day the female and male aspects of God are united (*Zohar*, 2.63b). The *shekhinah*, and the sabbath, are also associated with the “Community of Israel” and the image of the Bride: “The Community of Israel is also called “Sabbath,” for she is God’s spouse. That is why the Sabbath is called ‘Bride’” (*Zohar*, 2.63b per Rabbi Jose).

⁴⁴. Scholem, *Mystical Shape*, 225–26.

⁴⁵. D. P. Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella* (London: Warburg Institute, 1958), 113. Walker, 75, positions Zorzi as “dissolving” the spiritual magic of Ficino and his tradition into “orthodox Christianity.”