A Companion to
The Global Renaissance

English Literature and Culture in the Era of Expansion

Edited by Jyotsna G. Singh

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Cassio, Cash, and the "Infidel 0": Arithmetic, Double-entry Bookkeeping, and Othello’s Unfaithful Accounts

Patricia Parker

a great arithmatician,
One Michael Cassio, a Florentine...
By debitor and creditor — this counter-caster...
Shakespeare, Othello 1.1.19–31

ten numerall figures... used in the vulgar Arithmetickes throughout all Europe,... generally thought to have proceeded first from the Arabians.
Hylles, Vulgar Arithmatiche (1600)

"0! 0! 0!...
Shakespeare, Othello 5.2.198

Othello is particularly suggestive with regard to the “Global Renaissance” — as the tragedy of a “Moore of Venice” set against the geopolitics of the “Turk,” geographies ranging to Aleppo and the Pontic Sea, and names evocative of Sant’Iago Matamoros and Spanish “Roderigo” as well as (through “Brabantio”) the Low Countries’ campaigns (Griffin, 58–99). What I want to explore here are its critically marginalized lines on “Florentine” Cassio as an “arithmatician” and “debitor and creditor” (the term for double-entry bookkeeping) in relation to an international network that included Antwerp, the financial center Dekker described as “the eldest daughter of Brabant” (Sugden, 23) — whose Burse provided the model for Gresham’s Exchange — and the “arithmeticke mette for marchauntes” (as Thomas More called it) identified with the new “mercantile” (Edler, 120) or “Arabian” numerals, including the “‘infidel symbol’” of “0” (Rotman, 8).

Iago’s reference to Cassio as an “arithmatician” clearly summons the new military science important for Othello, “Florentine” in this context evoking the Machiavelli of The ArtofWarre (with its ciphers or “0’s” in battle array) in a tragedy in which the “Machiavel” is (ironically) Iago himself. But “arithmetic” — from arithmos or counting,
for the calculation "used by merchants or bankers when buying or selling in the marketplace" (Jaffe, 29) – was also bound up with the "infidel symbols" (Bernstein, 35) identified with Arabs, Saracens, and Moors. Hylles' Vulgar Arithmetike (1600) – just a few years before Othello – notes defensively that though "God himselfe" is the "author" of all "sciences," the "invention of those ten numerall figures, which at this present are used in the vulgar Arithmeticke throughout all Europe, is generally thought to have proceeded first from the Arabians" (Hylles, sig. B4r). Records (1543) influential English "arithmetike" (Recorde, 6) notes that some call it "Awyre for Algorisme (as Arabians founde it)." It was associated elsewhere with "Geber," the tenth-century monk who studied in Moorish Spain, accused, as Pope Sylvester II, of "heresy and witchcraft" (Smith and Karpinski, 110–12) because of his identification with Islamic learning. Frank J. Swetz in Capitalism and Arithmetic comments, with others, on its spread into Europe not only through early contacts with the Muslim world, which included its dissemination by "Moorish universities in Spain and elsewhere and by the Saracens in Sicily" (Bernstein, 35), but also through trade contacts "around the Mediterranean and Barbary coasts" (Swetz, 11). And as late as Warter's History of English Poetry (1774), the new arithmetic continued to be described as coming "from the Saracens."

The "system was attributed to the Arabs by the scholars of Europe because it came via Baghdad with the Moorish invasion" (Pullan, 36), from the ninth-century intellectual center that produced the influential arithmetic of Mohammed ibn-Musa al-Khwarizmi, which applied Hindu numerals (including the zero) to practical and commercial problems. Its title, Al-jabr wa'l maqabalah – translated into Latin as Algebra et Almucabala by the Englishman Robert of Chester, from his own studies in Muslim Spain – gave "algebra" its familiar name, while a corrupted version of "Al-Khwarizmi" yielded "algorithm" for the arithmetic that used these new numbers (Smith and Karpinski, 126; Boyer, 225; Menninger, 410–12). Subsequent trade contacts with "the Arabs of northern Africa" (Littleton, 20) led to Fibonacci's Liber abaci (1202), or "Book of Computation" (Swetz, 12, 292; Crosby, 110), which detailed the commercial reckoning made possible by these "arithmetical figures," including the "0 which in Arabic is called cipherum" or cipher (Menninger, 425). And the new arithmetic was further spread by the Carmen de algorismo of Villa Dei (1240) and Algoritmus vulgaris (1250) of Sacrobosco, who influentially described "the Arabs as the inventors of this science" (Smith and Karpinski, 3).

But despite the calculations it enabled across more global networks of commerce and credit, and its advantages over tally-sticks and counters as well as the cumbersome Roman numerals (Pullan, 34; Rotman, 10), an "intense and bitter resistance" to the new arithmetic and its "infidel symbols" meant that it was many centuries before they were more widely accepted (Bernstein, 35). Boyer's History of Mathematics observes that in the Latin translation of Al-Khwarizmi "a considerable portion of the Arabic draft is missing," perhaps "because the author's preface in Arabic gave fulsome praise to Mohammed, the prophet, and to al-Mamun, the Commander of the Faithful" (Boyer, 228). And despite the spread of vernacular arithmetics or "algoritms" (Swetz,
in ways that also broke down what Iago calls the "old gradation" (1.1.37) (Biagioli 1989, 41–95; Thomas, 103–32; Turner, 255–73) — "the change was slow and accomplished without grace" (Crosby, 115).

Though the "new arithmetic of the pen" using "arabic numerals" (Thomas, 106) spread into sixteenth-century England ("I shall reken it syxe tymes by aulgorisme or you can caste it ones by counters": Palsgrave, 1530, cited in Pullan, 42), both it and its "strange and unfamiliar" numerals were resisted well into the seventeenth century (Thomas, 120; Pullan, 42–3; Hadden, 87). The "old medieval battle between abacists and algorismists" continued, making it necessary for English arithmetics to include sections on counters for "such as lacke the knowledge of Arithmetike by the Penne" (Mellis, sig. A7v; Thomas, 121), a combination registered in the canon of Shakespeare (with its references to both "counters" and "arithmetic"), including in the description of Cassio as both "counter-caster" and "arithmetician" (Menninger, 366).

In England, the association of "arithmetic" with "Arabyans" likewise continued in the repeated reminders that its "figures" (or "ciphers") were to be written backward like Arabic itself, as in Villa Dei or Sacrobosco's "sinistrosum" or to the left, more arabico or "as arabieene wrieten, that weren fynders of this science" (Steele, 34–5; Ostashevsky 208–10; Recorde, 14; Gray, 1; Mellis, 2; Blundeville, 1v; Baker, fol. 2). Hylles's Vulgar Arithmetike repeatedly contrasts the right-directed writing of the "ABC" with what he calls the "preposterous order & contrarie to all reason" (4v–6r) of this system emanating from the "Arabians," complaining that "to write the figures toward the left hand (as it were backwardly) troubleth me much" (7v).

O, pardon! since a crooked figure may
Attest in little place a million...

If you would conjure in her, you must make a circle.

Shakespeare, Henry V, Prologue, 15–16; 5.2.292–3

Ciphers made like the Letter O... of necessarie use in practise
of Arithmetich, only to keepe the places

Dionis Gray, The Store-house of Breuittie in workes of Arithmatike (1577)

Central to resistance to the new arithmetic and its "Arabyan" numerals was the "infidel symbol" "of zero or "0," which was "resisted by Christian Europe" (Rotman, 7–8) both because of its "infidel" origins and because as "the terrible zero, a sign for what was not" (Crosby, 113), it risked identification with "blasphemy or heresy," despite the Genesis account of creation ex nihilo (Rotman, 3). The "0" registered its "Arabyan" origins in its very name, the Hindu sūnya that "Arabs turned into sīfī" (Seife, 73), or "as-sīfer, 'the empty'" (Menninger, 401), identified with the secret, hidden, or occult through the "cipher" of secret code or writing (Jaffe, 87). Like the
Moorish "arithmetic" to which it was central, it was identified with "dangerous Saracen magic" (Kaplan, 102), as "the creation of the devil" (Menninger, 422), including in England, where "to the ignorant, arithmetic appeared as a bizarre and mysterious art" (Thomas, 120–1) and its connection with alchemy (Kaplan, 96) was reflected in Jonson’s Alchemist (1.1.37–46) where "Algebra" is cited with "conjuring" among the alchemist’s "black arts."

In ways important for a tragedy involving the charge of "witchcraft" or "arts inhibited" (1.3.64–79) against a "Moor" but also a woman accused of infidelity – a combination of infidel and infidelity Othello shares with The Merchant of Venice (Spiller, 153) and the "Fidelio" and "Infidelio" of Daborne’s A Christian Turned Turk (Vitkus 2000, 218) – the cipher or "O" long assimilated to the circle as well as to the letter O (Menninger, 412; Rotman, 50) was readily conflated with both the potentially unfaithful female "O" and the conjuring circle (Kaplan, 96), a combination foregrounded in the "adulterous circles" in "secret places" invoked by the conjurer Lucifer in Middleton’s Black Book and in other contemporary writing (Daileader, 7, 133–4), including Romeo and Juliet’s "raise a spirit in his mistress’ circle" (2.1.24–6). In Henry V, "If you would conjure in her, you must make a circle" (5.2.292–3) comes at the end of a play that begins with the "flat unraised spirits" to be conjured within the "wooden O" and the zero or "O" that "may / Attest in little place a million" (Prol.8–16).

The use of this "infidel 0" to "hold open a place" (Evans, 117) – “as sifre doth in awgrym, That noteth a place and no thing availedeth” (Langland, in Pullan, 34) – was central to the new place-based arithmetic “profitable nor onley for Merchants, but also for all other occupiers” (Baker, fol. 87; Recorde, 5), including in calculating "gaines" according to "the portion of their laying in" (Mellis, 40). And it was frequently used for comparisons with other kinds of "place," in ways suggestive for the obsession in Othello with "place" and "occupation," including in relation to the "lieutenancy" of Cassio the "arithmetician." Stephen Gardiner, for example, compares the "places" (as both "offices" and "rooms") that can be occupied by "one man" to the new "Arithmetical figures" that change value according to the position they "occupie" (Gardiner, sig. F5v). But in a context in which Francis Meres’s God’s Arithmetike (1597) could begin with the Genesis command to "multiplie and increase" (Meres, sig. A2v), and the "place-value system" of the new arithmetic was "essentially about multiplication," where "every empty space is pregnant with value" (Jaffe, 44), the place occupied by the "0" that was "nought in itself" (Hylles, 6r) but enabled a "miraculous" increase to "ten thousand times" and more (Mellis, 2) adds arithmetic’s "infidel 0" to the much-discussed "O" of Othello (Vitkus 2002, 347–62).

Othello goes out of its way to invoke arithmetical "reckoning" ("seven days and nights? /Eightscore eight hours? . . . O weary reck’ning," 3.4.173–6), while Desdemona’s "high and plentiful wit and invention" is described as making her infidelity "the worse" a "thousand, a thousand times" (4.1.190–2). Othello’s conclusion that "she with Cassio hath the act of shame / A thousand times committed" (5.2.212) is not just an index of the "double time scheme" for which that line has been cited but of a feared multiplication (and increase) out of control, enabled by the "infidel symbol"
of "0" whose conflation with the potentially unfaithful female "0" would subsequently be exploited in its rewriting in *The Winter's Tale*, where the first scene in which (the pregnant) Hermione appears on stage is introduced with "therefore, like a cipher / (Yet standing in rich place), I multiply / . . . many thousands more" (1.2.6–8).

II

you shall sone see,

What thynges by one thyng knowne maie be.

Recorde, "Of the rule of Cose," *The Whetstone of Witte* (1557)

Spare your arithmectic, never count the turns,

Once, and a million!

Shakespeare, *Cymbeline*, 2.4.142–3

"Arithmetic" itself was associated with the sexual in the period, as with different kinds of "traffic" or trade. If the "Fidler" of Heywood's *Fair Maid of the Exchange* identifies "skill in Arithmetick" with the power of "multiplication" in a commercial or monetary context (Heywood 1.1), a lover is termed "an Arithmetician" for multiplying between a woman's "thighs" (Middleton of York, 6), while in *The Changeling* (2.2.62) it is said of the "0" of an unfaithful wife that "She spreads and mounts then like arithmetic; One, ten, a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand" (Williams 1994, 2: 863–4). In a contemporary context where "Turnbull Street whores" could be described as practicing "arithmetick," where the "Arithmaticke" of a "Bawd" included carnal as well as commercial "Divisions & Multiplications," and where Fletcher's *The Woman's Prize* (4.4) could refer to "those that multiply i' th' Suburbs" for "money" (Williams 1994, 2: 863–4) – a sexual "traffic" registered in Othello's condemnation of Emilia as a "bawd" and Desdemona as a "public commoner" who "can turn, and turn" (4.1.252) – the introduction of Cassio as "arithmetician" as well as "lieu-tenant" not only evokes the "'infidel symbol'" combined with the "O" of a suspected female infidelity in *The Winter's Tale* but the sexual "arithmetick" explicitly foregrounded in "Spare your arithmetic, never count the turns, / Once, and a million!" in *Cymbeline* (2.4.142–3), the other late play that revisits *Othello*.

The association with "arithmetick" in a play filled with the monetary and mercenary as well as with references to sexual "use" (*Othello* 1.3.292; 4.3.101–3; 5.2.68–70) simultaneously activates within *Othello* the sense of an "infidel" usury (Caesar, sig. A3v) both monetary and sexual (the "two usuries" foregrounded in *Measure for Measure*). "Use Desdemona well" (1.3.292) is the warning given to the Moor in the opening Act in which "an old black ram / . . . tupping your white ewe" (1.1.87–8) racializes the usurious language of "woolly breeders in the act" from *The Merchant of Venice* (dupton, 77), and a canon in which the combination of the female "O" with the "cipher" or "0" in *The Winter's Tale* has its counterpart in the prodigious increase of
the "usurer's wife" in that play's commercial second half (Parker 2004, 25–49). Sexual "use" is aligned with the explicitly commercial in Othello's "keep a corner in the thing I love / For others' uses" (3.3.273), while Iago's "fairness and wit, / The one for use, the other use it" (2.1.130) includes the "obscene innuendo" (Neill 2006, 249) that a woman will make "her body available for use, i.e. sexual 'use' for a usurious return (prostitution)."

In ways important for the conflation of epistemological and sexual in the obsession in Othello to "see and know" what is "hid" (Neill 2000, 237–68; Parker 1996, 244–5), the "vulgar Arithmetickes" was at the same time identified with bringing the secret or hidden to light, through the "Cosa" or unknown "thing" that was synonymous with it. Regola della Cosa was the term for "Algebra" or the new "infidel" arithmetic itself (Murray, 233). Digges's Arithmetical treatise, named Stratistoric (1579) refers to the "Art of Algebra or Rule of Cosse as the Italians terme it" (55), the English "coss," "cose," or "coase" that was both the counterpart of cosa as the contemporary term for "Algebra" and a verb meaning "to barter, exchange," as in "To cope, or cose, cambire" (OED cos v.). Recorde foregrounds it in the very title of his 1557 Whetstone of Witte, which plays on "cos" as the Latin for "whetstone" together with this cosa or unknown thing (Murray, 238), introducing his entire text with "the rule of Cosse" or the unknown "thyng" which the new arithmetic could make "knownen" (Recorde, sig. b5r). John Dee – on "The Science of working Algiebar and Al-machabel, that is, the Science of finding an unknown number" – again emphasizes the connection between the Italian cosa for "that great Arithmetical Arte of Aequation: commonly called the rule of Coss or Algebra" (Dee, sig. iv) and "the Latin word, Res: A thing," before proceeding to "the rule of Algibebar" to find the value of this unknown "Cos, or Thing" (sig. iiiir), calling attention to the "vulgar names . . . in Italian, Frenche and Spanish" that corresponded to the Latin term, from Italian and Spanish cosa (from Latin causa) to the French regle de la chose (Murray, 436). The res or "thing" that already came with so much contemporary sexual resonance (Williams 1994, 3: 1150) – evoked in Othello's "keep a corner in the thing I love" (3.3.273), in Iago's response to Emilia's "I have a thing for you" with "it is a common thing" (3.3.301–2), and in the "cause" of the final scene that cannot be named to the lexicon of the "arithmetic" invoked at its beginning and its power to bring a secret or unknown cosa, chose, or "thing" to light.

III

"When we shall meet at compt,
This look of shine will hurl my soul from heaven"

Shakespeare, Othello, 5.2.273–4

"I stand accommodant (ie accountant) for as great a sin . . ."

Shakespeare, Othello, 2.1.293
You have no true debitor and creditor but it...your neck, sir, is pen, book, and counters
Shakespeare, Cymbeline, 5.4.157–70

Iago calls Cassio not only an “arithmetician” but also a “counter-caster” or accountant, in lines whose “debitor and creditor” summons the English term for double-entry bookkeeping – associated not only with Florence, where the term for the ledger was libro dei debitori e creditori (De Roover, 143), and with Venice in its facings, pages form (Swetz, 12), but also with Antwerp (“the eldest daughter of Brabant”), where Simon Stevin, who would go on to apply the new “arithmetic” to military science and write his own double-entry treatise, began as a “book-keeper and cashier” (Murray, 213). Double-entry itself was a product of increasingly global networks of commerce and “credit transactions” (De Roover, 121) and the need to control agents, factors, or “lieutenants” (Crosby, 205), following the rise of the “sedentary” merchant who used “partners, agents or correspondents to secure representation abroad” (De Roover, 128; Robson, 694–704; Hadden, 94–5; Goldthwaite, 3–31).

Already long-standing practice, it was disseminated in print through the Tuscan Fra Luca Pacioli’s massively influential Summa de arithmetica, geometria, proportioni et proportionalita (Venice, 1494), which combined commercial arithmetic (including “la Regola della Cosa ouer Algebra”) with double-entry’s “Venetian” form. And it soon spread beyond Italy (Sullivan,13), including to Brabant, where the 1543 redaction of Pacioli by Antwerp merchant Jan Ymypn Christoffels was quickly translated into French and then into English, as How to Keppe a Boke of Accomptes (1547), and incorporated by James Peele (father of the dramatist) into How to Keppe a Perfect Reconyng after the order of the moste worthie and notable accompte, of Debitor and Creditour (1553), expanded in The Paste wyse to Perfection, in th’Accomptes of Debitor, and Creditour (1569). Antwerp itself also produced Valentin Mennher de Kempten’s Practis...pour cyfrer et tenir Liures de Compte (Antwerp, 1550), a work “known and often quoted in England” (Murray, 208); John Weddington’s Howe to kepe Merchantes Bokes of accomptes.

After the order of Debitor and Creditour (Antwerp, 1567), and Jan de Raeymaker’s Comptes pour les Cassiers (Antwerp, 1603), or “Cashiers” (Murray 1978: 212). In England, John Mellis’s Briefe Instruction and Maner bow to Keppe Bookes of Accomptes after the order of Debitor and Creditour (1588) – which included his “Arithmetick” – revised the earliest English version of Pacioli, Hugh Oldcastle’s A Profitable Treatise...of the Keypynge of the Famous Reconyng Called...in Englyshe, Debitor and Creditour (now lost). And, following John Browne’s The Merchants Aviso (1589), Nicolaus Petri’s Practiqueste Om te Loren Reekenin en cypheren (1583) was translated in 1596 as The Pathway to Knowledge, also combining the “rule of equation or of algebere” with “the order of keeping of a merchants booke, after the Italian manner, by debitor and creditor” (Nobes, 136).

Though the actual practice of double-entry bookkeeping gained ground slowly in England, what Nashe in the mid-1590s called “the Discourse of Debitor & Creditour” (Nashe, sig. L4r) was thus already the familiar term for double-entry (Murray, 238), invoked explicitly by Shakespeare not only in Othello but also in Cymbeline (5.4.157–90), in the context of a final “reckoning.”
IV

thou by that small hurt (hast) cashier’d Cassio. . . .

Othello (2.3.375)

Cassa, a chest, a cofine, a shrine, a trunke. . . . Also a case of any thing . . ., a merchants cash, or counter.

Florio (1598)

The double-entry accounting introduced through Cassio as "debtor and creditor" has multiple implications for Othello as a whole, from its combination of military and commercial to the fidelity of accounts of various kinds within it. Michael Neill has suggested that Cassio’s name may have sounded as “Cashio,” from “the Italian case = cashiered cashiering” (Neill 2000, 32) — connecting it both with “the sneering force of ‘cashiered’” in Iago’s complaint about “old gradation” (“and when he’s old, cashier’d,” 1.1.48) and with “cashier’d Cassio” (2.3.375) after the lieutenant’s dismissal. The juxtaposition not only invokes the military sense of cashier adopted into English “during the Low Country campaigns” (Edelman, 76) but also the play’s pervasive monetary language — applied by Iago to Cassio as “an epitome of the mercenary world of ‘debtor and creditor’ where cash is the key to all relationships — the world whose cynical values he must patiently explain to Roderigo (‘Put money in thy purse’)” when ironically “it is actually Iago himself who is the perfect denizen of that world” (Neill 2000, 32).

At the same time, however, both “cashier” and “cash” participated in the international lexicon of accounting, for having “charge of the cash of a bank or mercantile firm, paying and receiving money and keeping the cash account” (OED, cashier n.). Cotgrave included in “Cassier” (or cashier) not only “a chest-keeper, or treasurer” but “Ajourd’hui cassier demain cassé,” or “To day in cash, tomorrow cashiered” (Cotgrave 1611). By the time of Othello, Shakespeare had used this term from the Low Countries in the advice to Falstaff to “cashier” his followers (1 Henry IV 1.3.4–6) and in Merry Wives, where “the gentleman . . . was, as they say, cashier’d” (1.1.174–9) suggests both “dismissed” and eased of his “cash” (OED, cashier v.3). “Casso” as “deprived, frustrated, crossed, cashiered” (Neill 2006, 194) included being “cancelled” or “crossed, blotted, casheered out of a booke” (Florio 1598), in ways reflected in the cancelling of a debt from a “book” or ledger in Cymbeline (3.3.25–6) but also in the Book of Heaven from which it is possible to be cancelled, cast or blotted out, evoked in Othello’s despairing reference to the final “Compr’ or “generall daie of accompte and audit to bee made at the throne of God” (OED, audit n. 3; account n.8b).

Even more importantly, in a period when “cash” as “money” is already suggestive in relation to the contemporary alignment of adultery with adulterated coin (Neill 2000, 136), “cash” was in the discourse of double-entry the English equivalent of Pacioli’s cassa or cash account, so that “a payment per cassa was a cash payment ‘for
the money chest” (Menninger, 428) – reflected in Mellis’s “Capsa,” “Chest, or purse” as the “acconpte of the Chest or ready money” (1588, sig. C2r, D4iiir). “Cash” in this sense was increasingly personified as a subordinate in whom faith or trust could be placed (Miller and O’Leary, 235–65; Poovey, 58) – in ways suggestive for the difficulties editors have faced with regard to whether to gloss the “debitor and creditor” of the lines on Cassio as “an account book or a man who keeps an account book” (Ridley, 5). Simon Stevin’s 1604 double-entry treatise explains the personification of the “Cash” account made “debitor” (if given “money for safekeeping”), “just as if it were a human being” (Littleton 1966, 49), while Richard Dafforne’s double-entry treatise (1635, augmented 1660) – in response to the question “How booke you the Ready Money after the way of Debitor and Creditor” – explains that “Cash (having received my mony unto it) is obliged to restore it again at my pleasure: for Cash representeth (to me) a man, to whom I (onely upon confidence) have put my mony into his keeping, the which by reason is obliged to render it back, or, to give me an account what is become of it” (Geijsbeek, 153).

The “Faithful Cash” as “keeper of the money-chest” appears as a character in a much later play devoted to double-entry (Littleton, 59–60). But personification of double-entry’s “impersonal chest” (for cash) as “a trusted employee” (Littleton, 1966, 49, 51) is already evoked in the choice of the name “Cash” for the “Cashier” entrusted with a treasure and “secret” (“lock’d up in silence”: Jonson, 134–15 ) in Jonson’s Folio version of Every Man In His Humour, where this “Cash” is the post-Othello (or 1616 Folio) change-of-name for the original (suspected) yet “honestest faithful servant” (Jonson, 62–5) of a jealous husband who fears being “robbed” of his “treasure,” in the earlier 1598 version (set in Florence) in which Shakespeare himself had performed – a play long assumed to have exerted an important influence on Othello (Jonson, xxiv–xxvi) not only because of its suspected wife Bianca, and jealous husband Thorello as an anagram of Othello but also because of its scene of military arithmetic, or killing by computation (Cahill, 168).

V

I taught them not to kepe a Marchants Bookes, or cast acconpte: yet to a word much like that word Accounts . . .

Haughton, Englishmen for my Money; Or a Woman Will Have Her Will (ca. 1598)

The “cash” identified in double-entry accounting with the chest, casket, or case is highly suggestive for The Merchant of Venice, where the cassa or casse that was simultaneously a “box, case, or chest, to carye, or keep wares in,” a “casket,” “coffin, or shrine,” and “a Marchants cash, or counter” (Cotgrave) is reflected in the varying “choyse of three chests” (1600 Quarto) and “choyse of three caskets” (Pavier Quarto). Double-entry (with the new arithmetic) has in fact long been applied to that play (Bady, 10–30), together with the relation of the “casse, or caskets, used by merchants to hold
money” to the “marriage-endowing case (caskets)” identified with the “rich prize” of Portia herself (Jaffe, 66–79).

But in a context where English “cash” like “Cash in Italian, cassa, comes from case or box” (Geijtsbeek, 14), through “Latin capita, case, receptacle” (OED, cash n. 1; case n. 2), and a canon that repeatedly combines the sexual sense of “case” (as “priuities”) with its other senses of “cause, matter, thing . . . crime . . . esteeme, account, reckoning” (Cograve: cas; Parker 1987, 27–31), Iago’s insinuating “your case is better” (4.1.69) – in the lines that warn Othello that “There’s millions now alive / That nightly be in those unproper beds / Which they dare swear peculiar” (4.1.67–9) – and Othello’s “This is a subtle whore, / A closer lock and key of villainous secrets” (4.2.21–7) suggest that this nexus from the discourse of “debtor and creditor,” introduced in the description of Cassio the “lieutenant,” resonates within Shakespeare’s other Venetian play as well, including in relation to what is kept “secret” or hidden.

Double-entry itself was preoccupied with the “privy” or secret. “Early accounting records can be said to have functioned like the study or the locked chest” (Poovey, 36) and “directions as to keeping one’s account private are given by all the early writers” (Murray, 225). Pacioli’s influential treatise advises its reader to “keep in a more secret place, as private boxes and chests [cassa], all manuscripts of your debtors who have not paid you” (Geijtsbeek, 75). Peele counsels on “what is to be done of such as will have their substance kept in secreete” (Peele, ch. xi, sig. B5r) and Melliss on the keeping of the “inuentorie” in “a secreete . . . booke” (Mellis, sig. B1r), while many sixteenth-century manuals advise the merchant to keep a separate cash-book in order to “keep the exact details of the master’s wealth secret” (Nobes, 110). Double-entry thus inhabited the very boundary between private and public, secret and disclosed, functioning on the one hand “to protect the records of the household estate from prying eyes,” ensuring “that no one else had access to the family treasure,” but on the other, especially in the “ledger, which was the most public book,” purporting to make the private available to the eye’s inspection (Poovey, 34–5). It is not just, therefore, that the “infidel 0” or “cipher” was bound up with the mysterious or “secret” or that a hidden cosa or “thing” was identified with what the new “arithmetic” could bring to light, but that double-entry accounting was itself a practice bound up with “secrets” as well as with the promise of ocular proof.

In a period when the female body as a “book” that could be “opened and inscribed with the phallic pen” is foregrounded in Othello’s “Was this fair paper, this most goodly book, / Made to write ‘whore’ upon” (Williams 1997, 49), in his charge against Desdemona as a “public commoner” (4.2.73), and in a play in which the familiar equivocque on the Low Countries (already reflected in “Did I not dance with you in Brabant once?,” Love’s Labor’s Lost [2.1.114]) is sounded in Iago’s insinuation of her preference for “her country forms” (3.3.241: Williams 1997, 88), it is important to note as well that the accounts (and “counter”) of double-entry were also repeatedly aligned with the female “count” (Henry V 3.4.51; Parker, 1987: 132–8; Ostashevskiy, 218–20) – not only in double-entry’s “PUBLIC LEDGER” as slang for “a prostitute because like that paper she is open to all parties” or in other contemporary bawdy on account-
ing and its books (Williams 1994, 1: 131–2; Middleton, 401, 599, 1106; Haughton, sig. A4r) but also in Shakespeare, in the “account” of Sonnet 136 combined with “a treasure,” “a ‘thing’ of great receipt,” a “nothing,” and a female “will” (Booth, 471–2) and in “I see, lady, the gentleman is not in your books,” glossed as “account books” (McEachern, 154) in Much Ado About Nothing (1.2.79), the play whose plot of a “note,” accusation, blot, or stain as well as a female “nothing” or “0” Othello itself revisits.

The play that opens with the description of the “lieutenant” and “arithmetician” Cassio as “debitor and creditor—this counter-caster” (1.1.31) thus at the same time raises the question of the fidelity of all kinds of “accounts.”

VI

_The (bookkeeper) is not to falsifie any parcel, matter or thing._

Roberts, _The Merchants Mapp of Commerce_ (1638)

_a parcel, parte or share of any reckoning or accounts._

Florio, _A World of Wordes_ (1598)

_(Book-keeping) is like a Prince who is a judge before whom the merchant comes as litigant._

_With Arithmetic as his assessor, the case is argued by the rules of the ledger, and after hearing both parties—debtor and creditor—judgment is given._

Antonio Moschetti, _Dell’universal trattato di libri doppi_ (Venice, 1610)

Othello as a whole is filled with the language of accounting. As Michael Neill observes, Iago “dismisses Cassio as a mere pen pusher or accountant,” though “ironically it is he himself who typically employs the language and calculus of accounting”—including in his later reference to standing “accountant” (2.1.293) and its relation to a (calling to a) “compt” or “count” (Neill 2006, 198, 258, 391). But even more pervasively, in a historical context where Recorde’s “Arithmetike” could claim that “numbre... is the ground of all mennes affayres, so that without it no tale can be tolde” (Recorde 1543, 2) and “count” and “account” elsewhere in Shakespeare connect financial to narrative telling, tallying, or accounting, the language of double-entry in this tragedy also extends to its narrative accounts.

“Tell” is used both as “count” (“O, what damned minutes tells he o’er,” 3.3.169) and as narrate (“if I had a friend that lov’d her, / I should but teach him how to tell my story,” 1.3.163–4) when Othello is called to account before the Venetian Senate. And in his “story” recounting Desdemona’s prayer “that I would all my pilgrimage dilate, / Whereof by parcels she had something heard” (1.3.129, 152–4), the “parcels” that editors generally gloss simply as “portions” or “parts” was not only a familiar term from the lexicon of arithmetic, property, and money (Recorde 1543, 39; OED, parcel n. 2b, 4, 3a), but yet another key term from the double-entry accounting introduced at the play’s beginning, “the equivalent of the Italian le partite, or journal-posts, of
Pacioli" (Murray, 223), which Florio renders as "a parcel, parte or share of any reckoning or accounts" (Florio 1598, 260). The inclusion of all "parcels" or "particulars" was crucial to the comprehensive account promised by double-entry (Murray, 224), including in "the general ledger, summarized in the trial balance," which "brings to a point all the loose 'parcels' or transactions" from the other books (Sullivan, 79). Peele repeatedly refers to the bearing of the "parcels" out of one book into another as crucial to producing a complete account, advising on the "circumspect hede to be taken, that eche parcel of the fornnall be truly cast before it is borne into the quarterne" or ledger. Mellis emphasizes the importance of the accountant's "keeping of accompts & parcels of all his reckonings in his books" (sig. A2r) and instructs in the "manner of bringing the parcels out of the Journal into the Leager" as the principle of double-entry itself ("that for every one parcel that is sette in your Journall ought to bee made two parcels in your Leager, the one in Debito, and the other in Credito"). *The Merchants Mapp of Commerce* warns that "[The bookkeeper] is not to falsifie any parcel, matter or thing . . . but to set everything . . . plainly, directly, and orderly down" so that the account will be not only "perfect" (or complete) but "just" and "true" (Roberts, C6v).

"Parcels" in Shakespeare make clear its accounting (as well as arithmetical) sense, and not just the sense of "piecemeal" or "in parts" customarily used to gloss Othello's narrative account – from "to your audit comes / Their distract parcels in combined sums" in *A Lover's Complaint* (230–1) to the pervasive accounting terms in the scene of Wolsey's downfall in *Henry VIII*, from the "earthly audit" (3.2.141) of discovery of his secret "Inventory, thus importing / The several parcels of his . . . Possession" (3.2.124–38) to the "paper" (208) he expects to contain "the story of [the King's] anger" (209) but finds instead is "th'accompt / Of all that world of wealth I have drawn together" (210–11). And – in a canon where the sexual sense of "parcel" or particular (Parker 1987, 86–7; Williams 1994, 2: 998) is also exploited in the "parcel-bawd" of *Mature for Measure* (2.1.63–4) – both the arithmetical and the rhetorical senses are combined in *Henry IV Part One* (2.4.101: "his eloquence the parcel of a reckoning").

At the same time, the rhetorical and judicial "circumstances" crucial to *Othello* (Parker 1996, 354–5) were the foundation of double-entry itself and its connection to the disciplines of examination, interrogation, and confession. Studies of accounting as "a social and institutional practice" have stressed the fundamental early connections between double-entry and rhetoric (Aho, 28; Hopwood and Miller) but also the judicial, from Pacioli's emphasis on its importance for "defending claims in court and for protecting oneself from lawsuits" (Aho, 25) to the English treatises, including Peel on its usefulness in making it possible "to saie (with a cleare conscience)" whether an account should be free of "suspicion," in a "triall" at "lawes" (Peele, Aiii). Recorde – who himself refers to "accompts for merchants by order of Debitore and Credito" (Sullivan, 36) – stresses the accuracy of bookkeeping and "Arithmetick" essential to the adjudication of a judicial "cause" (Murray, 271). A Venetian double-entry treatise published in the same decade as *Othello* compares this method of accounting to "a judge before whom the merchant comes as litigant. With Arithmetic as his assessor,
the case is argued by the rules of the ledger; and after hearing both parties — debtor and creditor — judgment is given” (Moschetti, 4, in Murray, 187).

The rhetorical “circumstances” central to a judicial case provided the very basis of double-entry as influentially described by Pacioli — the “interrogatory questions” of the classical procedure in rhetoric, by which material for discourse was to be generated: *quid* (who), *qui* (what), *quod* (where), *quando* (when), *quantum* (how many), *cum* (how), *quo* (in whose presence), and *cum* (how) — to be provided in the account books themselves (Aho, 26). But at the same time, the “circumstances” foundational to double-entry had their counterpart in “the confessional interrogation of the penitent,” bringing together the “business account” and the “confessional account” in ways reflective of Pacioli’s own training in rhetoric as well as his education in “a Franciscan monastery where weekly confession was the rule” (Aho, 26).

Keith Hoskin and Richard Macve have stressed in even more detail the dependence of double-entry on the disciplines of accountability and “examination” (including confession and inquisition), making the “audit” itself a “power-knowledge apparatus” that embodied “the new critical practice of *inquisitio*,” in a process through which the auditor through careful examination of the books “got them to yield up their hidden truth” (Hopwood and Miller, 75) — a description that resonates with the foregrounding of both inquisition and torture within *Othello* itself, as part of its own “epistemology” of bringing to light a “hidden truth,” in a way that makes “knowledge and sight seem equivalent” (Hanson, 54).

The “circumstances” that promise to bring “truth” (though “hid”) to light are repeatedly summoned in *Othello*, in Iago’s promise of “strong circumstance” enabling the Moor to “see and know” in the absence of ocular proof (3.3.406–8) — and his illusory fulfilment of that promise (“I will make him tell the tale anew: / Where, how, how oft, how long ago, and when / He hath, and is again to cope your wife” (4.1.84–6) — and they are reiterated in Emilia’s reaction to Othello’s charge against her mistress (“Why should he call her whore? Who keeps her company? / What place? what time? what form? what likelihood?,” [4.2.137–8]) in the scenes in which he becomes both judge and executioner in a final “cause” (5.2.1–2). But the connection in *Othello* to the language of accounting is made retrospectively even clearer in its reprise in *Cymbeline* — where what Iago’s counterpart calls “the contents o’ th’ story” (2.2.27) — both narrative and “inventory” (2.2.30) — are described as “circumstances” so “near the truth” that they induce another husband to “believe” (2.4.61–3) his wife a “whore” (2.4.128), before he responds to “Will you hear more?” with “Spare your arithmetic, never count the turns” (2.4.141–2).

VII

*put at the head of the Inventory a Cross and the name of Jesus or some other Christian symbol to distinguish you from Turks, Jews and others.*

Jan Ympn Christoffels (Antwerp, 1543)
Double-entry itself, finally, was inseparably bound up with the issue of fidelity as well as "the rhetoric of credit" (Sullivan) — in a period when "infidel" evoked not only religious apostasy but the lack of "credit" to be given to "faithless infidels" (Knolles, 426), described repeatedly as "violating the faith" of their "word" (Barleti, 184) through "dishonesty" and "fraud," an atmosphere of "distrust and uneasiness" that also meant (for example) that the account books of a prominent merchant of Venice with "commerce in Constantinople" underscored that "credit terms, where the Turk are concerned, are cash" (Nobes, 79).

At the same time, the suspicion of and resistance to arithmetic’s new "infidel" numbers was magnified within the history of accounting or bookkeeping because of their own association with dishonesty and fraud. Though double-entry itself "grew out of algebra" after "Europe began to learn arithmetric from the Arabs" (Littleton, 5, 20) and was indebted to "Moorsish influence," including for the "system of equations" (Nobes, 151) and its "zero balance" (Rotman, 78) — the actual history of its bookkeeping was dominated by fear that these "Arabic" or alien arithmetical numerals might lead to "deceit and fraud" (Struik, 292) since they were deemed easier to "falsify" than Roman letters (Menninger, 427; Swetz, 182; Crosby, 115). The "6" and "9" of these "figures of Algorisme" could be "contrary turned" (More, 772), the "1" could be "readily converted into a 4, 6, 7, or 9" (Bernstein, 35), and the "infidel 0" was particularly suspect (Kaplan, 102) because it could not only be easily altered but could fraudulently multiply by its strategic insertion.

Identification of the new arithmetic’s "infidel symbols" with the production of dishonest or unfaithful accounts has been given by historians as the reason why the Arte del Cambio (or Guild of Money Changers) of medieval Florence famously prohibited any member from the "use of Arabic numerals" in "account books and ledgers or in any part of it in which he writes debits and credits" (Struik, 292) but also why even sixteenth-century Italian treatises still urged the more "secure" Roman letters (or "imperial figures") over "Arabic" or "mercantile" figures "nella posta del debito e credito" (Edler, 120). In England, concern that the "Arabic figures could more easily be forged" meant that they continued to be "distrusted" and Roman numerals used for important purposes to avoid "mistaking" (Thomas, 120), while strictures were repeated that there must be no "alteration of Cyphers ... otherwise the books are of no credit in Law" (Nobes, 110). In the same text that cites the "Discourse of Debitor & Creditor," Nashe derides "Arithmetique figures" as "juggling transformers" (Nashe, sig. S3v) — a juggling identified in the period with a trickery, conjuring, or witchcraft that could deceive the eye (OED juggling vb l n.) — and disdains to have his "margent bescrat (like a Merchants booke)" with these "roguish" arithmetical figures and "cyphers or round oos" (Nashe, sig. G3v). And in the opening lines of Henry V on the "ciphers" to a "great accompt," the zero or "0" that can "Attest in little place a million" is called a "crooked figure," not just (I would argue) for the reasons that have been
suggested but because of the association of the "0" itself with the falsifying of accounts of various kinds. 4

Treatises on double-entry not only emphasized the accountant’s “scrupulous fidelity to his own word” (Sullivan, 28) — or the "credit" from "credere (to believe, to trust, to put credit in)" (Turner, 280) and "bonafides, or good faith pledges... borrowed from religion" (Jaffe, 22) — but the importance of distinguishing its accounts from the "infidel." The "name of Jesus" or "sign of the Cross" that Pacioli instructed be put at an account’s beginning — reflecting not only the "good credit" of an "unblemished reputation" but a pledge of "trust and fidelity," "[for] truly everyone is saved by faith" (Aho, 29) — was underscored in Ympyn’s influential Brabantian treatise by "it is proper to follow the laudable custom of Italy and to put at the head of the Inventory a Cross and the name of Jesus or some other Christian symbol to distinguish you from Turks, Jews and others" (Murray, 205). And such “Pious Inscriptions” (Yarney, 143) were repeated in England (Nobes, 109; Sullivan, 40, 155), including in Mellis’s emphasis on “Fidelitie” and "Fayth" as well as "honesty" and "truth" (Mellis, 10; Poovey, 41).

But at the same time as the treatises stressed the "fidelity" of the accountant as a "faithful steward" (Murray, 190) producing an honest and "faithful account" (Aho, 32) — in ways echoed in Timon of Athens and elsewhere — what double-entry generated was an "impression of honesty" or credibility that could be only "a show of religiosity" (Aho, 32, 29), producing what was ultimately a credible substitute for ocular proof. Though its "formal precision" made its figures "seem accurate" (Poovey, 56), "double-entry bookkeeping guaranteed clarity but not honesty" (Crosby, 208). If (with its "balances") "the ledger was open for all to see," yielding a "fiction of total disclosure" through an accounting that texts such as The Merchants Avizo promised would make it possible to "see and know" (Browne, 5–6; Poovey, 59–60), both "the inventory and the journal were secret books" (Poovey, 58), like the "inventory" described as Wolsey’s "main secret" in Henry VIII (3.2.215) or the deceptive "Inventory" (and "Story") of Iago’s counterpart in Cymbeline.

Othello itself is literally filled with the language of "credit," "reputation," "faith" and "trust" — including in relation to the honesty or credibility of a particular word throughout the tragic process in which Iago manages to "undo" Desdemona’s "cred," with the "Moor" (2.3.359). Iago himself invokes the sense of "credit" as the credible — "That Cassio loves her, I do well believe’t; / That she loves him, ’tis apt and of great credit" (2.1.286–7) — in the very lines in which he describes himself as "acconitant" or "accountant" (2.1.293). And the juxtaposition of the language of accounting and "credit" is sounded, in the earlier scene of Othello’s "story," in the Duke’s comment on the conflicting reports of the Turk ("There’s no composition in these news / That gives them credit," 1.3.1–2) and Second Senator’s response that "they jump not on a just accompt" (1.3.5). The play’s pervasive language of "credit" is itself racially inflected in a "fair" that can mean both "white" and a reputation that is unsullied (Neill 2006, 213), a "report" that by being "foul" can undo "trust" (1.3.117–18), and a "name" that can become "begrim’d and black" (3.3.387).
But it is finally not a "Moor" accused of witchcraft and of telling "fantastical lies" (2.1.233), or the "infidel 0" of a suspect female sexuality, or the "lieutenant" called "debitor and creditor," "counter-caster," and "arithmetician," but the play's infidel within who (in the cultural commonplace) is "unfaithful like the Moors" (Neill 2000, 40), promising the "strong circumstance(s)" of a judicial "cause" attesting to Desdemona's infidelity, though it is finally the account itself in which no faith or trust should be put.

Double-entry's "impression of honesty" (as a sign-system) thus provides the commercial counterpart to the "Ensigne" who is to be a "man of good accompte, honest and veruous, that the Captayne may repose affiance in" (Digges, 88), literally rendered in Iago's "I must show out a flag and sign of love, / Which is indeed but sign / (1.1.156–7), and the "faithless infidel" is the "man . . . of honesty and trust" to whose "conveyance" Othello assigns his wife (1.3.284–5), 1 the "accountant" who manipulates the credit market of the play, until it is too late.

Notes

1 "Counter-caster" for Cassio in the context of battlefield arithmetic is, however, less likely to be a literal use of the counting board than the familiar transfer of this older terminology to the new pen-and-ink "arithmetic" used to cast accounts.


3 I am grateful to John Lavagnino for suggesting multiple places this wordplay appears in Middleton. For the gloss on Haugton's wordplay on books of account and "cunt," see Kermode, 172. The Quarto passage appears in Haugton (1616, sig. A4r).

4 I would add this sense of the "crooked figure," therefore, to the analysis in Ostashevsky. The book-in-progress from which my contribution to this volume is taken includes Henry V in relation to this sense of "crooked figure," the falsification of "numbers" and the importance of numerical (as well as other) "figures in all things" as well as a much fuller treatment of military arithmetic and "credit" in both Henry V and Othello.

5 Though there is not space to develop the connection here, "conveyance" in this line (as elsewhere in Shakespeare) is a term itself charged with the legal language of debtors, creditors, and potential fraud. See Parker (1996, 116–84); Ross (2003).

References and Further Reading


Haughton, William. *English-men for my money: or, A pleasant comedy, called, A woman will have her will*. London, 1616.


part of the dramatic text signifies in the early modern printed play texts. Since it is the only part of the dramatic text in which the author does not disappear behind his characters, it seems legitimate to ask whether it occasionally shows us Shakespeare responding to and interpreting features of his own plays. I hope the present analysis has indicated one direction in which the return of the author in Shakespeare studies might profitably lead.

NOTES
1 Erne 2003. I wish to thank Patrick Cheney and Neil Forsyth for their incisive comments on an earlier version of this article.
2 For an influential formulation of this editorial ideal, see Greg 1942.
3 See also Erne 2007: 5–25.
4 References to early printed books are cited using the pagination markers then in use, namely the alphabetically ordered gathering of pages (E, for example), the page within the ordering (43), and the front or back of the page (recto=r, verso=v). Sometimes “sig.” is used before such entries. [Ed.]
5 I refer to the through-line numbering (TLN) adopted in Hinman (1996).

CUTTING BOTH WAYS
Bloodletting, Castration/Circumcision, and the "Lancelet" of The Merchant of Venice
Patricia Parker

Scalpellus . . . A pen knife: a fine instrument to let bloude with. A lancelet.
Cooper, Thesaurus (1578)

The lancelet used by surgeons . . .
Rabelais

A little crooked Lancet . . . the acuitye or poyncte (of) which cutteth on both sydes.
Guillermeau, French Chirurgerye (1598)

If you prick us, do we not bleed?
Shylock

The Merchant of Venice—where the knife of the Trial Scene evokes the threat of forcible circumcision or castration by a "Jew," and Morocco,
from another circumcised nation, challenges "Let us make incision for your love, /To prove whose blood is reddest" (2.1.6-7)—is pervaded by cuts and incisions of multiple kinds, from Shylock’s preparing to cut a "pound of flesh" to the gelding of both "person" and "purse" (Shel 1982: 55), Antonio as a castrated ram or "tainted wether" (4.1.114) and the Jew deprived of both "daughter" and "ducats" (2.8.15). At the same time, it is traversed by the sense of writing (or graphen) as a grafting or cutting—making words on "paper" issue "life-blood" (3.2.265-6)—and by reminders of the movement from Old Testament to New, from "carnal" cutting to the spiritual "circumcision of the heart."1

Earlier criticism of the play based on such figural progression characterized its trajectory as moving from the "justice" demanded by the Jew to Christian "mercy," foregrounding not only Poria's "quality of mercy" speech and the conversion of Jessica, Shylock's daughter, but the more marginal figure of the "Clown"—called in most editions Lancelot (or Launcelot) Gobbo—who leaves behind the house of the Jew for the punning new "liveries" (2.2.109) of a Christian.2 What I want to do here, however, is to approach the play's multiple inscriptions of incision or cutting (including castration and circumcision) through the Clown himself—whose very name imports a cultural semantics crucial to both cutting and bloodletting, though this has been obscured by the editorial tradition. I then examine the ways in which his presence within this play of Christian, Muslim, and Jew both evokes the traditional logic of providential progression and undoes it, enabling (in ways appropriate for a knife that famously cut both ways) a double-edged or contrary reading of the trajectory itself.

Ever since Rowe's eighteenth-century printing of "Launcelot" (which appears in none of the early texts of the play), editors have reproduced a name that has generated the critical distraction of a connection with Arthurian legend. But the Clown who appears in the Quartos and Folios as "Lancelet" or "Launcelot" (with the surname "lobbe") introduces into the play the well-known name for this two-edged knife. The slowness of editors and critics to recognize a meaning that was commonplace in the period underscores not only the imperative to historicize the language of the plays but the need to return to the early texts themselves.3 At the same time, the figural networks of which this familiar item of material culture was a part provide a signal instance of the importance of going beyond a more narrow focus on the "object" in order to register its overdetermined status.4

Contemporary polyglot dictionaries make clear that the uses of this "lancelet" or "launcelot" were crucially related to the central issues of The Merchant of Venice. Palsgrave's Letractissement de la langue francoys (1530: 237/1) has for English "Lancet" the French counterpart "lancette" for which "lancelet" was the familiar variant, as in Rabelais' reference to "le lancelet qu'utilisent les chirurgiens" (1994: 501). John Baret's Averie or Triple Dictionarie (1573) informs its readers that the surgeon's scalpel or cutting knife is "a Lancelette or like instrument," while Thomas Cooper's Thesaurus (1578) provides not only its frequent comparison to a "pen knife" but the definition of Latin Scalper as "A lancelet, cissours, or other yron toole wherewith incision is made."5 John Rider's Bibliotheca (1589) has "A Launce, launcelot, or surgeons knife, wherewith they use to let blood" and "a Launcelot to cut wounds," making clear that "lancelet" and "launcelot" were simply variable spellings for this incising knife, while Minsheu's Guide unto the Tongues (1617) defines "Launcelot" or "Lancelot" as "a fleame, or Chirurgians instrument" used in "letting blood...launcing, cutting, or scarifying," underscoring its use not only for "bleeding" but for cuts in the flesh as well.6

Contemporary descriptions likewise underscore not only that "lancing" had the sense of cutting with a lancelet (or its variants lancet, lancer, and lance) but that pricking with its sharp point—as in Shylock's "If you prick us, do we not bleed?" (3.1.64)—was part of its well-known function. Lodge's translation of Seneca on bloodletting advises "Thou needest not to open thy breast with a deep and vast wound; a lancet will give way to that great libertie, and in a pricke consisteth securitie" (1614: 288), while Johann Wecker's Compendious Chyrurgerie (1585) advises that the surgeon make "incision" in a fleshly swelling by "pricking it with a lancet point, or quill" (1585: 153).
The knife inscribed in the name of "Launcelet" or "Lancelet" was repeatedly featured in surgical and bloodletting texts—from early references to "rasours & lancettes" to the choice of "The Lancet" as the name of one of the oldest medical journals.6 "Lancelet" (or "lancet") was used interchangeably with "lancet" throughout the sixteenth century. Ambroise Paré—who provides an illustration (see Figure 6.1)—describes how to make "the lancet enter more easily," so that the "incision" will "open a vein, and draw blood," warning of the danger that the patient might bleed to death ("you must stop the blood as speedily as you can ... lest hee pour the life together with his blood," Paré 1634: 358), in ways that resonate with Portia's warning to Shylock to have some "surgeon" by. In England, prominent descriptions of this material instrument and its dangers, along with the benefits of bloodletting, abound in the decades leading up to the play. In 1542, the translation of Guy de Chauliac's The question of cyrryns mentions a lancet or lancet as an essential part of any surgeon's chest (sig. Aiiir).7 In 1543, the influential treatise of Giovanni Vigo records under "Incision" the use of a lancet or "lance" for cutting an "apostume" (tumor or boil) and underscores the danger of a fatal bleeding in its advice on the veins from which blood might be taken—including in the breast or chest (1543: 116–18, 360–2, 385–8).8 In 1563, Thomas Gale's Certain works of chirurgien cites this knife among the "instruments ... which are in most use" and ought to be had in redynes of the Chirurgian" (sig. 13v), for "phlebotomie or lettyne of blode" (sig. 5v) as well as for fleshly incisions, and warns of the "great flux of blood to folowe" if "it happeneth the greate vayne, and arteries to be cut" (sig. 13v). In 1564, the "newly corrected" edition of William Bullein's Goodly Regiment against Fever Pestilence instructs on how to use the lancelet or "launce" in the "openyng of a vein" to "let the pacient bleede," along with the direction to "launce not verie depe" (1564: 36) lest the incision prove mortal.

The danger is foregrounded yet again in 1566, in John Securis's A Detection and Ocruimicne of the Daily Enemeties and Abuses Committed in Physick, which inveighs against abuses by "letters out of blind" (sig. Diii), warning that "they will cutte" and "they will launce," as they "rashely go to worke in all thynge." The year before it, the English publication of the works of Lanfranco of Milan advises on "howe incision should be done in the breast" so that there be no "errore committed" (1565: 171). And in 1585, John Banister's translation of Wecker's Compendious Chirynge—which repeatedly refers to the "scarrifying lancet" used for "pricking" the flesh as well as for bleeding (1585: 153, 187)—advises of the swelling called the King's Evil that the surgeon work with his "lancet, by little and little," since "in making incision" there may follow great "profusion of blood" (1585: 88). In ways equally suggestive for The Merchant of Venice, where gilding figures almost as prominently as bleeding and blood, he goes on to describe the use of this knife for incisions in the scrotum and testicles, advising the surgeon on how to divide the membrane "with your lancet" (1585: 210).
Closer to the time of the play, even more detailed descriptions of bleeding, “pricking” or cutting the flesh with a lancet or lancelet appeared. William Cloves’ *A Proved Practice for All Young Chirurgians* (1588)—whose illustration of a “surgeon’s chest” includes a man being bled with this instrument—details its uses for “bleeding,” including “a bodie full of euill humors” (1588: 166), and treats of its hazards in an exchange with a “shifting fellow” who refuses to believe that “a prick with a small poyned thing, as is a lancet” can be as “daangerous, as that which is cut asunder by a razour, knife, or other sharpe weapons,” when a mere “prick” with one can be deadly (sig. pir). Nicholas Gyer’s *The English Phlebotomy* (1592) provides detailed instructions on how to use a lancelet or “Lancelot” that include:

Launcing is done with a Lancelot or some instrument called in Greeke *Epidermes*; and in Latine *Scalpellum*. The member is cut by little and little with this Chyrruginall instrument, sometime it striketh but the very skinne: sometime it goeth in deeper... and the deeper the Instrument goeth in, the more abundant is the effusion of blood. (1592: 288)

Throughout *The English Phlebotomy*, Gyer returns again and again to the dangers of such incisions, contrasting “ignorant Barbers” with the skilled surgeon, who uses “a fine Launcet” with care, so that the incision is not mortal (1592: 201). Most strikingly for *The Merchant of Venice* and its so-called “bloody creditor” (3.3.34), in a period where a bloodletter could be described as “whetting his lancet to cut the throat of the disease” (Boys 1610: 72), Gyer also condemns mercenary “bloodsuckers,” “Arabians, barbarous phisitions” (1592: 230), and counterfeit “Jews or Egyptian” who “kill thousands” of “faythful Christians” (sig. A4iv) by bleeding.

In the same decade as the play, two other major discussions of bloodletting and incision make clear the contemporary associations of the two-edged knife evoked by Lancelet’s name. Peter Lowe’s *The Whole Couse of Chirurgie* (1597) repeatedly refers to the importance of the “lancet” as well as the potential dangers of bloodletting, adding that even if used in a different part of the body, it might effect a castrating or gelding. Commenting on treating of the “veines in the head” that if certain “veines be cutte, they cause a man to be sterile,” Lowe claims that such cutting of veins was “practised amongst the Schites” (or Shi’a Muslims) to “effeminat them” for use “like women” and cautions that the surgeon’s lancet “goe not too depe” (sig. Cc3r-v). In another passage noting that a surgeon “must haue diuers lancets,” some “large, some round pointed” and others “long sharp pointed,” he advises on the extreme care that must be taken to “pricke” the “veine softly” rather than “suddently” (sig. Dd4v).

The most detailed illustration of common lancets or lancelets is provided in the translated French *Chirurgerie* (1598) of Jacques Guillemeau, whose title page prominently features a bloodletting and the piercing of a man’s naked breast with what is likely this same knife, since so much of his text gives instructions for incisions with it in the breast, scrotum, and other “incarnate & fleshlye” parts. Prominent among his illustrations of the “Instrumentes of Chirurgerie” is an entire page filled with lancets or lancelets of various kinds (see Figure 6.2). According to Guillemeau’s key, the smallest ones at the top left corner—the sharp point marked “B” and the rings (“C”) with lancelets (“D”) hidden within them—are for secretly pricking the fearful but unsuspecting patient without his “perceavings.” The larger lancets depicted on the entire left side—with a razor (“G”) for comparison—include (“F”) a straight-blade or “rectifieyde Lancette, wherewith we open an Apostemat, wherin we make incisiones, & scarifications,” called by the “Latinistes” a “Scalprum Chirurgicum” (with “H” to mark the “poyntes that cuteth on both sydes”); “The Lancet to phlebotomize called in Latine Scalpellus” (“L”); a “little crooked Lancet” (marked “N,” its “acuiyte or poynte which cuteth on both sydes” surrounded by “O’s”); and at the lower left corner, “The crooked lancet which is occluded in her case” (“P”) and an opened case just barely showing “The blade of the Lancette” (“M”) it encloses. The most complicated of all—are from the secretly pricking rings—is at the top right corner, its blade curving downwards hooked into a privet or surgical probe, described as “A prope instrumente to launce the fistles [or fistulas] ... & make a great incisione,” a cut for which “the foresayed crookede lancet [must] be but reasonable sharpe.”
The text that follows describes the uses of these lancets or lancelets for bloodletting and for "Apostemations" or boils (fol. 17v)—including "Broade & narrow lancets" needed for ample cuts or when the "vaynes lye profoundly occulted in the fleshe" (fol. 28v)—and, as always, the care to be taken lest the patient bleed to death, emphasizing the importance in making certain incisions of not spilling any blood at all but cutting only the "incarnate or fleshye" part (fol. 20v). An entire section is devoted to incisions "with the lancet" in the breast in particular, with care not to "cut in anye vayne, artery, or synnue, which lyeth occult and burriede" (fol. 19v); while other sections are devoted to incisions in "the Scrotum" or "bagg wherein the testicles are contained," where the surgeon preparing to cut into "the privytes" must "pricke" with "a stronge crooked lancet" (fol. 21r–v), working "gently" because of the "danger of hurtinge of the testicles above" (fol. 22r). A lengthy section devoted to "phlebotomye" or bloodletting similarly advises that "the place, where we will pricke" be chosen carefully and "the poyncte, and acuitye" of the lancet be inserted "not abruptly, and rudely, with a hastye thrust" (fol. 28r) but "gently," taking care that there is no "arterye touched & opened... whereby the patient bleedeth to death" and "with great torment endeth his life" (fol. 27v).

The sense that the knife invoked by the name of "Lancelet" was potentially fatal was thus a commonplace part of its repeated description in early modern England. John Woodall's The Surgeons Mate (1617)—which typically cites it as a staple of the "Surgeons Chest"—devotes an entire chapter "Of the Launcet" not only to its uses but to the danger it can pose to life itself. Advising the "Surgeons Mate" to carry at "least six of the best sort of launcets" (1617: 18), Woodall warns the barber-surgeon "that his launcets be not too spear pointed" and that the incision be not "overlarge" or "too deep" (1617: 19). Throughout the century following the play—which included the invention of a "Lancet, for the more safe bleeding" that was purposely more "blunt" because of the "harm" in "Blood-letting" when "a Vein be prick'd through" (Fabricius Hildanus 1674: 3–4)—the lancelet, launcelot, lance or lancet continued to be the name for this well-known material instrument. One text, Sculetus's The Chyrurgons Store-house (1674)—in describing "A Lancet" able to "perforate any
place" as well as "let blood"—includes for this knife capable of "cutting with both edges" its use for incisions in the "preputium," prepuce, or foreskin through which the "yard not perforated is opened" (1674: 48), once again recording the multiple bodily uses to which it was put in ways suggestive for the choice of the name of "Launcelot" or "Lancelet" for the servant of the "Jew," who fears he will be a "Jew" (2.2.112) unless he leaves his service.

They cryed aloude, and cut themselves as their maner was, with knives and lancets, til the blood gushed out.

1 Kings 18: 28 (Geneva Bible)

The lancing or cutting conveyed by the name of "Launcelot" or "Lancelet" for the bond-servant of the Jew who leaves him for the new "livery" of a Christian was thus prominently identified with bloodletting and incisions in the period of The Merchant of Venice. His name—which is repeated incessantly (no fewer than 27 times) within the play—is sounded most frequently in the scene that enacts his decision to leave behind his Jewish "master" (2.2), a change that also enables him to facilitate the elopement of the Jew's "daughter" and the gelding of Shylock's "two sealed bags" and "stones" (2.8.18–20). It is therefore telling that the lancelet or lancet itself was identified as an instrument of castration, through an influential biblical text that was simultaneously combined with the cut of "carnal" circumcision in contrast to the "spiritual" circumcision of the heart, the self-castration or mutilation of the idolatrous Priests of Baal, which the Geneva Bible and other contemporary translations described as performed with "knives and lancets," or the very instrument used for bloodletting and other cuts (1 Kings 18:28, Geneva 1560). Contemporary texts routinely identified this familiar Old Testament instance of a gelding or bodily cutting with the lancet or lancelet. To cite just one example, George Abbot—future Archbishop of Canterbury—refers not only to the lancing or cutting of an apostume or swelling but to the "Baals Priests" who "cut and launce themselves" with this same knife (1600: 437, 524).

1 Kings does not expressively indicate whether Baal's priests castrated themselves or simply used their knives and "lancets" to cut their bodies. But multiple English writings repeatedly aligned these "Priestes of Baal" who "launce themselves" with the classical "Priests of Cybele" who (like the gelded Attis) transformed themselves from "he" to "she." One early modern polemic against the Judaizing of a return to the "Hebrew" testament assimilated priestly "shavelings" or the tonsure described as a circumcising (or literally "cutting around") of the head to the "Priests of Baal" who did "launce themselves," comparing the latter to Cybele's castrated followers (Gataker 1624: 29). The lancing of Baal's priests with knives and "lancets" was at the same time aligned with the carnal cutting of both circumcised nations—an elision important for The Merchant of Venice, where the cultural fantasy of forcible circumcision or castration by the Jew is joined by the "incision" explicitly invited by Morocco, whose invocation of his "scimitar" and service to the Sultan "Solyman" (2.1.24–6) simultaneously evokes the other bodily cuts identified with Moors or Muslims and Turks. Billberg's Amurath (1584)—describing the circumcision of the son of the Great Turk—compares his "Monkes" to the castrated "Priests of Cybele" (sig. Cir), the familiar counterpart to the Priests of Baal who "launce" themselves, an Old Testament cutting repeatedly conflated with "Mahometans" in the period. Marlowe's Tamburlaine (Pt. 1: 4.2.1–3) has the Sultan Baiazet describe the "priests" of "Mahomet" in terms that directly recall the priests of Baal ("Ye holy priests of heavenly Mahomet/That sacrificing slice and cut your flesh./Staining his altars with your purple blood"). Even more strikingly, a sixteenth-century history of "the Turkes" (Cambini 1562: 5) writes of places that have "bowed the knee before the idol Baale, which is Mahomethe," directly assimilating Turkish or Muslim forms of bodily incision to the familiar biblical instance of cutting with "lancets" and knives.

Perversely—given that the priests of Baal are described in the Hebrew Scriptures as an idolatrous contrast to Israel—this biblical instance of cutting or lancing with the very "lancets" evoked by Lancelet's name was applied not only to Moors or Turks but to the other circumcised nation, the Jews, represented as idolatrous practitioners of an outward or carnal cutting rather than Christian or spiritual circumcision of the
heart. John King directly compared the “Priest of Baal” who would “cut and lance his owne flesh” for his “idoll” to the “idolatrous Jewe” who “will freely bestowe his jewelles and earinges to make a golden calfe” (1599: 212, 389), while William Cowper conflated the “idolatrie” of the “Israelites” who “made a Baal to themselves” (Hosea 2:8) with the Priests of Baal from the familiar passage, referring to “The Baalites of Idolatrous Israel banishing themselves with knives” (1616: 286). Still another early modern text observed that “Baal’s priests,” like the “Corybantes, Galli, & c.,” were “instructed to cut and slash themselves,” in a passage on the difference between “true Religion and Idolatry” that begins with the “Idolatrous practices” of the “Israelites” (Littleton 1662: 283). Even Gyer’s English Phlebotomy—already cited for the prominence it gives to the lancelet or lancet used for bloodletting—not only condemned the dangerous bleeding practiced by “Arabians, barbarous phisitians,” and counterfeit “Jews or Egyptians” but contrasted Christian baptism to “The Priests of Baal cutting and launçign their owne bodies” (sig. A3r), or the kind of carnal cutting the New Testament had superseded.

In the period of The Merchant of Venice, this Old Testament instance of a lancet or lancelet used for such bodily cutting or castration was repeatedly cited as an example of the outward and idolatrous in contrast to the inward or spiritual. The connection between this lancing and circumcision was further enabled by an influential Pauline passage that contrasted the spiritual “circumcision of the heart” to Jewish circumcision re-cast as “concision” (Philippians 3:2), or itself a bodily mutilation, from conciere (“to cut up”). At the same time, this influential passage presented the Judaizing champions of such “fleshy” circumcision as “dogs” (Lupton 2005a: 95)—a combination reflected in the early modern description of both Jews and Muslims as “circumcised dogs.”

Whereas the wicked Jew too often tyrannically abused … Circumcision … [we must make] such incisions into our souls, with the lancers [ie lancelets] of true repentance.

Thomas Fuller, The Infants Advocate (1655)

Identification of “lancets” or lancelets as the instruments used by the Priests of Baal therefore suggests another way in which “Lancelet” or “Lancelet” in its multiple early modern resonances matters to The Merchant of Venice. The “lancelet” or “launce,” however, figured not only the knife used for “bleeding” and the fleshy cut of castration but in addition the redemptive lancing or bloodletting of Christ in the crucifixion that enabled the very movement from “flesh” to “Spirit.” Early modern texts repeatedly recalled the “breast” of Christ “pierc’d” with a “Launce” on the cross, whose bloodshed, ascribed to the Jews (Matthew 27:25), has been aligned by critics with the baring of Antonio’s “breast” to the “knife” of the Jew. At the same time, contemporary texts figuratively connected this “bloodletting” (identified with the “lancet” of a “Surgeon”) both backward to the Circumcision of Christ and forward to the drama of conversion itself. The lance that caused the outflowing of the blood and water of redemption and baptism on the cross (John 19:34; 1 John 5:6) was depicted as wielded by a blind Jew who was converted and cured of his blindness as a result of this lancing. But it was also conflated with the knife of the Circumcision (as “the first time Christ’s blood was shed and as a foreshadowing of the blood Christ shed on the cross—both ascribed to Jews”), a ritual depicted with the mohel or circumcision wielding a menacing knife and “the representatives of the Old Covenant—namely the priest and the surgeon”—performing their task “at times even with a cruel delight.”

While we know from the text of the priests of Baal that their carnal cutting was identified with the “lancet” used by the bloodletting barber or surgeon, it may prove impossible—for a time that maintained the fiction that there were no Jews in England—to find the precise English equivalent for the izmel or knife used for circumcision. But in the figurative substitutions that were part of the familiar habits of biblical reading in the period, text after text conflated both the bloodletting lancet or lancelet of the “Surgeon” and the “launce” of the crucifixion with the knife that first shed “blood” at the Circumcision, or what one early modern text called an “earnest” or down payment on the ultimate “Redemption” by Christ the Surgeon or Physician, “who by his spiritual knife, first cuteth off the foreskinne of our hearts, and makes them bleede” (Anon. 1611: sig. F24). Robert Southwell’s “His
Circumcision” (1595) conflates the lancing of Christ on the cross with the “knife that cut his flesh” at the Circumcision, casting both as a phlebotomy or bloodletting in which the “head is launst to work the bodies cure” (1595: 6), in lines where “head” is both “prepuce” or foreskin and Head of the Church. Another early modern text subsumes both Christ’s being made to bleed through the “Circumcisers knife” and the lancing on the Cross with the “Blood-letting” of the “Physitian” or “Surgeon” who worked the redemptive “cure” (Anon. 1638: 51). The figurative trajectory that extended from the circumsicer’s shedding of Christ’s blood to the final lancing of the crucifixion—and conflated both with the lancet or lancelet of the bloodletting “Surgeon” or “Physitian”—thus provides an even more overdetermined contemporary context for the name choice and trajectory of “Lancelet” or “Lancelet” in The Merchant of Venice. The very name (repeated yet another four times in the scene with Jessica on “converting Jews to Christians” [3.5.35]) would have suggested, in other words, not only the bloodletter’s or surgeon’s knife evoked by Morocco’s “let us make incision in our bloods,” Portia’s counsel to have some “surgeon” by, and Shylock’s “if you prick us, do we not bleed” or the biblical instrument of gelding or castration but also the bloodletting on the cross that enabled conversion itself, and the replacement of Jewish or “carnal” incisions with the circumsicion of the heart.

The lancet or lancelet used for lancing apostomizations or boils was at the same time the material instrument identified with the lancing of the boils of Job, a pivotal figure (as a Gentile from the Hebrew scriptures) for the movement from Old Testament to New—one of the reasons that Lancelet himself bears the surname “Iobbe” or Job (Drakakis 2000: 116). I would add that the alternate surname “Gobbo,” applied to his bent and blind father, simultaneously recalls the description of the Jews as both bent and blind from the central conversional text of Romans 11, where the grafting of Gentiles onto the Jewish root suggests yet another meaning of lancing and “launce” in the period. The crucial passage for this redemptive lancing was Job 5:18 (“he maketh a wounde and he healeth”), a text glossed with “he is both a Father and a physitian, he lanceh us not unlesse need be” (Trapp 1657: 56) and be “woundeth not as an Enemy, but as a Chirurgeon; not with a Sword, but a Lancet” (Manton 1685: 203).

The lancet or lancet was in this regard not only a figure for the progression from Old Testament to New but for the movement from justice to mercy, from “Sin” as “an incision of the Soule, a Lancination, a Phlebotomy” (Donne 1640: 132) to the cure worked by “that Chyrurgion whose Lancet threatens none but the imposthmated” (Allestree 1667: 159). This spiritual cutting and healing by what one writer called “the Lancet or incision Knife of Truth” (Saaedra 1700: 345) was so frequently invoked as to become (like the material object itself) a cultural commonplace in the period—from “cutte me, burne me, launce me, that finally thou mayst haue mercy on me” (Bonde 1526: 278) or the “conscience must be troubled by launcing” before the “soul can be cured” (Udall 1588: sig. Dv) to the counsel that “Surgeones of soules, in all their launcing and cutting” ought “to aime at the cure, that is the conversion of their patients,” a “spirituall” lancing ultimately more “gentle,” as one contemporary text put it, than the “jewish Iudicisall lawe” that cut off and “condemned to death” (Taylor 1612: 261, 714). The very circumsicion of the heart that was to replace Jewish or “carnal” circumsicion was figured as an incision into the soul (rather than the body) by a lancet or lancet. A text that treats first of the bodily cutting of the Old Testament—the “Priests of Baal, who with knives and lances cut themselves till the blood gushed out” and the “signe” of circumsicion, which “the wicked Jew too often tyrannically abused”—goes on to describe “soul-Circumsicion” (on the analogy of the “Surgeon”) as making “incisions into our souls with the lancers [or lancelets] of true repentance” (Fuller 1653: 2, 43, 58). Even the sense of writing itself as engraving or cutting so important to The Merchant of Venice—which was already assimilated to the lancet routinely paired with the “pen-knife” in the bloodletting treatises, in a period when “lance” could likewise mean “To make a dash or stroke with a pen” (OED verb 5)—was appropriated for the law written not in stone but in the heart, figuring the transition from the “letter that kills” to the law so cut or “engraven in our hearts, as it may never be wiped out again” (Calvin 1583: 473).

The lancet or lancet was thus not only a commonplace material object but part of the figural movement from Old Testament “letter” and “flesh” to New Testament “Spirit,” a progression that was at the same time cast in the familiar racialized metaphors of washing the
“Ethiope” or “Black-moor” white. One text that turns on the double sense of “Launce,” as the spear that pierced the “side” of “Iesus” (in a crucifixion where his “blood” was shed by “impious Jew”) and as the lancet that simultaneously effected a cure, compares the issuing of blood and the water of baptism through this lancing to the redemption enabled by the Surgeon who not only heals but blanches or whitens the “Black-moor borne, where Phoebus too much warms” (Abbot 1623: 7), the traditional figure of blackness evoked not only by Morocco (“Mislike me not for my complexion, / The shadowed livery of the burnish’d sun,” 2.1.1–2) but by Jessica’s recall of the Black Bride of the Song of Songs on the threshold of her own conversion (Hall 1992: 103), in a play where “Chus” (yet another biblical figure of blackness) is described as the Jew’s countryman (3.2.285) and the converted Jessica’s “blood” is described as “Rhenish” or “white” in lines that contrast her “flesh” as “ivory” to Shylock’s “jet” black (3.1.39–42).15

Hagar’s offspring . . .
the Moor is with child by you . . .

Merchant of Venice

As the lancing or incising instrument that could prove fatal but could also deliver the body from excessive or obstructive humors—a figure commonly extended to the body politic as well—both the material or surgical and the figurative or spiritual implications released into the larger play by its insistent sounding of Lancelet’s name resonate far beyond the scenes in which he actually appears. Lancelet directly himself invokes the bodily “humors” (3.5.63) for which this surgical instrument was used. But in the Trial Scene from which he is absent, Shylock likewise defends his choice of “a weight of carrion flesh” over the apparently more rational economic calculus of “three thousand ducats” with “say it is my humor” (4.1.40–4); and the humoral economy to which this bloodletting and impostume- or tumor-lancing instrument was central is further foregrounded by Bassanio’s condemnation of the “current” of the Jew’s “cruelty” (4.1.63; Paster 2004: 207), in lines that combine bodily humor and blood.

In this most pivotal of scenes—where the potentially fatal bleeding of Antonio as a sacrifice both echoes the bloodshed and lancing on the cross and evokes the blood libel identified with the knife-wielding Jew—Portia’s counsel to have some “surgeon” by “lest he do bleed to death” not only recalls the warnings surrounding the lancelet in the bloodletting treatises (underscored by Antonio’s “For if the Jew do cut but deep eno’/I’ll pay it instantly with all my heart,” [4.1.270–1]) but casts the “Jew” himself (the “cut-throat dog” of Venetian description) as the barbarous “Barber” of Gyner’s and other contemporary descriptions, the alien within the body politic killing “Christians” by such fatal bleeding, as well as symbolically by the exsorptive material “bleeding” that was its double.16

Portia—disguised as Balthasar (both a “second Daniel” and the Moor among the Wise Men of the East who in an “Epiphany” acknowledged Christ as the prefigured Messiah)—enters into a dispute with Shylock that includes the mastery of humoral discourse itself and urges the “gentle (and here Genteel)” softening of his “hard heart” by the “gentle rain” of “mercy” (Paster 2004: 209). But she also, in ways that recall her ambiguous “I stand for sacrifice” in the Casket Scene (3.2.57), simultaneously effects a sacrifice (Enterline 1995: 240), laying the foundation for the Duke’s condition of Shylock’s conversion, within the oppositional binaries of “letter” and spirit, blindness and sight on which “Epiphany” depends. And she symbolically gilds or castrates Shylock—the “stony adversary” of the Duke’s opening description (4.1.4)—just as the condition imposed for the casket choice of Morocco had earlier gilded him of the possibility of heirs. If she becomes effectively the “surgeon” who works the cure for both Antonio and the Venetian body politic (invoking the “mercy” of the ultimate Surgeon or Physician), in a successful and Lancelet-like verbal quibbling (Newman 1987: 30–1) that bests Shylock as the adversary in this contest, she also cuts the Gordian knot of a legal impasse not just by the application of the letter of the law to which Shylock had appealed but by the revelation of a new law applying to an “alien,” not earlier revealed but there from the beginning.

Fulfilling what in this sense came with the figurative implications of the lancelet in the period, Portia thus delivers not only Antonio but Bassanio from the bondage of a “bond” and threatened loss of
“Christian blood,” for which the consummation of her marriage to Bassanio—the joining of their bloodlines and sacrifice of her own virgin blood—had been postponed (Paster 1993: 92). From one perspective, what is achieved is the relieving of Antonio’s own “patient” or Job-like suffering (from a story in which lost prosperity is ultimately not only regained but increased); the rehearsal of the lancing in Job that both wounds and heals; and the Christian “comedy” of the conversion of the Jew whose grafting in is described in the Romans 11 adumbration of that comic plot. But, from another perspective, what she completes in this scene is not only the symbolic gelding of Shylock for which Lancelet’s enabling of Jessica’s defection had been the initial instrument but also the “bleeding” of Shylock of everything he holds most “dear,” and a forced conversion that is not a decision but a cultural incision, deracination or cutting off (Berry 2006: 246).17

As the knife that lances the boils of Job and a familiar figure for the movement from judgment to mercy, the resonances of the “Lancelet” who abandons the Jew and facilitates Jessica’s conversion and abandonment of her father might be argued (from a figural vantage point) as confirming the critical paradigm of the play’s movement from flesh to spirit, Old Testament to New (Drakakis 2000: 116) or the redemptive curing of the “blind Jew” whose lancing led to his own conversion. But in ways that undermine the binaries of such straightforward or teleological progression and a play where conversion itself is so certain and open to question, Lancelet functions as a much more promiscuous transactor of exchanges that are at once “economic, sexual, and religious” (Mentz 2003: 183) and as a character whose own identity is uncertain, in a plot that includes not only Christians and Jews but Muslims and Moors. Shylock calls him “Hagar’s offspring” (2.5.42), a term that might identify him as a Gentile but could also situate him among its Muslims (Shell 1982: 52), understood as descendants of Hagar (Abraham’s bondswoman) and their son Ishmael, in contrast to Christians as Abraham and Sarah’s legitimate line.18 As “the play’s nonpareil of indeterminate hybridity” (Harris 2004: 207), Lancelet is also its principal boundary-cossor (Hall 1992: 105), reversing Portia’s rejection of Morocco and Aragon (from Spain, that most “mingled” of nations) for a Christian of her own “kind” through the miscegenation (3.5.37) of his impregnating a “Negro” or “Moor” (Shapiro 1996: 173; Spiller 2000: 155), who remains unseen and outside the play’s conversional telos, in a scene whose punning “more” (rather than less) evokes divergent contrasting economies (Hall 1992: 92; Desai 2002: 314) and calls into question the more exclusive “cornucopia” of the play’s own end (Mentz 2003: 184).19 This mingling or boundary-crossing simultaneously suggests a reversal of the racialized metaphors of conversion itself, moving not “forward” but “backward” (as the Geneva gloss to Galatians pronounced of the mixture of Christian and Hebrew), complicating the progression from “Ethiope” or “Black-more” to a baptismal whitening by what Janet Adelman calls the “muddying of bloodlines” (2003: 22) in the case of Jessica and Lorenzo as well.

The “Lancelet” that cuts both ways in relation to bloodletting and castration—suggesting not only the Trial Scene’s threat to Antonio and “Christian” blood (4.1.310) but also the bleeding or gelding of both Shylock and Morocco—further complicates the sense of progression from “flesh” to “spirit” in his complaint that converting Jews raises the price of pork (3.5.36), an emphasis on the “economics of conversion” (Shapiro 1996: 132) that privileges the “flesh,” just as his prodigious appetites do.20 At the same time, his insistence that the converted Jessica remains a daughter to Shylock’s “blood” (2.3.18) recalls—by looking back to her bloodline and the “sins of the father” (3.5.1; Exodus 20: 5)—the pure blood laws that sought to distinguish between Old and New Christians (Friedman 1987: 3–29), exposing the racial-religious contradictions at the heart of conversion in the period (Halpern 1997: 213; Metzger 1998: 52; Lombara 2002: 138–58).

Even the scene in Act 2 that has been used by critics to argue that the movement of this “Clown” from Jewish to Christian master parallels the progression from Old Testament to New cuts both ways, suggesting not a pious rehearsal but a subversive parody of the Genesis story in which the wrong son is given the blessing through a trick played on a father, in ways that comment not only on Jacob or “Israel” (or on Jessica’s treatment of her father) but on the Christian “New Israel” in relation to its own appropriation of the Hebrew Testament.21 It begins with an equivocating psychomachia that defies simple binary opposition—since the “devil” is on both sides at once—and yields a
movement in which Lancelet, in deciding finally to leave his Jewish master for a Christian, follows not his "conscience" but the "fiend" (2.2.31). His cutting of this Gordian knot is motivated not by spiritual but by much more worldly prospects, both the attractions of mobility in itself (Menz 2003: 181) and upward mobility to the status of "Master" identified with the gentry, to "rare new liveries" (2.2.109) not as spiritual deliverance but as "the distinctive garb worn by a gentleman's servants" (Riverside: 261), in ways that provide an ironic comment on the upward mobility and "blatant materialism" (Orgel 2003: 158) of the Christian characters within the play. Far from suggesting a clear movement "forward" in the "right" or providential direction, the scene repeatedly harps on turning backward rather than forward, from its strangely "backward" blessing (2.2.97) to its repeated verbal reversals (including "impertinent" instead of "pertinent"), a verbal "quibbling" that in very different ways from Portia's manages to "undercut the serious religious issues" and provide an "alternative perspective" on "Christian orthodoxy and social hierarchy" (Cohen 1985: 210–11), as well as "quibble against the utopian progress of the main plot" (Menz 2003: 184).22 Even the sense of conversion (literally "turning") that is so central to the supposed unidirectional progression of the play is subject to "confusions" (2.2.37) in this scene, as Old Gobbo (or "Jobbe") is turned around and around ("Turn up on your right hand at the next turning, but at the next turning of all, on your left; marry, at the very next turning, turn of no hand, but turn down indirectly to the Jew's house," 2.2.41–4) and may finally come dizzyingly full circle (Mowat and Werstine 1992: 48).

In a play that is preoccupied not only with conversion but with "blood" in all of its contemporary senses (including as a contested marker of religious, racial, and other distinctions), this "Clown" who has been traditionally marginalized in its criticism and frequently cut from productions bears a name that connects him with cutting or lancing of multiple kinds, both as a material object and as part of the figural contrast of justice and mercy, "flesh" and "spirit." But the Lancelet who rewards Shylock for his "preferment" (2.2.146) to his new master by effectively helping to "bleed" as well as castrate him, who tries "confusions" on his own father by cruelly pretending that his son is dead (2.2.65), and who wields the incising words of the Clown that traditionally cut in more than one direction—crucially introduces into the play a heterogeneity of exchanges that cannot be incorporated into a single trajectory or figural frame, not only providing a complicating perspective on the play's larger issues but occupying contrary, and contradictory, positions at once.

NOTES

1 See Shapiro 1996: 113–30; Penuel 2004: 255–75. On its multiple cuts, including grafting, writing, engraving, insculpting, and "cutler's poetry/Upon a knife" (5.1.149–50), see Berry 2006. On its allusion to the prepence or "hood," see Fienberg 1998: 452. The combination or conflation of circumcision and castration was common in the period, including in plays such as Kyd's Solyman and Perseda, Heywood's Fair Maid of the West, Mason's The Turk, Fletcher's The Knight of Malta, and Massinger's The Renegado. All quotations from Shakespeare are from the Riverside edition. I am grateful to the readers who commented on earlier drafts and to Jean Howard, Katherine Goodland, Lowell Gallagher, Arthur Little and members of the Columbia University Shakespeare Seminar and UCLA Department of English Early Modern/Renaissance Reading Group for lively discussion that enabled its revision.

2 On such figural readings, see Freinkel 2002: 237–91; on "liveries," see Engle 1986: 32.

3 Although Schäfer 1970: 14–15 cited "Launce" in Two Gentlemen of Verona (also played by Will Kempe) as a "surgical instrument" and called the post-Rowe Arthurian reference a "questionable allusion," most editors have continued the latter tradition. Even Mahood 1987, who cites Schäfer's "little knife," restricts its sense to "the Clown's cutting witticisms" and prints Lancelot because it is "more conformable to the editorial tradition" (1987: 82). Although Mowat 1994: 317 and 1998: 141 and Mowat and Werstine 1992 argue for "Lancelet" instead, they give its meaning as "lancect" or "small lance' (a small weapon or man-at-arms)." Andrews 1991 prints "Lancelet" but, as in Andrews 2002: 166, limits its meaning to a phallic "little lance." John Drakakis, who is editing a new Arden 3 edition, is the only editor to see the importance of its surgical sense, though he restricts it to Lancelet's relation to his father "lobbe" or Job (2000: 116, 121 n. 2) rather than examining it in relation to the bloodletting, circumcision, and castration central to the play. No mention is made
of the meaning of “Lancelet” in the discussion of bloodletting or
hums in *The Merchant of Venice* in Paster 1993 or 2004.
4 For critiques of narrowly object-focused studies of material culture,
see Harris 2000 and 2001; and Bruster 2003: 191–205.
5 See Baret 1577, “Lancelete” ; Cooper 1578 under “Scalper,” “Scalpulum chirurgicum,” and “Scallpellus”; Rider 1589 under “Scalpellus” and
“Smilliunt”; Minshew 1617 under “Launcelot”; with Thomas 1589,
“Scallopellum” as “a penknife, or little fine instrument that Surgeons
use to let blood with, a lancet.”
7 For an explanation of the reference system here see Chapter 5 note 4.
[Ed.]
8 See also Lemnian 1576: 83, where “veynesse,” if large, “sweat out and
plainty appeares to the eye, offering themselves to the Lance, by
incision hansomly to be cut.”
9 In addition to this 1598 translation into English of Guillemeau,
dedicated to Queen Elizabeth, illustrations of lancets appear in English
texts, including Helkiah Crooke’s *Mikrokosmographia. A Description
of the Body of Man* (London, 1631), which contains an *Explanation of
the Fashion and Use of Three and Fifty Instruments of Chirurgery. Gathered
out of Ambrosius Pareus, the famous French Chirurgian, and done into
English for the behoofe of young Practitioners in Chirurgery, illustrating
in Chapter 1* a “phlegme or lancet” and the rings and their secretly
pricking points shown, respectively, in Guillemeau as “D,” “C,” and
“B”). An Explanation is also bound with the 1634 edition of Crooke’s
*Somatographia anthropina*. I am grateful to June Schlueter for these
references to Crooke.
11 See respectively Mellinkoff 1993: 143, 106 and II: Figure II: 23 and
12 See also Steinberg 1983: 50–64 on such figural connections in Patristic
and early modern writing, including in Milton’s “Upon the Circumcision.”
13 On Job as a Gentile (in Uz, identified as “the country of Idumea
... or bordering thereupon”), see the Geneva Bible on the first verse
of the book of “Job” (foll. 1594): “Forasmuche as he was a Gentle
and not a Leue, and yet is pronounced vypright ... it declareth that
among the heathen God hathe his.” The Bishops Bible has “This Job
was a gentile, declaring thereby that God hath his, even among the
heathen.” For Job as a Gentile in the Hebrew Bible and most rabbinic
sources, see Ginzbarg 2.225 (“Job, the most pious Gentile that ever
lived”) and Encyclopaedia Judaica 1971/73, 10: 124.
14 See Romans 11:10 (“Let their eyes be darkened that they see not, and
bow downe their backe alwayes”): Geneva 1560) in relation to Old
Gobbo (Italian for “hunchback”) and OED “lance” (noun 1.5) as “A
branch of a tree, a shoot” (citing “graffes of the fayrest lances”) and
“lance” (noun 2) as “a cut, incision, slit” in a “tree.”
15 Though there is no space to unpack it fully here, the compounded
senses of “livery” and the familiar Shakespearean homophone of
“sun” and “son” in Morocco’s “shadowed livery of the burnish’d sun’ raises not only the issue of color and (blood) line, but also as
(with the double-meaning “livery” for which Lancelet leaves a Jewish
master for a Christian) religious overtones here, with regard to a
Moroccan Muslim connected with the Great Turk. On the frequent
descriptions of Islam as “Hebraizing” in relation to the shadowy
types of the Old Testament (including circumcision), see Parker 2002:
2–6.
16 Gyer’s text (1592) has on its title page the familiar “horse-leech” verses
from Proverbs, applied in the period not only to extortionate
bloodletters but to moneylenders or usurers “bleeding” debtors.
17 For the contemporary conflation of “barbers” and “barbarous” (variant:
“barberous”) others, including Jews and Muslims identified with
“carnal” cutting, see Parker 2004: 201–44, which discusses the
“barbers of Barbary” in Thomas Heywood’s *Fair Maid of the West,*
the “base barbarous barbers” and “Barbaria” of Dekker’s *Gull’s
Hornbook,* the “Barbarossa,” Barby “gelding,” and “Nick” the
“Barbor” in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle,* the “barberous Moore
of Titus Andronicus,* Antony “barber’d ten times o’er” by Cleopatra,
and Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta,* where either Ithamore its “Turk” or
an anonymous Moorish “slave” announces that he can “cut and
shave,” euphemisms not only for thury (or usury understood as
“fleeing”) but for the cutting (or barbering) identified with both
circumcised nations (represented by Ithamore the Muslim and Barabas
the Jew, precipus of Shylock). Mark Johnson has suggested to me
that Portia’s urging of Shylock to have some “surgeon” by also recalls
the barber-surgeons’ company regulations that members were to have an
experienced surgeon present when performing potentially complex
incisions.
18 To complicate “Hagar’s offspring” still further, the well-known Pauline
“allegory” of Galatians 4 identified Hagar (and her “bondage”) with
the Jews, so that what is designated by the phrase would depend on the
perspective of the speaker. See also Spiller 2000: 161. In a period
where Muslims were called “Agarones” or “Agarenes,” the collocation
of Muslims and Jews as “Hagar’s offspring” (both subject to the
“bonds” of the “bondservant” rather than Abraham and Sarah’s legitimate heirs) was frequently cited in early modern writing and reflected soon after The Merchant of Venice in the name “Agar” (or Hagar) for the Muslim wife of the renegade Jew of Daborne’s A Christian Turned Turk (Parker 2002: 3–4, 15). The modernized “turquoise” ring of Shylock’s wife Leah (named after Laban’s older daughter) is “Turkies” in Q.

Sokol 1998: 168–9 notes the “bestiality” in this exchange on the female Moor and what Lancelet “took” her for (3.5.42), while Engle 1993: 101–2 speculates that this unnamed female figure may be a slave, or purchased servant, of Portia, suggesting yet another potential ironic commentary on Christians who pass judgment on Shylock’s “pound of flesh” that is “dearly bought” (4.1.89) while insisting on keeping “many a purchas’d slave./Which like your asses, and your dogs and mules,/You use in abject and in slavish parts” (4.1.90–2).

Shylock calls him a “huge feeder” (2.5.46); and Lancelet anticipates a polygamous abundance of at least “fifteen wives” (2.2.161). Mark Johnson has suggested to me the possible additional overtones (in Gobbo) of “gobets,” a term invoked elsewhere in Shakespeare (Henry VI Pt 2) in its sense of slicing or cutting. Minshew derives English “Gobbet” or “mouthful” from French “Gober” (to “feed greedily”), giving its counterparts as Gobbo’s homophone “Gobeau” (Cotgrave’s “gobbet, or morsel”) and “Gobequinault” (a “greedie feeder”). At least one early modern text cited in OED for the “gob” that designated the mouth, a mouthful, and the gift of language (“gob” or “gab”) puns on “Gob” and “A Man called Job, Dwell in the land of Uz” (gob, noun 3).

Jessica’s “in such a night/Meadea gathered the enchanted herbs/That did renew old Aeson” (5.1.12–14) foregrounds the moment in Ovid’s story when “Meadea unsheathed her knife and cut the old man’s throat; then, letting the old blood run out, she filled his veins with her brew” (Ovid, Metamorphoses VII.285–7; Berry 2006: 352), a part of the story that casts the daughter figure as the “cut-throat.” As critics have noted, the Meadea figure in the play extends to Portia as well, since Bassanio explicitly casts his venture for her as a mercenary seeking of the Golden Fleece (and himself by implication as the Jack or fleecer).

See Weimann 1978: 48–9, 120–50 on the subversive role of the Clown, including inversion and wordplay. The same actor (Will Kempe) may have played the Clown roles of both Lancelet and “Launce” in Two Gentlemen of Verona.

Cymbeline, the Font of History, and the Matter of Britain

From Times New Roman to Italic Type

Willy Maley

Little Britain

In an episode of the hit UK comedy series Little Britain, two characters in search of a play raid the offices of the Royal Shakespeare Company, a break-in that shadows the break-up of Britain in the shape of Scottish and Welsh devolution.1 Rewind 400 years to a passage in Drayton’s Polyolbion (1612) that marks the make-up of Britain:

A branch sprung out of Brute, th’imperiall top shall get,
Which grafted in the stock of Great Plantagenet,
The Stem shall strongly wax, as still the Trunk doth wither:
That power which bare it thence, againe shall bring it thither
By Tudor, with faire windes from little Britaine driven;
To whom the goodlie Bay of Milford shall be given.

(Cited Jones 1961: 94)