

Semitic slander, but an extraordinary appeal for equality. The protagonist Shylock pleaded that he be accorded basic rights as a human being and that Jews be seen as subject to the same passions, diseases, organs, dimensions, and affections as Christians.

Michael Egan, who has taught English literature at universities in England and America and written extensively on Shakespeare, has explained to author Andrée Brooks (see “Secret Jews in Shakespeare’s London,” below) that the playwright’s understanding of the Jewish predicament—the torment

of being reviled and persecuted—suggests that the writer had spent considerable time with Jews. Shylock’s reflection on anti-Semitism—“Still have I borne it with a patient shrug/For suff’rance is the badge of all our tribe”—was, Egan believes, “unlikely to have been learned from a book.”

And Peter Bassano, a British conductor and music historian, points to the “mixed marriage (between Shylock’s daughter, Jessica, and her non-Jewish lover, Lorenzo), which is not something you would talk about if you were anti-Semitic” in Elizabethan England.

the Bassanos were of Sephardi or Ashkenazi origin is unknown, though Ashkenazi is more likely. The Jewish community of Bassano, a village near Venice where the family originated, had been founded by a Jewish moneylender from Germany; and the Bassanos’ expertise in wind instruments more closely reflected musical developments in northern Europe.

Baptized Jews lived comfortably in England as traders, physicians, and musicians. Those who chose to maintain their ancient faith were also well versed in Jewish practice. Thomas Fernandes, a *converso* merchant living in England who had been apprehended in Lisbon while on business, testified before Inquisition authorities in 1558 that *conversos* in England scrupulously observed Passover, serving unleavened bread at gatherings of relatives, friends, and travelers. On Friday evenings and Saturdays, in recognition of the Sabbath, *conversos* used clean linen, wore good clothes, and refrained from work. They observed Yom Kippur by fasting.

Converso men were encouraged to marry within the group as a way to help perpetuate a faith under siege. In the New World, these marriage patterns lasted into the 20th century. Typically, women *conversos* were more protective of their Judaism and transmitted the rituals to the next generation.

In England at this time, all Jewish observance had to be performed covertly in the home. Any public display might have—and occasionally did—result in imprisonment and/or banishment. In 1542, the authorities arrested a number of *conversos* in London

following a public uproar over baptized Jews blatantly practicing their former religion. The prisoners were released after powerful friends in Antwerp intervened (presumably because exiling the offending Jews would have interfered with valuable trade). In 1609, several *conversos* were permanently expelled after their secret Jewish practices came to light during a court case arising from an internal dispute over bad debts. The arrest and public hanging in 1594 of Dr. Roderigo Lopez, Queen Elizabeth’s *converso* physician, on what historians believe were false charges of plotting her death by poison, must also have sent a chill through the tiny community—although this time the charge was for an individual act of treason, not a matter of practicing an outlawed religion.

In 1656, when Oliver Cromwell finally lifted the ban on Jewish inhabitants, primarily to boost the nation’s flagging economy, *conversos* already living in England could practice Judaism openly at last. By this time, however, many of them, including descendants of the Bassanos, had assimilated into the Protestant elite. They nonetheless left their mark, through contributions to English music, to London’s development as an international center of trade and finance, and to literature.

Journalist Andrée Aelion Brooks is author of *The Woman Who Defied Kings*, a biography of the 16th-century Jewish leader Dona Gracia Nasi, a *conversa* who saved thousands of her fellow victims of the Inquisition by developing an escape network.

BOTH BASSANO’S AUTHORSHIP AND Jewish subtext, Hudson contends, are further supported by the use of Jewish sources. In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, for example, the Mishnah’s Tractate *Nedarim* (The Book of Vows) is used to structure how Helena, the daughter of her absent father Nedar (in Hebrew *nedar* as an adjective means “missing” or “absent,” and as a noun means “pledge” or “vow”), compares herself to Hermia. Her criteria—beauty, fairness, and height—are the very same—and in the same order—as those in the tractate to determine the annulment of marriage vows: “[If one vows,] ‘Konam if I marry that ugly woman,’ whereas she is beautiful; ‘that black[-skinned] woman,’ whereas she is fair; ‘that short woman,’ who is in fact tall, he is permitted to marry her, not because she was ugly and became beautiful, or black and turned fair, short and grew tall, but because the vow was made in error’” (*Nedarim*, Folio 66a, Soncino Babylonian Talmud). In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the apocalyptic ending alludes to the distribution of dew—an image found only in Jewish accounts of the apocalypse, when “the Holy One revives the dead and will shower dew from his hair” (*Zohar* 1:131a).

And there is spoken Hebrew in several plays. In *All’s Well That Ends Well*, the character Parolles says: “*Boskos v’vado* [*B’oz k’oz v’vado*—in bravery, like boldness, in his surety], I understand thee, and can speak thy tongue. *Kerely-bonto* [*K’erli b’onto*—I am aware of his deception], sir, betake thee to thy faith....” It’s possible, says Hudson, that the young man from Stratford somehow learned Hebrew and immersed himself in the Talmud and Jewish history, but it’s highly unlikely.

IN 1979, BRITISH HISTORIAN A.L. ROWSE advanced the then controversial theory that Amelia Bassano, with her Mediterranean skin coloring, was the famous “dark lady” of the Shakespeare sonnets, arguing that the woman’s physical characteristics, musical talent, tyrannical and temperamental character, age, marital status, and promiscuous nature—all described in the sonnets—match the known facts about Bassano more closely than those of
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