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# 'And vow to play the Jew; why, 'tis my part': Performing the Jew on the Early Modern English Stage

**Ramit Das**

**Abstract**

This paper attempts to study the image of the Jew on the English Renaissance stage using the theory of performativity. It draws upon the views of critics who have contended that religion, like gender, is an interpellated performance, and religious identity is something that is assumed rather than something inherent. It has been argued that theological differences may be a doctrinal issue for theologians, but in the early modern theatre it was a social issue, a performed contrast. By a careful investigation of the play, *The Travels of the Three English Brothers*, this article problematizes the concept of the Jew in the play, usually confined in critical studies within the constricting categories of anti-Semitism or philo-Semitism. Jewishness, it is argued, is a mobile, polysemous category open to different meanings and significations. A consideration of the dynamics of performativity ultimately serves to delink "the Jew" (i.e. the image of the Jew or the signifier Jew) from the actual Jew and sets him up as a construct, thus providing a new inflection to the study of Jews and Judaism on the early modern English stage

**Keywords:** Drama; Early modern; Jew; Performativity.

The Jew has been identified as one of the embodiments of evil in Christendom from earliest times. The Jew, in all his physical and moral deformity, in the image of a usurer, ritual murderer, child crucifier, poisoner and Machiavellian merchant continued to haunt the popular imagination from medieval to early modern times. The stereotype of the evil Jew has however come under stress in recent critical studies of early modern literature. Critics like James Shapiro have contended that during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries,

> in the wake of the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisition, the Protestant reformation and the expansion of English overseas travel and trade, the question of who was a Jew began to be asked with greater frequency and, on occasion, urgency…The resulting desire to know who was a Jew led to the no less puzzling question as to what was a Jew, as early modern English writers tried to define what distinguished the Jews from themselves. (14)

Taking their cue from such studies, recent scholarship on the representation of the Jew in English Renaissance drama have stated that the early modern stage Jew was a metaphoric figure—a trope co-opted by contemporary dramatists to discuss issues related to race, gender, economics etc (Zinsser-Krys 427; Smith 219).

In this paper, I argue that such a metaphorical understanding of the Jew on the early modern stage can be explained further by using the theory of performativity. The concept of performativity is most usefully enunciated by Judith Butler in her groundbreaking work *Gender Trouble* where she states that "gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity that it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed" (24-25). According to her, gender is not something one is, it is something one does, an act, or rather a sequence of acts, a verb rather than a noun, a 'doing' rather a being'. As she says, "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (25). Butler's notion of performativity, I argue, has relevance in studies of religion, particularly Jewishness, in the early modern period. Butler's notion of performativity has found resonance in studies of sexuality and gender in early modern studies; in recent times, scholars have come to accept the fact that like the configurations of gender identity, religious identity was not something inherent but "a stylized repetition of acts through time…the very multiplicity of their construction holds out the possibility of a disruption of their univocal posturing" (Butler, *Performative Acts* 520). Jewishness, which stands at the centre of so much theorizing about religion, race and nation in sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe, is, I argue, particularly amenable, to the concept of performativity in my discussion. If, as Shapiro contends, "the early modern Jew…confounded those who sought more precise definitions" (5), then it is the contention of this paper that such a negotiation of Jewishness was worked out on the early modern stage by questioning all a priori assumptions, by constantly recalibrating the notion of Jewishness in much the

same way as gender.

In this paper I study the representation of the Jewish character, Zariph in the drama *The Travels of the Three English Brothers*, written by William Rowley, John Day and John Wilkins. The drama depicts the real-life exploration of Thomas, Anthony and Robert, the three Sherley siblings. In the beginning, Anthony Sherley and his brother Robert are shown receiving a warm welcome by the Sophy (the Persian sovereign) and other courtiers. Impressed by the nobility and courage of the Englishmen, the Sophy decides to select Anthony Sherley as his commander in the campaign against the Turkish army. Later, Anthony convinces the Sophy to make an alliance with the Christian countries against their mutual adversary, the Turks. The Persian ruler concurs with the suggestion, and appointing Sir Anthony as an ambassador, sends him on an expedition to Europe, attended by other Persian courtiers.

This alliance is somewhat jeopardized by the internal bickering between Sir Anthony and Halibeck, one of the chief Persian courtiers, who constantly tries to denigrate the Sherley brothers. On their arrival at Moscow, things come to such a pass that Anthony is imprisoned on the basis of false charges by Halibeck, though he is later acquitted of all charges and discharged from prison. Things come to a head in Venice when the Sophy assigns Sir Anthony with the duty of procuring a precious stone from a Jewish merchant, Zariph. He does buy the jewel and send it to the Persian emperor, but Halibeck manages to seize the money. Consequently, Anthony fails to pay the money and is imprisoned by Zariph.

The remaining portion of the drama follows the fortunes of the eldest brother, Thomas Sherley, who is captured by the Turks and sent to Constantinople while on his way from England to meet Anthony. Robert, the youngest brother, who lives in Persia and is the commander of the Persian army, tries to obtain his release by exchanging twenty Turkish prisoners, but this offer is met with a stern rebuff. However, the English sovereign steps into the matter and ensures that Sir Thomas is granted freedom. Halibeck and his brother Calimath continue with their conspiratorial designs by telling the Persian emperor that Anthony had made unfair use of his role as the ambassador during his European sojourn, while Robert had attempted to seduce his niece and flouted the rules laid down between the Persians and the English by releasing the Turkish prisoners. However, Robert is able to successfully disprove all the charges and unmask Halibeck. Halibeck is awarded death sentence. As a reward for his service to the state, the Sophy gives his niece in marriage to Robert.

The play's Jewish character, Zariph, makes his entry when the Persian embassy including Anthony reaches Venice. The Sophy wishes to buy a precious stone from the Jewish merchant and delegates Anthony for the job. Anthony is able to obtain the jewel, but he is unable to make payment because the money from the Sophy mysteriously fails to reach him. In spite of his pleading for mercy, Zariph pertinaciously sticks to the 'law' (34). Anthony appeals for empathy, but Zariph is quick to remind him of his inhuman treatment of his brother Zachary and his family, asserting that hard-heartedness of Christians leads to Jewish stubbornness: 'If we be curst we learn of Christians/Who, like to swine, crush one another's bones' (37-38). Anthony tries to reason with him that any immoral act performed by Christians must necessarily be counted as a sin if performed by Jews, but Zariph replies: 'But they are Christians. Zariph is a Jew / A crucifying hangman trained in sin / One that would hang his brother for his skin' (40-42). However, he assures Anthony that he would grant him one more day, adding sotto voce 'to play the Jew; why, 'tis my part' (51).

The next scene shows Zariph gloating over his impending revenge over the Christian and giving vent to a torrent of anti-Christian invective. At this point, Halibeck enters and informs him that Sir Anthony is incapable of discharging his debt, since he had himself intercepted the money sent by the Sophy. The Jew is ecstatic at this news, and profusely thanks Halibeck for his service. Soon, Sir Anthony and his companions enter ready for the banquet; but even before it begins, Anthony is arrested by the sergeants and sent to prison.

My choosing of this play is not accidental; for long, this play has been singled out by critics as conforming to the notion that the early modern stage Jew, with the possible exception of Shylock and Barabas, was an ogre, a diabolic, cannibalistic villain out to wreck destruction on Christendom at any cost (Cardozo 155-156, Landa 92, Berek 155-156). Even Zinsser-krys, who has conducted the most searching analysis of the early modern stage Jew in recent times, concludes that "there is nothing to be said about Zariph. Since he is more or less insulated in his episode from the rest of the dramatis personae, not even a comparison with other figures cast a better light on him" (307). Such a view is, of course, not completely unwarranted: Zariph appears only in two scenes out of a total of thirteen scenes, and speaks eighty-one lines out of a total of nearly two thousand.

However, even though the Jewish figure might strike the viewer as bald, basic in execution and stark in sentiment, I would argue that he is integral

to the structure and design of the play. As has been noticed, a central crux of the play is Zariph's concluding comment in Scene ix: 'I…vow to play the Jew; why, 'tis my part' (IX. 50-51). Such a comment might seem to be absurd at first glance since Zariph *is* a Jew and does not need to *act* as one; however, I contend that this statement is not as paradoxical as it appears to be. Rather, this emphasis on *playing* aligns the play, particularly the play's representation of its Jewish character, with the concept of performativity as I have been tracing throughout this paper. In fact, a recent study by Jane Grogan has insightfully commented on the play by using the concept of performativity (she does not make use specifically of Judith Butler's theorization of performativity but the general notion of performativity in her discussion of the play).

Grogan, in her analysis of the play, argues that "one of the play's most perceptive insights is the acknowledgement of the *performativity* of the Sherleys themselves" (165; emphasis added). She goes on to argue that that it is not just Zariph or the Persians who perform a mock-battle between Persians and Turks for the Sherleys, but a whole range of dumb shows, the comic interlude involving Will Kemp, the two mock-battles, an interrupted play-within-a-play and a substituted head-trick which contribute to the "theatricality and meta theatricality that swap around the play" (165). Although she perspicaciously engages with the concept of performativity and metatheatre in order to establish the deconstruction of a stable, monolithic cultural and religious identity in the *Travels*, she does not engage with the representation of the Jewish character of the play in detail. I would argue, drawing upon her insights and stretching them a bit further that the role of "the Jew"* and the representation of Jewishness partakes of the same notion of performativity sketched out by her.

A more nuanced argument of the representation of the Jew in this play can be drawn by discussing the careers of the Sherley brothers (especially Sir Anthony Sherley) and their resemblances to the play itself. As several critics have pointed out, *The Travels* 'is a topical and propagandistic work that presents the Sherleys in a heroic light and appeals to the patriotic feeling of the audience in an effort to gain popular support for their scheme (or at least to defend their good name against ill report' (Vitkus "Adventuring Heroes in the Mediterranean" 88). The play, commissioned by Sir Thomas Sherley, who probably oversaw its production, sought directly to influence public opinion on a current affair—his brother Anthony Sherley's

* I place the term in quotation marks to indicate a strategic *image* of the Jew that and replaced the *actual* and *living* Jew (in the absence of a legal Jewish community) in the early modern English imagination

diplomatic tour around Europe seeking to bring Christendom into an alliance with Persia against the Ottoman Empire. In fact, both the pamphlet and the play, in seeking to glorify the Sherley brothers, implicitly recognize the undercurrent of hostility and antipathy towards them in the court and in certain other circles.** This acknowledgement of the misdemeanors of the Sherley brothers and the need to present them in a palatable manner to the contemporary English audience led to the playwrights' liberally interlacing their material with fictions, so that we are presented with the travels of the three brothers as 'transmuted' by the dramatists. In the next section, I intend to examine the various alterations— misrepresentations, omissions and overstatements — to demonstrate how "the Jew" played a crucial role in the overall design of the play.

One of the most striking of these transformations was the depiction of Persia and the Persian characters on the stage. Neither completely vilified nor unequivocally eulogized, the Persians 'represent[ed] both a classical (Greek and Roman) standard of cultural otherness, and a non-Mediterranean, non-Turkish, cultural exception in the east, the Persians…constitute an unstable third term, which resists the binary 'Orientalist' model' (Niyaesh 128). It is true that in the initial stage, Persian social mores are shown as inferior to English ones, but "the playwrights temper the obvious objection that the Persians are every bit as 'infidel' as the Turks by presenting themselves as something approaching a breed of 'noble savages'" (Publicover 7). This dramatic sleight of hand in the presentation of the Persians also entailed a concurrent disparagement of the Turks, in accordance with the Sherley brothers' goal to establish a sort of ecumenical league against the Turks. Such a purpose is served by portraying the Turks as inveterate enemies of the Christians. This overly simplistic view of the Turkish empire as a mutual opponent of all Christian countries required the playwrights to simultaneously allay anti-Catholic sentiments, which in turn led to the portrayal of the Pope as an exalted figure, the 'mouth of heaven' and the 'stair of men's salvation' (v.39, 46).

Such a scheme was in keeping with the Sherley brothers' conversion to Catholicism during their peregrination. According to one critic, 'Day and his colleagues not only avoid anti-Papal propaganda; they actively counter it (and the prevailing public mood) by enlisting the Pope in a larger Christian cause' (Parr 'Introduction' 10). Moreover, while analyzing the function of the *ambassador* in Renaissance Europe, Jonathan Burton clearly

** For the most thorough study of the Sherley brothers, especially Anthony Sherley's diplomatic tour around Europe and his mooted alliance against the Turks, see D.W. Davies, *Elizabethans Errant: The Strange Fortunes of Sir Thomas Sherley and his Three Sons* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967)

demarcates between the role of the 'ambassador' in early modern Europe and in Persia. Burton's argument is based on his comparative analysis of two texts, the English account of the journey written by Sherley and the chronicle of the journey in Persian. The Persian version, entitled *Relaciones de Don Juan de Persia*, was penned by Uruch Beg, who was one of the four secretaries accompanying Halibeck during the journey. After reaching Spain, he converted to Catholicism, assumed a new name, Don Juan and penned an account of the journey. Burton's reading reveals that Sherley's position was similar to the Persian *safir* who had lesser authority, and was treated with much lesser respect, than a European 'ambassador'. Moreover, the collation of the two accounts show that it was the Persian emperor and not Anthony Sherley who was the driving spirit behind this intended alliance with Christendom, the Englishman playing only a very nominal role in this scheme (Burton "The Shah's Two Ambassadors" 35-36).

In this contrapuntal reading of the English and Persian narrations of this expedition (the *Relaçiones* of Don Juan/Uruch Beg, the Persian secretary who was a part of the embassy until his conversion to Catholicism), Jonathan Burton notes that while the European accounts of the Sherley brothers always tend to portray Anthony Sherley in a favorable light, the Persian account shows that 'Anthony…manages to distinguish himself from other outsiders in Don Juan's estimation in as much as no other comes across as equally duplicitous, a liar, a thief, possibly a murderer, certainly a charlatan' (Burton "The Shah's Two Ambassadors" 36). This infamy of Sir Anthony becomes particularly evident in the case of the Portuguese friar, who is absent in the play but is presented in the European accounts as a mountebank who bears the brunt of Anthony's anger and is ultimately imprisoned. In contrast, Don Juan presents him as an upright person who had lent Sir Anthony some money and kept some valuable jewels in his custody. However, Anthony refused to return these to the friar and even threatened him when he had wanted these back. Don Juan had a lurking suspicion that he had perhaps murdered the friar because in Moscow, he was found to be missing and could not be traced even after a thorough probe. Burton opines that though 'none of the texts on Sir Anthony record a source of Zariph, the play's moneylender, Don Juan's account of Anthony's debts to the friar suggest that the episode of the vicious Jew may have been an attempt to render Anthony's reckless borrowing and possible villainy into duty and virtue' (Burton 37).

Burton's reasoning elucidates the necessity of introducing 'the Jew' in this drama. The invention of Zariph, the vicious Jew, was absolutely essential

in warding off potential suspicion that the Sherleys were unscrupulous political conspirators, actuated more by unscrupulous designs and egotistical speculations rather than any patriotic interests. The playwrights were compelled to use the metaphor of 'the Jew" to screen the misdeeds of Anthony Sherley and to recuperate his reputation as the envoy of Anglo-Persian alliance. In other words, 'the Jew', with his rapacity, vengefulness and implacable hatred of Christians, is a mirror image of the *actual* wastefulness, larceny and assassination attempt by Anthony Sherley. By being elided with the Englishman, 'the Jew' becomes a trope for the Englishman. Michael Neill's comment that the Europeans' fear of the Jew was due to his strategies of mimicry, "with his insidious role as the hidden stranger, the alien whose otherness is the more threatening for its guise of semblance" (272) seems to be particularly relevant in this context. Thus, Jewishness is revealed not to be an irreconcilable Otherness, but something aligned with English identity. It is by the dual process of opposition and resistance, as well as incorporation and assimilation, of Jewishness that 'Englishness' is configured on the early modern English stage.

An alternative use of 'the Jew' can be detected in the Zariph-Halibeck equation in this drama. According to Parr, 'Persia is shown neither as a primitive society nor as a luxurious or hedonistic one, and its political dignity and standards of honour…are betrayed only by the provincial small-mindedness of courtiers like Halibeck and Calimath. It is such men, not problems of cultural difference, which jeopardise the prospect of real alliance' (Parr, 'Introduction' 17). However, as my investigation of the drama and its contingent circumstances shows, such an aggrandizement of a 'Muslim' nation does come under stress at certain moments in the play. The association between Zariph and Halibeck (and in some measure, Calimath), signals towards the latent discomfort of the playwrights regarding this improvisational strategy. The glorification of Persia is tempered, to a certain extent, by conflating 'the Jew' with 'the Muslim' (a standard device adopted by early modern dramatists).*** The linkage between the Jew and the Muslim features prominently in the Venetian scenes when the collusion between Halibeck and Zariph results in the infamy and imprisonment of Anthony Sherley.

At a certain moment in the play, there appears to be a complete meld of

*** See Alan Harris Cutler and Helen Elmquist Cutler, *The Jew as Ally of the Muslim: Medieval Roots of Anti-Semitism* (Notre Dame, IND: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986). For the linkage of Jews and Muslims on the Renaissance stage, see particularly Daniel Vitkus, *Turning Turk: English Theatre and the Multicultural Mediterranean 1570-1630* (New York: Palgrave, 2003) and Jonathan Burton, *Traffic and Turning: Islam and Renaissance Drama, 1579-1624* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005)

'the Jew' and 'the Muslim'. When Halibeck informs the Jew that he has himself embezzled the money from the Sophy and Zariph would certainly exact revenge from Anthony, the Jew, overjoyed by the news, expresses his desire that Halibeck was 'one of the promised seed / To sleep with blessed Abraham when thou diest/For this good news' (x.48-50), thus bringing about a thorough imbrication of Judaism and Islam. The deliberate misidentification of 'the Persian' with the irredeemably diabolical Jew is a key moment which 'records the playwrights' awareness of their own dubious, presentational strategy and lift[s] it above the exercise in public relations' (Publicover 16**).** More importantly, the Jew is here shown to be a signifier capable of bearing contrasting signifiers, one of which undergirds the conflation of the 'Jew' and the 'Muslim'.

Thus, an analysis of different aspects of the play shows that the Jewish image is polyvalent, contingent on different circumstances**,** media and creeds**.** There is no single meaning invested in Jewishness; the Jew is, in Jonathan Gil Harris's elegant formulation, 'identity-less, a site of *performed* contradictions in which any determinate Jewish "identity" … is simply one of the many "identities" that are subsumed within the larger unstable rubric of Jewishness as difference'(Harris 99; emphasis added). In her study of post-Reformation English theatre, Musa Gurnis correctly points out that "religious identities are not so much something one *is* but rather something one is constantly *doing*…[r]eligious identities, in other words, are like gender identities as described by Judith Butler: 'The very multiplicity of their construction holds out the possibility of a disruption of their univocal posturing'" (11). Her contention that religious selves are not "discrete, coherent, ideological units" but are "constituted and continually recalibrated" (4, 5) is particularly apposite to my argument. As Costola and Saenger contend in their discussion of Shylock and Jewishness, "religious beliefs may be privately held, but they are also publicly performed, and theatre is naturally invested in the risks and profits of that public performance.

Theological difference may be a doctrinal issue for theologians, but for Shakespeare's play it is a social issue, a performed contrast, very much like the performance of gender" (161). If the early modern Jew proved to be a refractory figure, resisting clear-cut definition, then on the early modern stage, such a negotiation was carried out by questioning any a priori assumption of Jewishness, by constantly negotiating the notion of Jewishness in the same way as gender. By borrowing Butler's language, one can say that Jewishness in early modern England is not something one *is* but rather something one is constantly *doing*, on the stage particularly,

where the very multiplicity of 'the Jew" challenges his "univocality". Such an insight, I argue, leads us to conclude that 'the Jew' in the play *The Travels of the Three English Brothers* was not a stable category but polysemous, a signifier capable of subsuming a number of signifiers. Not only does he come to signify a range of 'Others', the playwrights use him, for a number of purposes, quite independent of the socio-political conditions of the times. Zariph may be a liminal figure, but 'the Jew' helps to suture the plot and smooth over the inconsistencies in the play and the world outside it.

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