

ARTICLE

“The Uncontrollability of Real Things”

Operation Shylock, Sabbath’s Theater, and Philip Roth’s Falstaffian Theology of Judaism

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Philip Roth’s engagement with William Shakespeare has been a steady and intense career-long affair. Hermione Lee, in remarks delivered on the occasion of Roth’s eightieth birthday, observed that Roth’s use of Shakespeare extends at least as far back as *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969). “Roth has Shakespeare deep in his head,” Lee averred, and of this there can be no doubt. What can be questioned, however, is the upward-charting trajectory of Roth’s use of Shakespeare. Even a cursory reading of Roth reveals that the more he aged, and the more his career progressed, the more he invoked Shakespeare, demonstrated in the series of novels beginning with *Operation Shylock* (1993), crescendoing in *Sabbath’s Theater* (1995), and culminating in *Exit Ghost* (2007) and *The Humbling* (2009). Roth’s greater use of Shakespeare in the later stages of his career—greater in the dual senses of frequency and engagement—can be ascribed, this article argues, to Roth’s growing involvement with Jewish identity and human mortality.

INTRODUCTION

Since the passing of Philip Roth in May of 2018, a great deal of discussion concerning Roth's legacy has centered upon the question of defining Roth as a writer—and whether he can even be classified at all.¹ Scholars both before and after Roth's death have made compelling cases for presenting and teaching Roth in accordance with their chosen interpretation of the Newark-born writer. Stanley Corngold reads Roth as a Kafkaesque writer, a novelist of surprising humor and great inventiveness whose characters cannot escape the labyrinthine constrictions of their own neuroses-ridden consciousnesses (38). Leora Batnitzky and Ilana Pardes, building off of the work of scholars who (especially after the publication of the *Nemesis* tetralogy) began to view Roth as a sort of Sophocles redivivus, read Roth as a Joban writer, as an author whose novels “have insisted [. . .] on highlighting the complications of exegetical endeavors in the context of modernity” (7). Murray Baumgarten has argued that Roth is a satirical writer, a “writer of brilliant tales” whose comical edge is designed to “provoke readers [. . .] into a search for deep meanings” (289).

However, a closer look at Roth's *oeuvre*—and a more careful observation of *Operation Shylock* in particular—reveals Roth, as this article argues, not merely as a writer content with satirizing Jews and Judaism, but one dedicated to propounding a much more carefully considered conceptualization of Jews and Judaism than previously thought. Roth, is a Falstaffian writer—a writer whose foremost concern is choosing life, in all of life's chaos, carnality, messiness and uncleanness—a concern at the core of Jewish theology as well. This article reads *Operation Shylock* as Roth's grand, summatory thesis statement on the nature of Judaism and Jewish people in the twentieth century and beyond, a nature of ineradicable alterity qualified and augmented by the Jewish people's enduring, irrepressible Falstaffian vitality.

By observing how Roth uses Shakespeare in his writing—particularly in his two most Shakespearean novels, *Sabbath's Theater* and *Operation Shylock*—we can begin to understand Roth's deeper, wholly non-satirical understanding of Jews and Judaism. By way of entry into what I term “Roth's theology of Judaism,” I will begin with a brief discussion of the place of Shakespeare in Roth's writing, proceed to an analysis of the role of Shakespeare in *Sabbath's Theater* and *Operation Shylock*, and conclude with an examination—built upon the groundwork laid in the sections on *Sabbath's Theater* and *Operation Shylock*—of Roth's theology of Judaism. Reading Roth in this way, I argue that conceptualizing Roth as a Falstaffian writer has implications not only for our understanding of *Operation Shylock*, but also for how Roth's views

about Judaism and the Jewish people should be understood. I argue here, in other words, not only that Roth is first and foremost a Falstaffian writer, but also that once we recognize his relationship with Falstaff, we can further gain insight into Roth's possible theology of Judaism.

SABBATH'S THEATER

Mickey Sabbath, as Peter Scheckner has observed, oscillates between affinities with Lear (his longing for a tragic, suicidal end) and affinities with Falstaff (his longing for life); after an extended flirtation with Lear, "Sabbath fully embraces his Falstaffian side" (Scheckner 221),² staunching his suicidal impulses and fully choosing life, even if it is a "really trivial, really shitty life" (143). While I agree with Scheckner, I contend here that this claim must be amplified and expanded. In so doing, I propose that not only Sabbath, but many, if not the vast majority, of Roth's protagonists—Nathan Zuckerman and "Philip Roth" in particular—are Falstaffian in this sense: they are captivating, comic, uncontrollable, transgressive, endlessly witty, inwardly absorbed, and outwardly exuberant beings brimming over with vitalism who frequently flirt with suicide³ but whose insatiable appetites (which, in Roth's universe, are predominantly sexual), "inexhaustible playfulness," and "irrepressibly comic fitness for life" (*Shylock* 246) lead them to make Falstaff's choice, even when giving themselves up for death appears to be the better alternative.⁴

Even before the Nemesis tetralogy, the novels *Sabbath's Theater* and *Exit Ghost* bookend a phase of Roth's career when mortality occupied a central place in his thoughts and in his literature. Both novels are framed by the thought of death (the epigraphs of *Sabbath's Theater* and *Exit Ghost*, respectively, are: "Every third thought shall be my grave" [*The Tempest*, V.1] and "Before death takes you, O take back this" [Dylan Thomas, "Find Meat on Bones"]), and both feature protagonists who attempt to resist it: Zuckerman, in *Exit Ghost*, relishes the prospect of a "resuscitating breath" bringing him "back to life!" (103, 104). In both novels, suicide is a significant motif, as well. Not coincidentally, both novels are two of the more Shakespearean novels (in style, substance, and amount of references) that Roth ever produced. The more Roth's pen circled the idea—and reality—of death, the more he dipped it into Shakespeare's inkwell.

Sabbath's Theater is such a propulsive, dynamic novel because it is so Falstaffian—and what makes it Falstaffian is not merely its references to Sir John but its dynamism, its full-bodied depiction of a full-bodied, fleshy man

who, like Falstaff, protests against death and condemns the curse of human mortality by clinging, in the most carnal of matters, to life, and to the sexual dimension of existence that makes life possible. Roth, as a Shakespearean—and, specifically, as a Falstaffian—writer therefore invoked Shakespeare with greater frequency in his fiction as he aged.

It is telling that the most overtly Shakespearean of all Roth's novels, *Sabbath's Theater* is also the book that Roth has stated is his favorite (Banach). The epigraph for *Sabbath's Theater* is Prospero's vow from Act 5 of *The Tempest*.⁵ In a 2014 interview, however, Roth likened Mickey Sabbath, the novel's impish, irreverently theatrical anti-hero—a former puppeteer who teaches drama at a rural New England college—not to Prospero but to Hamlet, who “winks at the genre of tragedy by cracking jokes as Sabbath winks at the genre of comedy by planning suicide” (“My Life as a Writer” 14). Sabbath's character, like Swede Levov's in *American Pastoral* (1997)—a book which can be read as a modern Jewish-American *King Lear*, in part because it features a benevolent father betrayed by a callous daughter (Shechner 154)—is also constructed with the literary tissue of *King Lear* (Koy 7). Sabbath recalls his “disastrous” finger-puppet performance as *Lear* (*Sabbath* 125, see also 192), and during a fit of mental disturbance reprises his notorious performance of *Lear* while riding the subway and impersonating a panhandler; his aged, forlorn appearance makes him think of himself as “Shakespeare in the subway, *Lear* for the masses” (209).⁶ Later, Sabbath recounts an even more disastrous performance when discussing a rehearsal of another Shakespeare tragedy gone horribly wrong:

I am a notorious killer-diller *who strangled his wife*. [. . .] I did it with these very hands while we were rehearsing in our bedroom, on our bed, the final act of *Othello*. My wife was a young actress. *Othello*? It's a play. It's a play in which an African Venetian strangles his white wife to death. You never heard of it because it perpetuates the stereotype of the violent black male. But back in the fifties, humanity hadn't figured out yet what was important. (241-42)

These and other Shakespearean references in Roth—such as the ones which will be discussed presently—relate to the theme of mortality, of the incessant struggle between life and death, and the unavoidable question of which of these options we should choose should we be confronted with this perennial conflict: the theme that animates Roth's fiction like an incandescent bulb in a long and winding corridor.

Part II of *Sabbath's Theater* is titled "To Be or Not to Be," deliberately conjuring Hamlet's contemplation of self-annihilation. The "desire-not-to-be-alive-any-longer" (191) accompanies Sabbath throughout the second half of the novel, where he bluntly contemplates suicide in a Joycean stream of consciousness. As Bellow does for Herzog, Roth crafts a Hamletian monologue for Sabbath wherein Sabbath meditates on the quintessential philosophical question in a distinctly Shakespearean manner: "So passeth Sabbath, seeing all the antipathies in collision, [. . .] whether it was to slide headlong into the stairwells with the substrata of bums or to succumb like a man to the-desire-not-to-be-alive-any-longer or to affront and affront and affront till there was no one on earth unaffronted" (198).⁷ Yet, in the end, after a psychologically torturous confrontation with suicide, Sabbath sides with Hamlet and decides to keep on living.

The external carapace of Mickey Sabbath's character is constructed with the integuments of Lear and Hamlet, but on a deeper, visceral level, the Shakespearean character with whom he shares the most strands of literary DNA is Falstaff. Sabbath's core persona—his insatiable appetites, his incorrigible comic impulse, his manic energy, his ever-present wish to always be "going to the king's tavern" (*1 Henry IV* II.ii.52), his verbal and theatrical *jeux d'esprit*, and his indefatigable drive for life—is essentially that of Falstaff, who insists: "I am no counterfeit: to die, is to be a counterfeit; for he is but the counterfeit of man who hath not the life of a man: but to counterfeit dying, when a man thereby liveth, is to be no counterfeit, but the true and perfect image of life indeed" (*1 Henry IV* V.iv.113-118). The connection between Falstaff and Roth's character is drawn by Sabbath himself. When a young German girl mocks him, calling him "only an old man," Sabbath reflexively responds, "so was Falstaff, kiddo. So was that huge hill of flesh Sir John Paunch, sweet creator of bombast! 'That villainous abominable misleader of youth, Falstaff, that old white-bearded Satan!'" (53). Moreover, what may be most Falstaffian about Sabbath is the way in which his irrepressible carnal appetites impel him to choose life, even when other options (for Falstaff, an honorable death on the battlefield; for Sabbath, a quick, easy suicide) seem more desirable. Roth, by listing a litany of great artists and thinkers who committed the ultimate act of self-immolation, sets up suicide as the more noble option for the moribund puppeteer:

Mishima. Rothko. Hemingway. Berryman. Koestler. Pavese. Kosinski. Arshile Gorky. Hart Crane. Walter Benjamin. Peerless bunch. Nothing dishonorable signing on here. Faulkner as good as killed himself with

booze. As did [...] Ava Gardner. [...] Ava, Yvonne de Carlo—those are role models! [...] The list grows more inspiring by the year. I'd be the first puppeteer. (157)

Sabbath continually contemplates suicide, but his Falstaffian fleshly passion, “that thing which allowed him to improvise endlessly and which had kept him alive” (446), impels him to choose against becoming “[a] living being choosing death” (443). Like Falstaff taking the “cowardly” way out by forsaking military honor and declaring “give me life” (*1 Henry IV* V.iii.56-57), Sabbath forgoes artistic honor, rhapsodizing about himself: “How tenaciously he clings to life! To youth! To pleasure!” (*Sabbath* 157). When the moment of decision finally comes, Sabbath sides against Hemingway and Hart Crane, opting for Falstaff's choice instead: “he couldn't do it. He could not fucking die. How could he leave? How could he go?” (451). His ravenous, Rabelaisian craving for life and for all its carnal delights is simply too strong to permit him to depart from the earthly stage.

OPERATION SHYLOCK

While many Roth novels contain a greater number of Shakespearean references, and *Sabbath's Theater* (1995) in particular may contain *dramatis personae* who are more manifestly Shakespearean in nature, only *Operation Shylock* contains the name of a Shakespearean character in its very title, and only *Operation Shylock* includes an extended, almost professorial-like disquisition on both the meaning of a Shakespearean character and the fraught history of a certain Shakespearean play.

The questions that thus ineluctably arise upon reading *Operation Shylock* through a Shakespearean and Rothian lens are: How does *Operation Shylock* harmonize with the rest of Roth's Shakespearean-tinged *oeuvre*? What larger arguments, if any, is Roth making—not only about literary matters but also about larger sociological (and even theological) questions concerning the nature of Judaism and Jewish identity—through his imaginative use of Shakespeare in *Operation Shylock*?

Among the many outlandish things that happen in *Operation Shylock*, this wildly inventive, metafictional novel,⁸ is a chance meeting between Philip Roth (the character) and an antiquarian bookseller who requests that Philip write the introduction for what are purported to be the recently discovered diaries of Leon Klinghoffer. The bookseller also happens to be a “Shylock specialist” (273), an aficionado of *The Merchant of Venice* whose encyclopedic

mind is filled with trivia about the play and its performance history. Upon first encountering Philip, the bookseller presents him with the diaries and provides an impromptu disquisition on the meaning of Shylock. It is a long, powerful, incantatory monologue, covering nearly three full pages, and worth quoting at some length:

[F]or four hundred years now, Jewish people have lived in the shadow of this Shylock. [...] To the audiences of the world Shylock is the embodiment of the Jew in the way that Uncle Sam embodies for them the spirit of the United States. Only, in Shylock's case, there is an overwhelming Shakespearean reality, a terrifying Shakespearean aliveness that your pasteboard Uncle Sam cannot begin to possess. [...] [Shylock is] the star of the masterpiece that was to prophesy, in the expulsion of the unregenerate Jew Shylock from the harmonious universe of the angelic Christian Portia, the Hitlerian dream of a *Judenrein* Europe. Today a Shylockless Venice, tomorrow a Shylockless world. As the stage direction so succinctly puts it after Shylock has been robbed of his daughter, stripped of his wealth, and compelled to convert by his Christian betters: *Exit Jew*. (274-76)

Contemporary readers who are unfamiliar with *Operation Shylock* could understandably be led to believe that the novel participates in the new but important literary tradition of novels such as Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and Kamel Daoud's *The Meursault Investigation* (2013) which retell, or "write back" to (and thereby reclaim) the story of a marginalized, stereotyped character through the eyes of a writer who is a member of a disenfranchised group. A reader encountering a novel titled "*Operation Shylock*," written by a Jewish writer, could easily expect it to be a retelling of *The Merchant of Venice* through the eyes of the vilified Jewish character—such was the task taken up by Howard Jacobson in his novel *Shylock is My Name: William Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice" Retold* (2016).⁹ But Roth, as he so often does, confounds our expectations on this count, as well. *Operation Shylock* is not, as one might expect, a reclamation and transformation of the character of the Other by a writer who belongs to the people whose otherness has been reinforced, in part, through the literary legacy of the title character. But if this is not the literary mission of *Operation Shylock*, then what is it? How are we to understand Roth's most striking—and perhaps most important—use of Shakespeare?

Jay L. Halio has read *Operation Shylock* as an example of Roth's "reverse anti-Semitism" (which should be distinguished from "philo-Semitism")—as

a literary-performative attempt, also witnessed in *Portnoy's Complaint*, of taking revenge against cultural antisemitism through crafting works of fiction that respond to antisemitism artistically, redemptively, and also occasionally satirically (2, 4-5). According to Halio, Roth's reverse antisemitism was pre-saged by Bellow's reverse antisemitism (in his early novel *The Victim*) and by Shylock's own reverse antisemitism (in his scheming to take revenge against the Christian Antonio for his many insults and continual ill-treatment) in *The Merchant of Venice* (2, 4). However, while Roth may indeed be engaging in reverse antisemitism in *Operation Shylock*, the reading of *Operation Shylock* I offer here suggests that Roth uses Shakespeare in this novel for additional reasons, reasons related to his conception of Jewish-American identity.

Operation Shylock neither rehabilitates nor humanizes a defamed character by telling the story from his perspective. Instead, Roth leaves Shylock in his deformed, demonized state in order to confront head-on the antisemitic legacy perpetuated—and very well perhaps exacerbated—by one of Shakespeare's most problematic creations. Roth was well aware that Shylock had been indirectly responsible for maintaining and propagating some of the worst antisemitic stereotypes in Europe, and thus may have contributed, in whatever way great or small (as the bookseller states) to the general worldwide willingness to eradicate European Jewry—or to look the other way while the destruction was occurring—during the Second World War. Roth evidently was aware that it was this image of Shylock—and of the Jew created in Shylock's image—that needed to remain intact rather than rebuilt and rehabilitated if it were to properly testify to the harms wrought by the creation and dramatization of this character.

Roth's use of Shylock in the title of a novel about Israel and Jewish identity is perhaps even more significant than the role of Shylock within the novel. Placing Shakespeare's notoriously stereotyped Jewish character in the novel's title serves to frame the novel as a story about otherness. Shylock, though a fully human, complex character, has become an archetype: for Jews, "Shylock" functions as a symbol, a Jewish "Uncle Sam," that signifies how non-Jews have historically viewed Jews—as the mythical, inassimilable, demonized "eternal Jew," the defamed elder of Zion, the vilified, rat-like "*Ewige Jude*" who is at home nowhere and will prey upon anyone anywhere.¹⁰ Framing a novel about Jewish identity with the literary character who, even more than Marlowe's Barabas and Dickens's Fagin, has become the urtext upon which all antisemitic fantasies have been projected inevitably serves to mark and reinforce the continuing sense of Jewish alterity within a country whose capitalist, conformist, consumer-driven culture tends to downplay difference. The use of the Shylock narrative to frame a novel about Jewish-American identity

obliges readers, and Jewish readers in particular, to view the novel—a literary work with popular, mass-market appeal—through a sharply focused lens.

Granted, *Operation Shylock* is one of the few Roth novels to take place overseas and addresses a range of international Jewish issues, I still read *Operation Shylock* as a novel not just about Jewish identity, but about Jewish-American identity in particular, given Roth's consistent, career-long focus on and interest in American life. (Witness the way, for instance, he Americanizes the European Jewish story of the Holocaust by turning it inwards—shifting its center of gravity away from Europe and closer to home—in *The Plot Against America* [2004].) Roth uses international issues and the Israel setting as literary devices through which to discuss and highlight issues of Jewish-American identity. It is important to remember that while key events of the novel take place in Israel, Roth pulls the main thematic focus back to America in the end.

Roth's choice of title reminds Jews that however much they may have assimilated into the broader American community, they still—at least as long as *The Merchant of Venice* continues to be read and performed—will continue to exist within what Mary Douglas would term an “enclave community”: a group with a shared identity whose boundaries are marked by, and continually reinforced by, the hostility—real or perceived—of those around them (44-45).

In *Operation Shylock*, Shakespeare's universally understood, carefully crafted character of cross-cultural contempt is converted into a symbolic, the-matizing figure who functions within a particularist, culturally specific iconography. Shylock, along with Anne Frank, Leon Klinghoffer, and Shylock's opening line, “Three thousand ducats” (which functions as a narrative thread in the latter half of the novel [*Shylock* 274-76, 302]), compose the “grammar of remembrance” (David Roskies's term)¹¹—the culturally specific reference points that lend thematic coherence to seemingly dissimilar phenomena by situating them within a specific collective master-narrative—that Roth utilizes in *Operation Shylock*. Deploying Shylock not just as part of this grammar of remembrance but also as this grammar's central component indicates that the Jewish-American master-narrative, in Roth's eyes, despite its successes and relative prosperity, remains a narrative of alienation, inassimilability, and alterity. Roth knows that Shylock is a dynamic, multi-dimensional character that nonetheless can, according to the interpretive techniques of Russian formalism, morph into a functional folkloric figure;¹² consequently, in order to frame a novel about Jewish-American identity within a certain conceptual, literary-historical frame, Roth transmutes Shylock one degree further—from a character into a function and from a function into an icon. By deftly employing the iconography of one of Shakespeare's most notorious characters, Roth

enables *Operation Shylock* to operate within the liminal terrain of literary and psychic memory.

As a literary and cultural icon, Shylock represents the demonization, figuratively and literally, of the Other: Launcelot calls Shylock “the very devil incarnation” (*Merchant* II.ii.27).¹³ For Roth to title a novel about Jewish-American identity *Operation Shylock* is a calculated, unique allusion wherein the Bard, rather than serving as a homogenizing force whose plays, as critics such as Joseph Quincy Adams Jr. wanted to believe, maintain the “solid Anglo-Saxon character” of America and safeguard “our long-established English civilization” from the “menace” of immigration and the “babel of tongues and cultures” (431), instead serves as a powerful literary force for cultural heterogenization. “Operation *Shylock*” is a deployment of Shakespeare that serves to differentiate “us” from “them”; it is a not unsubtle suggestion that “being a Jew in Christian America” (583)—Nathan Zuckerman’s phrase in *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983)—still presents Jews with some of the same challenges that diasporic living has always presented them, regardless of whether the Diaspora happens to be twentieth-century Newark or sixteenth century Venice. As such, it is a poignant, highly ramified use of Shakespeare by a successful, assimilated Jewish-American author that reminds Jews—recent, new residents within the liberal, unprejudiced (in the *de jure* sense) American community—of their status as permanent residents within the particularist, historically persecuted enclave Jewish community.¹⁴

In short, *Operation Shylock* is not a reimagination of Shylock through the eyes of a Jewish-American writer; it is a radical reimagination of the Jewish-American community through the “eyes” (metaphorically speaking) of Shylock. And Roth, ever the iconoclast, subversively employs the iconography of Shylock as a way to critically interrogate the dialectical nature of Jewish-American identity—an exilic, historically “apart” people living with others in the universalistic sphere of twentieth century America—during the time in which the newly created state of Israel, a further factor that significantly problematizes this identity, progressed from mere survival to relative prosperity.¹⁵

PHILIP ROTH’S THEOLOGY OF JUDAISM

Among the diverse and wide-ranging political, historical, sociological, theological, and historiographical debates Roth engages in *Operation Shylock* lurks a latent yet insistent anthropological-theological question: what makes the Jewish people and the Jewish religion distinctive? The “other” Philip Roth in *Operation Shylock*, whom the “real” Roth comically and condescendingly

dubs “Moishe Pipik,” wades directly into the difficult subject of post-Holocaust theology—and into the perennial theological perplexity of how divine benevolence can be squared with divine omnipresence and divine omnipotence—when he fulminates to Roth the writer, “Philip Roth, where was God between 1939 and 1945? I’m sure He was at the Creation. I’m sure He was at Mount Sinai with Moses. My problem is where He was between 1939 and 1945. That was a dereliction of duty for which even He, *especially* He, cannot ever be forgiven” (206). Other clues indicate that Roth sought to position *Operation Shylock* as a theological novel: most prominently in his choice of epigraphs—one from the Hebrew Bible (Genesis 32:24: “So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak”), and a second from the theologically oriented existentialist philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (“Existence is surely a debate”).

The fact that Roth cites the verse from Genesis in Hebrew as well as in English suggests that Roth wished to situate his novel not only within the world literary canon (and specifically within the storied Dostoyevsky-pioneered genre of the double), but within the Jewish theological canon of works that engage with some of the core historic Jewish theological questions—the nature of God (“God sent Hitler because God is crazy. [. . .] [F]rom the very first day He created man, He has been irritated with him from morning till night” [110]); the nature of existence; and the nature of Jewish chosenness, or Jewish singularity (“So Jacob was left alone”). Additionally, Roth’s biblical epigraph which hints to readers that the biblical story of Jacob is a key intertext for *Operation Shylock*, just as it is for *Merchant* (see Kenneth 87-93), serves to further bind *The Merchant of Venice* to *Operation Shylock*—a text Kenneth Gross reads as “Roth’s wrestling match with Shakespeare” (170).

If Roth does believe—as *Operation Shylock* patently evidences—in the enduring, ineradicable alterity of the Jewish people, then what makes Judaism and the Jewish people different? What is it that makes the Jewish people “chosen”?¹⁶ Roth, of course, was not a person of faith, continually disavowing any pretensions toward belief and consistently eschewing the creeds and comforts of religion, even through his final days. However, it is possible to speak of Roth possessing a theology of Judaism insofar as a reading of *Operation Shylock* through a Falstaffian lens evinces an implicit (and, at times, explicit) Rothian view of the distinctive character of the Jewish people and the Jewish religion.

A consistent undercurrent coursing through *Operation Shylock* is a subtle yet unmistakable construction of a binary opposition between Christianity and Judaism. Within the theological schema developed in *Operation Shylock*, Christianity is the religion that idolizes death, while Judaism is the religion

that glorifies life. This is the schema that Wanda Jane “Jinx” Possesski, the girlfriend of the “impostor” Philip Roth, endorses when she expatiates upon her understanding of these faiths to the “real” Philip Roth:

Know why I started hating Jews? Because they didn't have to put up with any of this Christian nonsense. Death to self, you have to kill yourself, suffering makes you a better servant of Him—and they *laughed* at all our suffering. [...] They laughed at our suffering, they laughed at *His* suffering. [...] I wore little plaid skirts, wore my hair in a ponytail, didn't fuck, and meanwhile the Jews were all smart, they were middle class, they were fucking, they were educated, they were down in the Caribbean at Christmastime, and I hated them. (231)

Jews, according to Possesski, embody the polar opposite of Christianity's fixation with death, martyrdom, and suffering.¹⁷ Jews are the people, Roth seems to be saying through Possesski, who more than anything else yearn for life: for education, for upward striving, and, above all else, for sex—the ultimate and overriding symbol of the life-impulse in the Rothian universe.¹⁸ (Whether Jinx is an entirely reliable source for what Roth believes about Jews and Judaism is a valid question. However, the fact that Roth gives Jinx such a prominent voice in the novel suggests that while Jinx may not be *the* authoritative source vis-à-vis Roth's views about Judaism, hers is *an* important voice, and one that merits being listened to, on this subject.) Yes, Jews are different, Roth is saying in *Operation Shylock*, and will always be perceived as Others, even in the multiculturalist melting pot of the United States of America. But how exactly *are* Jews different? What constitutes Jewish difference—or, in theological parlance, Jewish chosenness? To be Jewish, Roth suggests in *Operation Shylock*, is to be Falstaffian—it is to love life, even in all its messiness, and to abhor death, even in all its peaceableness.

This Rothian understanding of the distinctive character of Jewishness—that Jewishness is characterized above all by a sharp, inassimilable contrast with Christianity and by a propulsive, libidinous, Falstaffian fascination with life in all its chaos and commotion—is glaringly evident in *The Counterlife* (1986) as well, wherein Nathan Zuckerman, for all of his love of English literature, bristles under the weight of the overly placid English Christian country life in which he lives. Zuckerman, Roth's alter-ego, had thought that living in peaceful “Christendom” (as Roth titles this section of the novel) would be a welcome respite from having to abide in the intensity of “Judea,” but Zuckerman ultimately cannot accept such a calm, placid, overly serene domain.

Something in his being—in what he comes to recognize as his irrepressible Jewish being—cries out against it. Zuckerman quickly comes to feel that he is “never more of a Jew” than when he is “in a church when the organ begins. I may be estranged at the Wailing Wall but without being a stranger [. . .]. But between me and church devotion there is an unbridgeable world of feeling, a natural and thoroughgoing incompatibility” (*Counterlife* 256). Something in him rejects the pastoral life—and the pastoral literary genre—as un-Jewish. “The pastoral is not my genre,” writes Zuckerman. “The pastoral stops here and it stops with circumcision” (*Counterlife* 322). Jews, for Zuckerman—in diametrical opposition to Franz Rosenzweig—are meant to be embroiled in the cauldron of history, yet never melting within in it. They are instead meant to be stirring it and being stirred by it, adding to and learning from the culture around them yet always remaining identifiable as Jews within that very culture. There may be a Judeo-Christian ethic—the similarities and the historic commonalities between these two “sibling communities,” as the theologian Arthur Green terms Judaism and Christianity (142), are undeniable—but in the Rothian universe, Jews and Christians are and must always remain distinct from one another.

And what most serves to render Jews identifiable, according to Zuckerman, is their irrepressible life-drive, their Falstaffian vitalism, their libidinous love of life—a feature which is marked upon their very flesh itself. If a libidinous love of life—a love of life that is the living imitation (or, if you will, the incarnation) of the God of life—is what more than anything else constitutes Jewishness, then it is eminently reasonable why the commandment of circumcision was the first task given to Abraham (Genesis 17:10-14), and it is eminently explicable why circumcision more than any other of the six hundred thirteen commandments symbolizes the Jewish covenant with God: the very organ itself that both symbolizes and manifests creativity, generativity, and Falstaffian carnality should be marked as such. In fact, it symbolizes this covenant to such an extent that circumcision itself is now simply known (in Hebrew) as “Brit” (lit., “covenant”); when Jewish males are circumcised, the ritual is now simply known as “having a Brit” (or a “bris,” depending on one’s pronunciation of the Hebrew). Circumcision is “quintessentially Jewish” because it “is everything that the pastoral is not [. . .]. Circumcision gives the lie to the womb-dream of life in the beautiful state of innocent prehistory [. . .]. To be born is to lose all that. The heavy hand of human values falls upon you right at the start, marking your genitals as its own” (*Counterlife* 323). Or, as the American Jewish theologian Michael Wyschogrod puts it, “[t]he circumcised body of Israel is the dark,

carnal presence through which the redemption makes its way in history. Salvation is of the Jews because the flesh of Israel is the abode of the divine presence in the world. It is the carnal anchor that God has sunk into the soil of creation" (256).

The sign of the circumcision on the male life-giving organ of generativity is what, for Roth, as for Wyschogrod, distinguishes Jews and Jewishness from all other peoples and cultures. It is the sign that says we love life—and the God of life who has given us our lives—so much so that we want to constantly remind ourselves, through the very organ that contains within it the capacity to create life, of our unquenchable love of life and of our undying pursuit of the Yahwistic Blessing of more life. Circumcision, for Roth's Zuckerman, is what more than anything else "confirms that there is an us" (*Counterlife* 324), that there is a singular people on earth known as the Jewish people, and that even Nathan Zuckerman—a self-described "Jew without Jews, without Judaism, without Zionism, without Jewishness, without a temple or an army or even a pistol," feels a "strong sense of difference" from his Christian counterparts by virtue of his circumcision (324).

This irrepressible, carnal, Falstaffian love of life—this "famous Jewish intensity" (*Counterlife* 257)—accompanied by an unshakable sense of difference and singularity symbolized by the carnal anchor of circumcision that opposes with all its might Christianity's "fundamental abhorrence of sex" (259)—is for Roth what above all else is constitutive of Jewishness, and in *Operation Shylock* Roth thus twice juxtaposes the terms "death-poisoned Jew-hating" (244) in his description of Possesski as if to indicate that hatred of Judaism and the Jewish people—a carnal, Falstaffian, life-loving people—is a sure sign that one has become almost literally death-poisoned.

Possesski's hatred of Jews was at its apex, the summary continues, when she was a "chaste fundamentalist stupefyingly subjugated to Jesus" (244). But what causes her to metamorphose from "a death-poisoned Jew-hating oncology nurse" into a "recovering anti-Semite" (244)? What drains her mind from death and fills it with a sudden thirst for the thrill of life? It is her attraction to a Jewish cancer patient she attends named Philip Roth, and to the love of life he exudes from every pore: "That talk. Those jokes. That intensity. The imitations. *Crazy with life*" (96, emphasis added). Roth the writer-character, in turn, is drawn to Roth the impersonator's lover because *she* is "full of life" (191). What makes Jews Jewish, according to Roth—what makes Jews unique—is that they are, like Falstaff, crazy with life, and, like Falstaff, they *choose* life over what could otherwise be a more honorable, Hotspurian death.¹⁹

Operation Shylock, thus, in addition to expounding upon what it means—as Roth’s epigraph from Genesis reminds readers—for the people of Jacob to be “alone,” an eternal Other, “wrestling until daybreak” with others, and with themselves, also expounds upon what it means for the Jewish people to be the “chosen people.” For Roth, Jewish chosenness does not mean that God chooses the Jewish people; it means—in a Spinozistic inversion of the doctrine of chosenness (Novak 22)—that the Jewish people are the people who choose God. Insofar as “God,” within Roth’s a-theistic theological schema, is not the traditional personal God of the Bible, but “Falstaff,” and everything that Falstaff symbolizes and incarnates: the incorrigible comedic impulse; the irrepressible carnal instinct; and, above all else, the unremitting pursuit of the Yahwistic blessing of more life in all of its forms.²⁰ This, Roth contends, is the “God” the Jewish people have always chosen and continually choose: not a perfect, peaceful, personified spiritual being, but a vibrant, vivacious, vitalistic *mode* of being; it is a mode pervaded by comedy, drama, conflict, chaos, craziness, concupiscence—by “the uncontrollability of real things” (239): in short, Life itself. Heine liked to say, as Roth quotes him in *Operation Shylock*, that “there is a God, and his name is Aristophanes” (204); for Roth, there is a God, and his name is Falstaff.

The nature of the Jewish people and the Jewish religion, Roth is saying in *Operation Shylock*, is comedic, non-tragic—after all, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Operation Shylock*’s key intertext, is technically a comedy, not a tragedy (Stoll 314; Barber 185-87). And, above all, the Jewish people and the Jewish religion are Falstaffian: the Jewish people, since the time Jacob wrestled with the angel, are the people who love life so much—its talk, its jokes, its intensity, its absurdity—that they continue to choose it, even in the face of a more peaceable death, despite—or, as Mickey Sabbath would have it, *because* of—its messiness and disorderliness, its perennial conflict and perpetual chaos, its anxiety-inducing uncertainty and its frustrating—yet ultimately vivifying—uncontrollability. Falstaff is still with us: “the better part of valor is discretion; in which better part I have saved my life” (*1 Henry IV* V.iv.118-119). Similar to how pre-monotheistic religionists believed that the sexual urge and the *Wille zu leben* were inextricably linked—and similar to Milton’s sexual-spiritual depiction of the holy spirit as the force which inseminates the universe with life (“Thou from the first / Was present, and with mighty wings outspread / Dove-like satst brooding on the vast Abyss / And mad’st it pregnant” [*Paradise Lost*, Book I, 19-22])—Sabbath seems to believe that his urge-to-live ultimately defeats his desire-not-to-be-alive-any-longer because of some force that is even more overpowering: his insatiable sexual appetite. “He couldn’t

do it,” the narrator of *Sabbath’s Theater* tells us, recounting Sabbath’s decision, after having wrestled with his own inner angel of death, to go on living: “He could not fucking die. How could he leave? How could he go? Everything he hated was here” (451).

NOTES

1. This article originated as a course paper in James Shapiro’s “Shakespeare in America” graduate seminar in the fall of 2016 at Columbia University. I would like to thank my colleagues in that seminar for their helpful and constructive feedback on the first iteration of the paper; Harold Bloom’s¹, for his encouraging and enlightening remarks on the subject in our correspondence; the anonymous reviewers of *Philip Roth Studies*, and Aimee Pozorski and Maren Scheurer, for their invaluable comments and suggestions on subsequent iterations of this paper; and James Shapiro, for his guidance, encouragement, and unflagging support throughout every stage of this paper’s development.

2. As Scheckner argues, “In Falstaff Roth chose the perfect paradigm for Mickey Sabbath, a late twentieth-century man who instinctively understands the best way to overpower the mess of life is to choose more of it. ‘Yes, yes, yes, he felt uncontrollable tenderness for his own shit-filled life. And a laughable hunger for more. More defeat! More disappointment! More deceit! More loneliness! More arthritis! More missionaries!’” (247).

3. Even Simon Axler, the rare Rothian protagonist who actually does consummate his suicidal wishes, may be viewed as a Falstaffian character in the sense that what he succumbs to is not a societal sense of honor and duty but a personal, Falstaffian desire for carnal delights—and, as James Duban has observed, his “cravings that conflict with his better judgment” (“To Dazzle” 14).

4. I presented this reading of Mickey Sabbath—and of Roth’s other primary protagonists—to Harold Bloom, and he concurred, saying that this is how he reads Roth as well; personal communication, Sept. 26, 2016. Two months after this communication, I discovered that Bloom had in fact written something in one of his collections of literary criticism very much to this effect: “Vitality, in the Shakespearean or Falstaffian sense, and its representation in personality and character, is Roth’s greatest gift, which is why I would nominate *Sabbath’s Theater* as his sublime achievement” (*Novelists* 529). Bloom has also characterized Roth’s remarkable late-career literary output as an “almost Shakespearean outburst of creativity” (Senior) and has compared Roth’s “comedy or tragi-comedy” to Shakespeare’s “Problem Plays” (*Novelists* 529). This “Falstaffian sensibility” is most clearly glimpsed in Roth’s *The Human Stain*, as well as in *The Anatomy Lesson*, *Operation Shylock*, *The Ghost Writer* (1979), *The Counterlife*,

parts of *The Humbling*, *American Pastoral*, and *Everyman* (2006). The leitmotif of Falstaffianism in Roth's fiction—particularly in regards to the way in which it manifests itself in Rothian protagonists choosing life over suicide (Roth's books, says Stephen Greenblatt, have consistently portrayed "our relentless will to persist")—is a fascinating subject. For now, it should be recognized that Scheckner also notes that Bloom, much like Roth, chooses Falstaff and his unabashed "celebration of life" over the "glib morality of the 'Henriad' world" (271, 313-14).

5. When Roth retired, the critic Hermione Lee compared him first to Shakespeare, and then to Prospero (20).

6. I am grateful to William Pritchard for pointing me to this particular passage.

7. This Hamletian monologue contains a *Macbeth* allusion as well; I am thankful to Kevin Windhauser for making this observation.

8. On *Operation Shylock* as a metafictional novel, and on the extent to which Roth may be situated within the camp of postmodernists, see Shostak (18, 170), and Brauner.

9. Jacobson's novel, in a deliciously ironic literary twist (especially within the context of this paper), showcases a Shakespearean character—Shylock, living in present-day England—reading from Roth. In a scene bearing overtones of *Sabbath's Theater's* comic-cum-plaintive graveyard scene, Jacobson's Shylock reads, of all things, *Portnoy's Complaint* (Jacobson 64, 66)! One wishes that Jacobson would have upped the intertextual ante by having his Shylock read from *Operation Shylock*, though perhaps such a *mise en abyme* would have been too much for readers—and for his Shylock—to handle.

10. See, e.g., Bonnell 166-74, showing how Nazi propaganda films drew upon elements from *The Merchant of Venice*, and how the Nazi depiction of Shylock drew upon centuries of grotesque German theater representations of Shylock so that Shakespeare's character came to incarnate a vast variety of vices. Even as late as October 1944—when German defeat was clearly imminent—Goebbels began to collaborate with German filmmakers upon a lavish color feature film version of *The Merchant of Venice*, which "was to have been among the most prestigious films produced in the Third Reich" (Bonnell 167). See also: "By [the middle of the nineteenth century] the name *Shylock* had become synonymous with a rapacious Jew and Shakespeare's play was thoroughly identified with anti-Jewish sentiment" (Shapiro 217). Brustein 173-203 and Fiedler 18-29 further discuss the impact of Shylock upon Jewish identity: "Shylock [. . .] lives the immortal life of a true myth, appealing to the paranoia that persists [. . .] and stirring the corresponding fear of its consequences from which no Jew is ever quite free" (Fiedler 20).

11. On how (Jewish) literature creates and perpetuates communal memory, see Roskies.

12. See, e.g., Propp. Some have read *The Merchant of Venice* as a fairy tale, an interpretation which Harold Bloom has heavily criticized (*Shakespeare* 179); nevertheless, the

fact that the play can fit within an additional modality of literary genre—the fairy tale—indicates that its characters are available to be interpreted as, and occasionally transmuted into, functions; on the fairy tale element in *The Merchant of Venice*, see Marowitz 473.

13. Othello—the other epitome of the Other in Shakespeare—is also called a “devil” (*Othello* I.i.94).

14. For a recent analysis of Roth’s impact on the Jewish-American community, see DeKoven Ezrahi (600-01).

15. Roth, from his earliest days as a writer of short stories, was concerned with the meaning of American Jewish existence in the twentieth century. James Duban asserts, through a reading of “Eli, the Fanatic,” that being Jewish in the twentieth century, for Roth, carries either a confrontation—or the evasion of a confrontation—with the Holocaust (“Being Jewish” 2, 7), and an ambivalence about Jewish heritage.

16. The subject of chosenness in Jewish theology is an extensively debated and highly fraught one. It is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into the tangled thicket of this theological debate; readers interested in further analysis of this topic are directed to David Novak’s *The Election of Israel*, the best contemporary study of the various views of chosenness in modern Jewish theology, and to Arnold Eisen’s *The Chosen People in America*, a study of the idea of chosenness in the American setting.

17. In propounding, through Possesski, this binary opposition between Judaism and Christianity, Roth participates in an unfortunate and deprecatory Jewish characterization of Christianity as otherworldly and death-idolizing, proffered by some of Roth’s American Jewish theological near-contemporaries, most notably by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik—whose seminal work *Halakhic Man* is permeated, according to its translator, with a “clearly anti-Christian thrust” (Kaplan vii; see also 142)—and Rabbi Menahem Mendel Schneerson. On Schneerson’s characterization of Christianity as an otherworldly, non-life affirming faith, see Wolfson 131. The American Jewish theologian Rabbi Irving Greenberg, a contemporary of Roth’s—and a disciple of Soloveitchik’s—has done much work, both through his commitment to Jewish-Christian dialogue and through his theological writings, to break down this obfuscating (and at times invidious) opposition, vigorously asserting that Christianity, just as much as Judaism, is a life affirming religion. See, e.g., Greenberg 50, 140. Possesski, however—and evidently Roth as well—clearly sides with Soloveitchik and Schneerson, and not with Greenberg, on the question of what differentiates Judaism from Christianity.

18. As Claudia Roth Pierpont has observed, “sex,” in Roth’s novels, is “the great, tingling counterforce to death” (309). For the suicide-seeking Mickey Sabbath, it is the sexual impulse that keeps him alive, “that thing which allowed him to improvise endlessly and which had kept him alive,” his “nutty tawdriness” (*Sabbath* 446). Sabbath overcomes his death-wish through giving reign to his libidinal wildness. Why does he choose life? Because of “[h]er bed,” Sabbath muses. “Two simple words,

each a syllable as old as English, and their power over Sabbath was nothing short of tyrannical. How tenaciously he clings to life! To youth! To pleasure! To hard-ons! To Deborah's underthings!" (157). The primary impulse which keeps Sabbath alive is his improvisational sexual desire; it is an impulse which has theological significance, as Sabbath himself acknowledges: "Do you know how the Egyptians imagined the origins of the universe? Any kid can read about it in his encyclopedia. God masturbated. And his sperm flew up and created the universe" (277).

19. In the novel, Philip's desire for a suicidal end is only checked by his imagining of the grief that his death would cause to his eighty-six-year-old father (23).

20. On the Yahwistic blessing of the Hebrew Bible as the blessing of more life, see Bloom and Rosenberg, "Vitalism, the drive for more life, is always the mark of J's Yahweh" (301), who also describe Yahwism as a kind of "daemonic vitalism" (302). See Bloom, *Possessed* xx. On Falstaff as the literary incarnation of the Yahwistic blessing, see Bloom, *Shakespeare* 313-14.

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